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,

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

2 Ipsos MORI (2013).

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.

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.

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 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.

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).

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.

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 Model (see for example Gerrard et al., 2008) 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 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.

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 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.

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.

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Introduction

1.1 Aim

This report is the final output of a strategic review undertaken for Drinkaware. The question which we were asked to address in this review was:

What role could and should Drinkaware play in reducing the harms associated with drunken nights out?

The language of this question has been refined in light of the findings of the review. The original brief specified that the aim of the review was:

To develop strategic recommendations as to the role that Drinkaware both could and should play in reducing the societal harm that results from binge drinking. The term 'binge drinking' in this context refers to drinking to extreme excess, often in an intentionally reckless and very public way, with individuals putting themselves and others at risk of harm.

In this report, we have adopted the more neutral term 'drunken nights out' to describe a pattern of behaviour, of which intentional drunkenness in the night-time economy forms a part. We define this term more fully in **§2.1**. We also review, in the rest of **Chapter 2**, the main reasons why we have sought to avoid terminology such as 'binge drinking' in our formulation of the aim.

Research was undertaken and conclusions drawn with a clearly defined remit to make evidence-based recommendations for Drinkaware.

It is *not* within our remit to make recommendations for wider policy, for agents other than Drinkaware, or regarding interventions other than those which Drinkaware might make.

Drinkaware is an independent charity, which aims to reduce alcohol-related harm by:

- Providing objective, independent, comprehensive and evidence-based information about alcohol
- Raising awareness and changing attitudes to responsible drinking
- Through practical tools and support, acting as a catalyst for behavioural and social change.
- As this mission statement makes clear, Drinkaware's activities are entirely focused on education and communications, including marketing communications.

While we hope that the findings presented in this report will have wider relevance to those working to reduce alcohol-related harm, the findings and conclusions of this report focus on the role that education and communications could and should play in reducing the harms associated with drunken nights out.

1.2 Sources of evidence

Three key sources of evidence have been drawn on in this review:

1. **Original qualitative research with participants in drunken nights out**
   This research comprised two phases:

- ***Phase 1***: guided pre-work, followed by 90 minute one-to-one interviews with a total of 48 participants
- ***Phase 2***: ten two-hour facilitated workshops, each with six participants, giving a total of 60 participants

28 participants in Phase 2 were reconvened from Phase 1, giving a total sample for both phases of 80. Full details of the sample and methodology for this qualitative research are provided in the chapter that follows.

2. **A review of literature.**
   Sources reviewed were identified by the following means:

- A bank of relevant recent literature was supplied by Drinkaware, based on their monitoring of academic and other sources
- Additional sources were identified via i) an open call for evidence issued by Drinkaware and ii) interviews with key informants (see below)
- Further data sources and/or references were identified based on the initial review of the literature supplied by Drinkaware.

It was not within the scope of this study to conduct a systematic review of literature, and the report should be read with this in mind.

3. **19 key informants, selected to provide a wider perspective on policy and practice in relation to drunken nights out, were interviewed.**
   A full list of those who took part in interviews will be found in the **Acknowledgements** at the beginning of this report.

Further input from a number of stakeholders was also sought at a workshop held between the interview and workshop stages of the qualitative research. A list of external attendees at this workshop will also be found in the **Acknowledgements**.

1.3 Recruitment criteria

Full details of the questions used in screening participants for Phases 1 and 2 of the qualitative research are provided in **Appendix 2**, and key features of the sample are detailed below.

The recruitment process also included a detailed description of the kinds of contribution they would be expected to make, uses to be made of material and confidentiality, associated incentives, and opportunities to withdraw. Participation was contingent on informed consent, subsequently re-confirmed by researchers.

Current regular participation in drunken nights out

The bulk of the sample was made up of current regular participants in drunken nights out (see

below for discussion of lapsed participation). Four key dimensions were used in screening:

1. Enjoyment
Candidates were asked how well the statement 'I really enjoy going out to get drunk' described them, and only those who agreed ('definitely agree' or 'tend to agree') were passed.

This statement was deliberately chosen to match an item in the TGI database, for which population-wide response rates were therefore available (see §3.3 for discussion of TGI data).

2. Intensity
Candidates were asked how well the statement 'I sometimes get very drunk on a night out' described them, and only those who agreed ('definitely agree' or 'tend to agree') were passed.

3. Frequency
Candidates were asked, 'How often, typically, do you go out and get drunk?'. Only those who answered 'three or four times a month or more' or 'at least once a month' were passed.

4. Venues
Candidates were asked: 'And is this typically in bars, pubs and clubs, in town?'. Only those who responded yes were passed.

This reflected the focus of the review on the night-time economy.

Participants were also asked how often, when they went out and got drunk, they drank at home or at a friend's home first. A small minimum quota was set for pre-drinkers.

Lapsed participation

Given the overall focus of the research on understanding, not only current drinking patterns, but also how those patterns change over time, we were also keen to speak to a number of people who had been regular participants in drunken nights out but no longer regularly participated.

Two additional screener routes were therefore included to identify lapsed participants:

- Individuals who no longer enjoy going out to get drunk, but used to do so
- Individuals who no longer go out and get drunk very often (though they still enjoy it), but used to do so much more often

In both cases, candidates were asked to give an open response to a question regarding why they thought their behaviour had changed. Those whose response included a reference to a new child were excluded, on the grounds that we did not believe it was a good use of the research to establish that starting a family leads to changes in leisure activities.

Frequency of drinking

Prior to being asked about their participation in drunken nights out, candidates were asked how often they drank alcohol in a typical week. This allowed screening to be closed for individuals who rarely or never drank alcohol, before asking them questions about whether they ever got drunk, which might have been found inappropriate.

Crucially, however, participants who stated that they drank five days a week or more were also excluded. Drinking this often is rare in this age

group (see **§3.1**), and this was therefore judged to be a practical way of excluding individuals with alcohol-dependency issues. Of course, not all young people who drink that frequently have such issues: but it is likely that those who do have such issues will drink that frequently.

Demographics

The sample was split equally between males and females.

Three age bands were used for recruitment:

- 18 to 20 year olds (extended to 21 year olds for student sample – *see overleaf*)
- 21 to 24 year olds
- 25 to 29 year olds

Socio-economic group was monitored, without quotas being set for either. It is important to point out that research with 18 to 24 year olds conducted for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013) *suggests that there are no significant patterns of difference by socio-economic group regarding drunken nights out*.

Ethnicity was also monitored but no quotas were set. The sample was overwhelmingly White British, and may therefore fail to reflect the experiences of some minorities, to the extent that such minorities participate in drunken nights out.

There is good reason to suspect that religious and cultural differences may make a significant difference to participation in drunken nights out. In respect of cultural differences, candidates who had grown up anywhere outside the UK were excluded from the current study, irrespective of any other factors.

To the extent that religious and cultural differences are correlated with ethnic differences, we might therefore also expect such differences to be apparent between ethnic groups. What is less clear is whether these differences relate to i) *whether* people participate in drunken nights out or ii) *how* people participate in drunken nights out. If the latter is the case, the findings in this report would need to be supplemented with studies of different kinds of drunken night out (and different associated risks – e.g. the risk of racist abuse or attack) among different minorities.

It was our view that quotas for ethnic minorities in qualitative research of this kind risk representing little more than an unhelpful and indefensible tokenism. A serious study of the ways in which ethnicity, culture and religion impact on whether and how people participate in drunken nights out would be welcome, but these are not questions to which we could do justice within the scope of this research.

Similar considerations apply to drunken nights out in the gay and lesbian night-time economies – which may be quite distinct from the straight night-time economy. Gay and lesbian participants may also face unique risks around homophobic abuse and attack. While not monitored at recruitment, our sample included some self-declared gay men (though no self-declared lesbians), but not enough for us to be able to comment on whether or not differences exist.

Students

In the first instance, 12 participants in the 18 to 20 year old range were recruited at Phase 1, with the specification that half should be students and half not.[3] In practice, the students recruited at this stage all proved to be studying in their home towns, with a number still living with families. These responses were very useful, but were felt not to reflect the full range of student experiences. In particular, the experience of living alone for the first time was of potential interest.

An additional sample of 12 students was therefore recruited, in two additional locations. The screener for these additional interviews specified that participants should be living alone, in a shared house (not with parents or family) or in student halls.[4] The age range was extended to 18 to 21 year olds to better accommodate third year students.

As a critical comment on our own specification, we would note that the screener might better have reflected the *diversity* of educational options available at ages 18 to 21, in particular the (often overlooked) further education sector.

Recruitment in friendship pairs/trios

An effort was made to recruit participants in friendship pairs or trios, to reflect the importance of social groups in drunken nights out. While Phase 1 interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, the inclusion of some friendship groups in workshops (Phase 2) contributed to the quality of conversation in those workshops, and provided a useful point of comparison between workshops which included friendship groups and those which did not.

Research locations

Locations were selected to ensure a good spread both geographically and in terms of the sizes of the urban areas in question. These were considered important because:

- To the extent that behaviour in the night-time economy is governed by social norms, it could vary between different locations (in the same way as, say, styles of dress when going out matter).
- Larger urban centres are likely to have both more venues and more differentiation in styles and types of venues, creating greater potential choice in the kinds of night out available to consumers.

For the additional student sample, locations were selected to ensure representation of students at universities within an urban area, and students at a campus university on the edges of an urban area.

Initially, it was hoped that locations could also be selected based on clear patterns in publically available data (such as, for England, the LAPE). However, no obvious hotspots were identified. This may in part reflect shortcomings in the kinds of data available, or may reflect the fact that drunkenness and its associated harms are widespread, and occur wherever there is a significant night-time economy. Conversations

3 In fact, second year university students were specified. As participants were being recruited in friendship trios, it was not considered practical to seek a group of friends spanning more than one year, or more than one type of institution. The second year was selected as representing the best chance to identify individuals who had settled into university life, without yet facing the prospect of finals. Since interviews were taking place in the autumn, it was recognised that first year students would be very new to the university experience.

4 The additional sample was split equally across first, second and third year students.

with stakeholders supported the latter point of view. Moreover, to the extent that locations *do* face particular problems around drunkenness in the night-time economy, comments suggested that this may be due to the influx of visitors from outside (for example in seaside towns which are popular venues for hen and stag nights). Our recruitment approach, which targeted people actually living in an area, would not have enabled us to reach these temporary visitors.

Incentivisation

Incentivisation of the Phase 1 pre-work was structured to encourage participants to take completion of the task seriously, without creating pressure to discuss occasions or situations they might not wish to discuss. Participants were notified of two levels of incentive for the pre-work: a lower, basic level, and a higher level if the work was completed in full and to a high quality. Quality was defined in terms of the submission of all the elements of the pre-work, and not in terms of content. Participants were assisted to reach the higher level, through the provision of feedback if pre-work was not complete. All participants were paid at the higher level, and many needed no feedback to do so. Asked to reflect on the process at the end of the interview, a number of participants stated how much they had enjoyed both doing the pre-work and talking about it subsequently.

To further incentivise engagement with the pre-work task, a prize was offered and awarded for the submission judged to have been given most care and attention – again, defined in terms of the *completion* of all elements of the pre-work in full, not in terms of the *nature* of the events described.

An additional incentive was paid for attendance at the interview. Participants were clearly informed from the outset that they would not receive payment for their pre-work if they did not also attend the interview.

Phase 2 workshop participants were also remunerated for their work in line with standard practice.

1.4 Sample

Phase 1

The Phase 1 sample was structured in eight blocks of six interviews. The structure of these blocks is summarised in Table 1 below. Codes refer to the code numbers used throughout this report to identify interviewees.

Table 1: Phase 1 sample structure

Age range	Gender	Structure	Location	Codes
18–20	Female	Friendship trios; half students, half not	Cardiff	01 to 06
	Male		Newcastle	13 to 18
18–21[5]	Even split of female/male	Students; even split of 1st, 2nd and 3rd years	Sheffield	37 to 42
			Colchester	43 to 48
21–24	Female	2 friendship pairs; 2 lapsed participants	Northampton	25 to 30
	Male		Cardiff	7 to 12
25–29	Female	2 friendship pairs; 2 lapsed participants	Newcastle	19 to 24
	Male		Northampton	31 to 36

Table 2: Phase 2 sample structure

Age range	Gender	Reconvened?	Location	Codes
18–20	Female	Reconvened	Cardiff	A
		Newly recruited	Oldham	J
	Male	Reconvened	Newcastle	C
		Newly recruited	Glasgow	G
18–21	Even split of female/male	Reconvened	Sheffield	E
		Reconvened	Colchester	F
21–24	Female	Reconvened	Northampton	D
		Newly recruited	Glasgow	H
	Male	Reconvened	Cardiff	B
		Newly recruited	Oldham	I

5 The age range for the additional student sample was extended to reflect the fact that many third-year students are over 20.

Phase 2

Phase 2 comprised a total of 10 workshops.
Six of these workshops were set up to reconvene participants from Phase 1. Only the younger participants aged 18 to 24 were reconvened. In practice, it was necessary to replace a small number of participants at this point to ensure that the workshops comprised members of the likely target audience for Drinkaware activities:

- Some lapsed participants were replaced at this point.
- A very small number of participants whose interview responses had not matched claims met at recruitment were also replaced.

Of the 36 participants aged 18 to 24 who took part in Phase 1, 28 were reconvened. All participants in workshops were current regular participants in drunken nights out.

A further four workshops, each with six participants, were recruited in the same age bands in two additional locations (chosen in line with the principles noted above). All participants in these additional workshops were current regular participants in drunken nights out. These workshops were recruited individually (i.e. not in pairs or trios), in contrast to the reconvened groups.

The full complement of workshops is summarised in **Table 2** *on the previous page*. Codes refer to the code numbers used throughout this report to identify workshops.

1.5 Process

Phase 1 pre-work

Participants in Phase 1 were taken through a two-step process, involving supported pre-work followed by a 90 minute face-to-face interview.

During the pre-work phase, participants were invited to identify and send materials relating to different patterns of drinking from their own past and present.

Instructions for this phase of work were piloted with individuals of a similar age to ensure clarity, and participants were supported by a dedicated team member who was available to provide support and answer questions by e-mail, text or mobile.

The pre-work was also broken into two phases, to allow participants to confirm their understanding through a practice task. The key elements of the practice task were to:

- Think of a typical occasion when they had drunk alcohol with others before they were 18
- Submit various materials to bring that typical occasion to life:
  - ◊ A short written description
  - ◊ Photos (actual photos from the event and/or images from the internet)
  - ◊ Names of drinks associated with the occasion
  - ◊ A piece of music associated with the occasion

On completion of the practice task, participants were asked to complete this process for three more typical drinking occasions, and were encouraged to include:

- At least one they still regularly did.
- At least one they used to do regularly, but no longer did so often.
- At least one (past or current) which involved going out and getting drunk (or getting drunk before they went out).

For the additional student sample (codes 37 to 48) this task was slightly modified in light of lessons from the earlier interviews:

- The practice phase was dropped, as the instructions had proved to be clear for all participants.
- The total number of occasions was dropped from four to three, as younger participants with less experience had in some cases struggled to identify four patterns, and had often submitted a special event instead.

The materials relating to each occasion submitted by a participant were used to construct a collage of images and words accompanied by the chosen soundtrack. These were used as the starting point for conversations in the face-to-face interviews, with the interviewer also drawing on the written descriptions as the basis for prompt questions.

Phase 1 interviews

Interviews lasted 90 minutes, and were conducted face-to-face by a team of three researchers with extensive experience of qualitative work of this nature (two of them being the authors of this report).

Interviews were semi-structured. Key steps of the interview process were:

- Exploration of the typical occasions presented in the pre-work, using collages as a starting point for discussion, along with any pre-prepared prompt questions based on the written descriptions.
- Discussion of similarities and differences between the occasions submitted.
- Construction and discussion of a timeline of the individual's drinking career up to the present career, filling in other experiences not covered in the pre-work (including attitudes to drinking at home, specific events, etc.).
- Identification of high points and low points.
- Exploration of change over time – what had changed, what had stayed the same, why this might have happened, and what might happen in the future.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Initial analysis, stakeholder workshop, Phase 2 development

An initial rapid analysis of interview responses was undertaken to identify key themes in responses. A preliminary debrief of findings, covering key aspects of the structure of drunken nights out and patterns in participation over time, was shared with Drinkaware, and also at a stakeholder workshop (see **Acknowledgements** for external participation). This workshop was also used to begin the process of exploring implications, specifically ideas for constructive roles which Drinkaware might play.

This material was used as the basis for the design of Phase 2 workshops, and in particular stimulus material to be used in these workshops.

Phase 2 workshops

Interviews lasted two hours, and were facilitated by a team of three researchers with extensive experience of qualitative work of this nature: the two authors of this report, who had also undertaken interviews, and an additional experienced facilitator. In almost all cases, workshops were facilitated by someone who had not conducted an interview with any of the participants (this was not possible in practice at one workshop, meaning that two participants were facilitated by the same individual who had previously interviewed them).

Key steps of the workshop process were:

- An additional round in which participants discussed what advice they would give to a younger person who was starting to go out.
- Review of and reaction to a number of simple factual statements relating to the effects of alcohol.
- Unprompted and prompted discussion of the risks associated with a drunken night out, including the presentation of new information regarding each of these risks.
- Discussion of the rules of a drunken night out, both within the small group and more widely among participants in drunken nights out
- Review of and reaction to a number of simple propositions.

It is important to stress that the materials developed and used at these workshops were designed as stimulus for workshop discussion. The workshop was not designed to test messages or propositions – research which would need to be undertaken as part of the development of specific campaigns, and not (as here) in the development of an overarching strategy.

Analysis

At the end of the research process, the corpus of material for analysis comprised:

- 48 pre-work submissions, including textual descriptions.
- 48 interview transcripts, plus associated materials (e.g. timelines) created during interviews.
- 10 workshop transcripts, plus response templates completed by participants.

Analysis efforts were focused on the transcripts and written element of pre-work submissions. An interpretative phenomenological approach was taken to analysis, with the focus being to understand how participants in drunken nights out *themselves experience and make sense of* i) the drunken night out itself, and ii) their own changing patterns of behaviour over time.

Analysis was conducted by the core team that had undertaken interviews and workshops, and was structured on hermeneutic principles: through identification of initial themes/hypotheses, search for confirmatory and disconfirmatory evidence, revision/replacement of themes/hypotheses, and so on, until a firm coding scheme was developed as

the basis for final coding of transcripts.

It is worth stressing that our focus in analysis has been on developing *an overarching account of drunken nights out*, and that this has been matched by a focus on points of commonality between participants. We have also sought to note key points of difference – especially where patterns of difference were apparent, for example between genders. Given the design of this research, however, any such differences noted need to be taken as provisional hypotheses.

We would strongly support further research to explore such differences further (along with differences on which we have not been able to comment, such as by ethnicity or sexuality). We hope that such research might build on the account offered here, but it would need to be designed, delivered and analysed differently to reflect the different research purpose.

1.6 The status of the findings

Whose perspective?

Our primary aspiration in the design, delivery and analysis of this research was to avoid, in so far as is possible, imposing prior assumptions (theoretical or otherwise) about drunken nights out onto the accounts given by participants in order better to understand the phenomenon *from the perspective of those who take part in it*.[6]

However, we recognise that there are practical limitations to this aspiration. For example, even during the fieldwork stage, the way in which one asks questions unavoidably influences the kinds of answers that one receives. To take a very simple example, if a participant describes a certain behaviour, then asking them 'Why do you do that?' may prompt different kinds of explanation than asking them 'Why does that happen?' Since a researcher inevitably brings certain assumptions and intellectual predispositions to a topic, these are best rendered explicit through reflexive analysis.

A particular feature of our own approach to this work was a recognition from the outset that concepts such as 'choice' and 'intention' were likely to be of limited use (although still of some use) in developing an account of a drunken night out. It has been our view from the outset that the drunken night out cannot be conceived of as a series of conscious decisions based on calculations of benefits and risks: for example, the decision as to whether to have another drink or not. Arguably, little human behaviour can be described in this way: recent work on behaviour and behaviour change has highlighted the extent to which behaviour is shaped by factors other than rational calculation – such as physical context, social context, group norms and habits.

Leaving these general points aside, however, the effects of alcohol make it particularly unlikely that an individual will engage in the conscious calculation of risks and benefits as a drunken night out proceeds. The account of drunken nights out strongly fits this point of view. We believe that this reflects the accuracy of our original beliefs regarding the limitations of choice and intention

6 For example, our selection of the Prototype Willingness Model as an appropriate behaviour model for Drinkaware to use in developing and evaluating interventions (see **§19.3**) came at the very end of the process of analysis, as opposed to being assumed from the outset.

in the context of a drunken night out, and a genuine recognition of these limitations (and of the importance of other factors such as social norms) by our participants. However, the nature of an interpretative approach means that it cannot be ruled out that our own stance has influenced the final account.

Facts or stories?

The account of drunken nights out offered in this research draws largely on the self-reports of participants in such nights out. This applies not only to the qualitative evidence reported, but also various survey data presented (including ONS data).

It is, of course, always important to remember that individuals' descriptions of their own behaviour may not be particularly accurate. A good example is provided by the vexed question of consumption data (see for example Bellis et al., 2009). As one of the participants in our research put it when asked how much she drank during a typical night out:

> *God knows. It gets to the point where you get to a certain point and you're quite drunk and then you keep on drinking, you, kind of, forget what you drink. So I couldn't put a number to it to be fair. [f, 21, Int27]*

Even larger challenges arise when it comes to individuals' explanations of their own behaviour. There are two key difficulties here:

- First, most of us are simply unaware of many of the determinants of our own behaviour. For example, the role of social cues is often underestimated.
- Secondly, explaining is an inherently social activity, undertaken with an eye not only to correspondence with facts, but also to the construction of a desirable social image. What image is desirable is also dependent on context, meaning the explanation given may vary by audience.[7]

For example, in **§6.2**, we discuss what superficially appear to be different attitudes to sexual interaction on a drunken night out, with female participants less likely to identify pulling as a goal. Clearly, however, this difference may be an artefact of the research context (or wider social norms), with male and female participants applying different standards in terms of the image they seek to project to older interviewers and, in workshops, to peers of the same gender. Indeed, in **§7.2**, we will discuss how the transformation of experience through the telling of stories designed to construct and maintain a desirable identity is itself part of the drunken night out – albeit a part that takes place on the morning after.

These are large theoretical issues, which cannot be addressed here. At a very practical level, we would make the following two observations regarding the status of the account of drunken nights out:

- On the one hand, our account – like any such account – should be read as a story about drunken nights out, shaped not only by the realities of a drunken night out but also by the reconstructions first of our participants, then of ourselves. There is, as a result, clear potential for divergence between story and reality.

7 The research process, with a mix of individual interviews, workshops with friendship groups, and workshops with unknown peers, was partly designed with this in mind. While the effects are not removed, any gross differences between these different social contexts should have been apparent. There was some evidence of social performance in the workshops with friendship groups, but less than we had anticipated – perhaps because these workshops brought together two friendship groups, so some unknown peers were also present.

- On the other hand, there are good reasons to take this account very seriously. In particular, we believe that the analysis offered by our participants is striking in its sophistication, its credibility, and its consistency with other perspectives on behaviour with a more observational basis.

In summary, while it is certain that the account of drunken nights out offered in this report is neither 100% complete nor 100% accurate, there are good reasons to believe it performs well on both measures.

PART A
INTRODUCING DRUNKEN NIGHTS OUT

One of our first tasks in undertaking this review was to find appropriate language to describe the behaviours under investigation.
The term 'binge drinking', often used in this context, is confused and contested. Moreover, much discourse about binge drinking is shaped by implicit and erroneous assumptions about who does it, what kinds of people they are, what drives them, and what they actually do. Indeed, it is hard even to talk about the practices described in this report without running the risk of being seen to make such assumptions.

In **Part A** of the report, therefore, we seek to establish a baseline regarding:

- The nature of the behaviours being investigated.
- The people who participate in those behaviours.

We begin by offering a brief introduction to our own chosen term, 'drunken nights out' (**§2.1**), and a summary of the key problems with the alternative term 'binge drinking' (**§2.2** and **§2.3**).

In the rest of **Chapter 2**, we review other debates in the literature regarding the nature of drunken nights out and the characteristics of people who participate in them, and clarify our own position on key issues.

In **Chapter 3**, we investigate what can be established from key data sources regarding the characteristics of participants in drunken night out.

2 What is a Drunken Night Out?

Key points

- The term 'drunken night out' refers to a package of behaviours which takes place in a specific context (temporal, spatial and social). Drinking and drunkenness are central, but they are not the only behaviours involved.
- The term 'binge drinking' is problematic. Definitions of the term are inconsistent, and risk a credibility gulf between recommended and actual levels of sessional consumption. Moreover, a narrow focus on quantities consumed neglects the highly social nature of drinking and drunkenness in the context of a drunken night out.
- Binge drinking is often represented as the behaviour of a small minority. In fact, the behaviours associated with drunken nights out, including excessive consumption of alcohol, are entirely normal – at least from the perspective of those who participate in them. The normality of drinking and drunkenness is established more widely across our culture.
- Binge drinking is also represented as chaotic, reckless and out of control. While participants in drunken nights out clearly do engage in some behaviours which are reasonably described in these ways, they do so in the context of a package of behaviours which is structured, managed and controlled. The structuring role of social norms is particularly important.
- Stereotypes of binge drinkers are heavily shaped by attitudes to class, gender and, in particular, youth. Much alcohol-related harm occurs outside the context of drunken nights out or drinking by young people.
- Many young people do not participate in drunken nights out, or indeed drink at all.

The first challenge facing anyone seeking to investigate drunken nights out is the fact that the language typically used to describe the phenomenon is itself confused and contested. The terms 'binge drinking', for instance, has been subjected to some scrutiny in the literature. Key criticisms include the fact that it is inconsistently defined (see **§2.2**), and focuses solely on quantities consumed, neglecting the important role of context (**§2.3**). Our own preferred term, 'drunken night out', is introduced in **§2.1**.

Terms like 'binge drinking' and 'binge drinkers' have also become associated with particular ways of conceptualising both drunken nights out and their participants. Griffin et al. (2009), for example, note that:

Contemporary popular culture in the UK is replete with narratives of young people drinking to excess. Health education initiatives generally constitute young people's alcohol consumption as a potential source of risk and harm, representing young drinkers as in need of help and treatment. Most advertising and marketing

campaigns by the major drinks manufacturers represent young people's drinking as a source of pleasure, camaraderie, fun and adventure. More voyeuristic narratives in TV programmes such as 'Britain's Streets of Booze' or 'Booze Britain' constitute young people's drinking as a source of entertainment and as a spectacle of excess. It is commonly argued in the alcohol research literature that young people are being seduced into a culture of normalised excessive drinking, whilst simultaneously being pathologised as disordered and disorderly 'binge drinkers'.

In this context, it is hard even to talk about the practices described in this report without running the risk of being seen to make such assumptions. We therefore clarify at the outset that:

- The behaviour associated with drunken nights out is entirely normal, at least for those who participate in them (**§2.4**)
- The drunken night out is a highly structured context (**§2.5**)
- Unhelpful stereotypes of drunken nights out, of their participants, and of young people in general, need to be avoided (**§2.6**)

2.1 Drunken nights out

'Drunken night out' is the term we have decided to use to describe the behaviours which are the focus of this review. The term usefully draws attention to some key elements of our approach to the topic:

- The term 'night out' focuses attention on the special context (i.e. a context set aside from the rest of life) within which those behaviours take place, a context which is distinguished:
  - ◊ Temporally ('night'): this is a pattern that happens across the evening and night, typically at the weekend (although for students it may be more likely to happen on weekdays)
  - ◊ Spatially ('out'): this is a pattern which involves time spent away from home and in the night-time economy (although it may begin and end elsewhere)
  - ◊ Socially: while the words don't directly reflect this fact, a 'night out' is (in everyday usage) something one undertakes with other people
- Focusing on this special context also reminds us that what we are addressing here is a complete behavioural package, comprising numerous behaviours – of which consuming alcohol is only one.
- Individual behaviours, including alcohol consumption, need to be understood as part of the overall package. However, the term 'drunken' points to the fundamental importance in this package of being drunk. A drunken night out is not just a night out that involves drinking, as a consequence of which one may (or may not) end up drunk. Being drunk is a condition of participation in a drunken night out.

One apparent drawback of the term 'drunken night out' is the difficulty of converting it into a term for a person who participates – as opposed to, say, 'binge drinking', which readily yields 'binge drinker'. In our view, however, this is a point in favour of the term. The focus of our investigation is a type of social activity, not a type of person.

2.2 Binge drinking: a confused term

There are a number of good reasons not to use the widespread term 'binge drinking' to refer to the behaviours which are the focus of the review. A number of commentators draw attention to confusion and inconsistency in use of the term 'binge'. Berridge et al. (2009) note that, "going on a 'binge' used to mean an extended period (days) of heavy drinking, while now it generally refers to a single drinking session leading to intoxication'.

Focusing on contemporary usage, Martinic & Measham (2008), draw attention to the many different ways in which the term has been operationalised in practice: 'a growing number of definitions and meanings of the word 'binge' exist, notable not only for their lack of consensus regarding definition and measurement, but also their lack of consideration of outcomes and cultural sensitivity'.

Hayward & Hobbs (2007) remark that, in practice, the term 'is seldom used to describe the drinking habits of any group other than young denizens of the night-time economy. Indeed, private 'bingeing' is rarely referred to at all, and is seldom linked with alcohol-associated diseases, with accidents in the home, or with privatised violence in the form of spousal or child abuse'. The result is a term which leaves considerable rhetorical room for manoeuvre – as Hayward and Hobbs put it: 'a remarkably pliant device to implicate a range of individuals perhaps more accurately described as, 'young people drunk and disorderly in public places".

A recent manifestation of that pliant device can be found in the very first paragraph of the Prime Minister's foreword to the Government's Alcohol Strategy (2012):

Binge drinking isn't some fringe issue, it accounts for half of all alcohol consumed in this country. The crime and violence it causes drains resources in our hospitals, generates mayhem on our streets and spreads fear in our communities.

The slide from the Government's standard definition based on units consumed per day to a set of issues popularly associated with 'young people drunk and disorderly in public places' could all too easily create in the mind of a reader the (false) impression that it is these young people who are drinking half of all alcohol consumed in this country. There are many other contexts (including drinking by older people) in which it is likely that significant binge drinking (as defined by the Government) takes place.

Meanwhile, the term 'binge drinking' is not in general use among the very people it is typically used to describe. In their qualitative research, for example, Szmigin et al. (2008) found that, 'socialising and drinking amongst the participants took many forms but 'binge drinking' was not a term often used to refer to their own alcohol consumption. Participants described excessive drinking as getting mullered, totally blasted or pissed, wasted and annihilated'.[8] By way of contrast, Bartlett & Grist (2011) report that, 'a search for 'binge drinking' on the Daily Mail website yields 1,705 reports since August 2008 – almost two a day – often with extremely alarming headlines'.

8 Based on our own qualitative work, we can add the word 'mortal' to this list.

Given the most common definition of binge drinking (more than 8 units a day for men, more than 6 for women), Martinic & Measham (2008) also note concerns about 'the 'credibility gulf' between recommended and actual levels of sessional alcohol consumption by young people'. These concerns appear to be borne out by statistics, which show that, 'whilst 14% of all adults in 2012 were classified as binge drinkers using this measure, less than 1% felt that they were heavy drinkers' (ONS, 2013a).

2.3 Quantities consumed vs contextualised behaviours

Perhaps the most important criticism to be levelled against the term 'binge drinking', however, is that, by focusing on alcohol consumption, it is a poor description of the contextualised behavioural package we have chosen to refer to as a drunken night out. This argument is developed in some detail by Martinic & Measham (2008), who argue that, 'the presence of heavy alcohol consumption alone is not sufficient to define these behaviours'. Their argument can be read as having two key parts:

1. Consumption is not the same as intoxication. As they point out: 'combined with the lack of a specified time period for the drinking session, this [unit-based definition] means that an individual can potentially be classified as a 'binge drinker' without ever reaching altered states of intoxication'.

2. Intoxication (a physiological state) is not the same as drunkenness. The latter, as they explain, is 'very much a social phenomenon, shaped by local attitudes towards alcohol and its effects. […] It is therefore the combination of intoxication and cultural mores and expectancies about alcohol-related behaviour that makes up the complete picture of 'drunkenness".

They conclude that the package of behaviours we are describing as a drunken night out, 'cannot be constrained by measures of quantity, frequency, or intoxication', and suggest five definitional criteria that need to be satisfied:

- Intoxication (heavy drinking and its effects)
- Motivation (intentional pursuit of an altered state of consciousness)
- Process (a social and positive process)
- Outcomes (attention to drinking outcomes, positive and negative)
- Alcohol experience (the idea that an individual gets better over time at 'handling their drink')

Their proposed term is 'extreme drinking':

In many ways, extreme drinking is not so far removed from other extreme behaviours, such as extreme sports, which also offer a challenge; their pursuit is motivated by an expectation of pleasure; and they are, by design, not without risk to those who engage in them, others around them, and society as a whole.

Szmigin et al. (2008) note a number of other terms in use by those who recognise that the term 'binge drinking' is 'unclear, emotive and politically charged', such as: bounded hedonistic consumption; rational hedonism; heavy sessional consumption; controlled loss of control; determined drunkenness; and calculated hedonism. They themselves opt

for the last of these terms, usefully pointing out in the process what we would suggest is a sixth definitional criterion, context: 'alcohol consumption is a form of calculated hedonism allowing a type of pleasure which is *contained by time, space and social situation*' (our emphasis).

This last criterion is one of the key reasons for our own use of the term 'drunken night out'. As noted in **§2.1**, the term clearly establishes the temporal, spatial and social context in which alcohol is being consumed – while at the same time making reference to intoxication, motivation, process and outcomes (if not to alcohol experience).

2.4 Deviance vs normality

Binge drinking is often represented as the behaviour of a small minority, the classic perpetrators of deviant behaviour. By contrast, many commentators and researchers have drawn attention to the extent to which 'the pursuit of excessive alcohol consumption has become established as part of a 'normal' experience of young adulthood' (Seaman & Ikegwuono, 2010).

This conclusion is strongly supported by the findings from our own study. Interestingly, some of our participants explicitly contrasted the normality of their current drinking practices with the 'deviance' of their first experiences of underage drinking:

I think alcohol, now, is just a normal thing to do. Like, it's just… it is the norm. Everyone does it. It's… if you don't think, that, to a certain extent, is a bit weird, whereas, maybe, when I was 14, drinking, kind of, scared me a little bit at the same time, but I wanted to do it to see what happens. But now I like to do it as a part of life. [f, 20, Int47]

When I was 15, obviously everybody started, like, talked about having a drink and everybody said, yes, let's try it, let's try it. […] I've been drinking for a few years now, it's just, like, on a Wednesday night we know that we're going to have a drink and we're going to go out, so it's, like, it's nothing new to me then, really. Everybody does it, so it's just normal for me, really. I enjoy going out on a Wednesday and I enjoy having a drink then as well. [f, 19, Int02]

I know it's the same for the majority of people who do go out and binge drink. They've obviously done it from probably about the same age as me, and I think it's just our culture and our society, I think. [m, 24, Int07]

The normality of drunken nights out (for those who participate) is established in a number of different ways. The most obvious of these is the perception that, as one of our participants [f, 18, Int46] put it: 'everyone else drinks all the time'. While those who don't participate in drunken nights out may consider the behaviour deviant, those who do participate spend sizeable chunks of time surrounded by people doing the same as them. On the basis of fieldwork in Manchester, for instance, Measham & Brain (2005) dismiss the common claim that, 'drunkenness is confined to a small and antisocial minority of young revellers rather than being a feature of the weekend for a significant proportion of young people'. Other field studies confirm the point (**see §3.2**), as do some of the comments by our participants:

I don't think I've ever been in a club, and someone's come up to me who's been sober. [f, 18–20, WSA]

In practice, participants in drunken nights out are likely to come to the conclusion that their behaviour is normal not just among 'young revellers' (true) but also among young adults in general (false). That is because their social circles are likely to be *defined* in large part by drunken nights out. As one of our participants put it:

I don't know anybody my age that doesn't drink, really. No, everybody in uni has a student night and everyone gets drunk on the student night. [f, 19, Int02]

The second sentence does not in fact follow from the first – but it is an inference most of our participants appeared to make. We directly tested perceptions of the prevalence of drunken nights out among young adults in our workshops by reading out a simple statement, based on ONS statistics: 'half of all adults under 25 never or hardly ever drink alcohol'. Reactions to this statement from participants illustrate both the prevalence of the false belief that all young adults drink and get drunk, and the likely source of that false belief in an unrepresentative sample:

It's obviously crap because it's not true. [m, 18–20, WSC]

My friends from home, we've always gone out on the weekends, or in the weeks. We, I don't know. I just, I don't know many people, who don't drink, and if somebody tells me, or somebody doesn't drink, I think that's quite strange. [f, 18–20, WSA]

I would say if I met someone under 25 who never or hardly ever drank alcohol, I would have thought they were a bit weird. [m, 18–20, WSG]
m1 I think that's a lie.
m2 I've met a lot of under 25s and they all seem to be pretty big on their drinking. It's very rarely you meet someone that's teetotal and doesn't drink.
m3 Is that supposed to be a fact? [m, 21–24, WSI]

Participants in drunken nights out are not, however, alone in making this assumption. In their study of young people who choose *not* to drink, Herring et al. (2012) note that:

Young people felt there was a widespread assumption that drinking heavily was part of growing up, and which they came across among parents/family, friends, peers, in schools and within the media. Messages about alcohol from school, education and the media were felt by some young people to reinforce stereotypes and norms around drinking behaviour. Young people were angered by the lack of support for their choice and wanted their personal preferences to be respected and recognised as being valid.

In fact, some of our participants cited similar stereotypes as part of their rationale for rejecting the statement based on ONS statistics:

You wouldn't think that was true based on like, trying to change legislation to increase tax on cheap alcohol etc? They seem to make a big deal out of the fact that young people do drink. Apparently they don't, not as much as people believe. [m, 18–21, WSE]

To put the point another way, the normality of drunken nights out is established not just within the social circles of those who participate, but more widely across our culture. As Engineer et al. (2003) put it: 'the acceptability of binge drinking is established both within the young people's immediate friendship group and *through their perceptions of wider cultural norms*' (our emphasis).

There is, moreover, reason to believe those 'perceptions' of wider cultural norms may actually be quite accurate. Mintel (2009) report that 42% of all adults over 18 who drink alcohol agree with the statement 'binge drinking is part of British culture', and 24% agree that 'there is nothing wrong with occasionally drinking to excess' – not majorities, but not 'small minorities' either. Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) argue that:

The relationship between how young adults drink and wider cultural norms around consumption should not be ignored. Steady increases in population level consumption and increased accessibility may have led to a cultural acceptance of intoxication within a wider range of circumstances. It is now not uncommon, nor considered problematic, to take a 'deserved' large glass of wine to unwind, or to witness a sporting team inebriated in celebration on a news report.

In the same vein, Szmigin et al. (2011) note that, 'young people see others, particularly media celebrities, engaged in excessive drinking, which minimises the impact of fear appeals and creates a 'credibility gap". As one of our participants put it:

It's not like they're on the telly saying go out and get drunk, but when you watch TV and you watch films, they're all out having a drink. Same if you read the paper. There's drinking all over the media. It almost feels like it's not normal to not kind of go out and [get drunk]. [m, 24, Int07]

Reflecting upon the ubiquity of images of normalised drunkenness, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) go on to ask: 'are today's young adults being socialised into a qualitatively different culture around alcohol and to what extent does this store up problems for future alcohol-related harms for which society must bear the cost?'.

Unsurprisingly, considerable attention has been focused on the role of the drinks industry in the creation of wider cultural norms around drinking and drunkenness.[9] It is argued that marketing messages sent by commercial interests promote consumption, and sustain the culture of which drunken nights out are a part. This includes both the explicit messages sent by advertising, product placement and promotion (see e.g. BMA, 2009; Science Group of the European Alcohol and Health Forum, undated; Alcohol Health Alliance, 2013), and the implicit messages encoded in factors such as price, drink strength and venue design (see e.g. Seaman & Ikegwuono, 2010). Some of the participants in our research expressed comparable

9 We note that the construct of 'the drinks industry' is itself a very problematic one. As Berridge (2009) points out: 'the industry itself is fragmented, with horizontal organisation through large companies, rather than the vertical organisation of the past, dependent on the brewers. 'The industry' is not a monolithic force with a unified influence on policy'.

views on the signals sent by price in particular:

On a Monday night it's £1 drinks, which is obviously a massive, sort of, advertisement for anyone to go out and just, sort of, get drunk, really drunk; so that's probably what we'll do. [m, 20, Int18]

The cheaper… like, the cheaper the drinks, the faster you drink them and, you know, things like shots and stuff like that. [m, 24, Int11]

We used to get offers, oh, you get like three for this, oh yes, I'll have three, and then before you know it, your night's ruined. [f, 25, Int22]

99p drinks attracts the 99p drinkers. [m, 18–20, WSC]

A number of commentators have looked beyond industry marketing and seen connections between binge drinking and wider cultural trends, such as consumerism (see e.g. Measham, 2004) or the commoditisation of youth (see e.g. Percy et al., 2011). A few of our participants touched on similar themes:

I don't know about other towns, but in [City] there's nothing to do. So, we go out and drink. […] During the day you can go shopping or whatever, but then what's the point going shopping if you're not going to do anything with the new clothes you bought, so you may as well go out. Do you see how every day is an occasion? [m, 25, Int31]

In a similar vein, Hayward & Hobbs (2007) have argued that: 'despite the sirens, vomiting and inevitable hand-wringing that accompanies *Booze Britain*, the cumulative behaviour of the young drunk population of Britain's night-time high streets constitute not inversions of the social order but mirrors of it'.

Perhaps the most striking feature of that 'social order' is the fact that neither drinking nor drunkenness is in and of itself illegal (although many specific behaviours that take place within a drunken night out are). For our participants, this fact underpinned a distinction between excessive drinking and the use of other psychoactive substances:

You know the dangers but it is just such a sociable thing and you like go, oh, it's legal, it can't be that bad. So, but then when you start… when people start talking about drugs and things, I'm like, oh no, I'm too paranoid, I'd be scared because it's illegal, whereas drink it's like, well, it must be fine even though deep down I know it's not. [f, 21–24, WSH]

Say if you take heroin, or things like that, you go down a really slippery slope, and it really ends up bad, the majority of the time. But then you think, people have gone through their whole lives, with drinking, and it's normal. It's a very normal thing to do, isn't it? [f, 18–20, WSA]

Once again, our findings here reflect those of Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010), who note that, 'unlike many other forms of recreational substance use, drinking, even to excess, did not appear to put an individual outside the mainstream or subject to any of the labels that might accompany the heavy user of an illegal drug (indeed, abstainers were the ones at odds with majority views)'.

Participants in drunken nights out see their behaviour as fundamentally normal. This perspective is in stark contrast to the rhetoric Szmigin et al. (2008) discern in 'government reports, many research studies and marketing communications, implying that there is a normal way to drink alcohol, and that not conforming to this leads to illness and crime. People are presented as either consuming appropriately or not'.

The existence of a 'pervasive culture of 'determined drunkenness' in which drinking to intoxication is a normal part of many young people's social lives' (Griffin et al., 2009) also has important implications for the timeframes on which interventions should be undertaken and measured. Behaviour change is hard enough, but culture change represents another order of challenge. As Measham (2006) points out, 'the processes of cultural change may take decades rather than years, as illustrated by changing attitudes to drink driving, passive smoking, and the wearing of car seat belts'. Stead et al. (2009) draw a similar conclusion from their review of successful change initiatives, concluding that, 'such problems cannot be tackled once and then forgotten about. They are part of society, and will be so for a long time; policymakers, practitioners and the public need to engage with them over a generational timeframe. A commitment to generational action also requires a corresponding resource commitment – a factor that has arguably been lacking in alcohol work'.

2.5 Chaos vs structure

Binge drinking behaviour is often represented as chaotic, reckless and out of control. By contrast, many researchers have highlighted the extent to which behaviour during drunken nights out is in fact structured, managed and controlled. For example, Measham (2006) draws attention to 'subtle processes of self-regulation (such as the bounding of consumption by occasion, location, and weekly cycle)'. Hackley et al. (2008) argue:

Young people are choosing when, where and with whom to drink even where they may appear from an outsider's perspective to be drinking recklessly. It can be argued that young drinkers' perceptions of risk and safety are distorted, especially under the influence of alcohol. Nevertheless, there is an element of calculation which includes consideration of personal safety and health in relation to the inner body, balanced with the management of appearance and social positioning through the outer body in the social space.

Percy et al. (2011) identify the same patterns in underage drinkers, drinking outside the context of the night-time economy: 'simplistic portrayals of [underage] consumption as out-of-control binge drinking, where young people are looking to get 'as drunk as they possibly can', fail to capture the complexity of the decision-making undertaken by young people regarding the type, amount and pace of consumption'. They point out that the most extreme episodes of intoxication are 'more accurately labelled episodes of miscontrolled drinking rather than uncontrolled drinking'.

Of course, it is important not to overstate these points. Participants in drunken nights out do engage in behaviours which may reasonably be described as chaotic, reckless and out of control. They do so, however, in the context of a package of behaviours which is itself highly structured – and which carves out the social context in which specific forms of chaos and recklessness are made possible. This apparent paradox at the heart of the drunken night out is nicely captured by the phrase 'controlled loss of control', originally introduced by Measham (2002) and Hayward (2002) but widely used since.

The word 'control' should not be identified solely with individual 'self-regulation', 'calculation' or 'decision-making'. As Martinic & Measham (2008) point out, the drunken night out (or what they call 'extreme drinking') is 'by and large, a social activity, enabled and encouraged by others, usually friends and peers, who share the experience and the broadly positive attitudes to this pattern of consumption'. Behaviour is guided and shaped not only by individual choices, but also by norms within the group – themselves shaped, as we saw in the last section, by wider cultural norms.

In light of this, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) caution that, 'understanding decision-making as being driven by will-power and autonomy alone misses the point of social drinking':

Focusing on individual decision-making can over-rationalise and over-personalise the processes that lead to the adoption of alcohol-related practices. Indeed, throughout the data [from their qualitative study], talk was as much about activities that could be justified through reference to societal expectations, norms and appropriate ways of acting around alcohol. 'Decision-making', therefore, takes place in a nexus of influences from the broadly societal and cultural to local elements of family and network influences. Differences in consumption and alcohol-related practices were as much about available opportunities to enact broader cultural norms as they were about individual choices.

In this report we shall offer an analysis of the structures of a drunken night out based on explanations of behaviour given by those who themselves participate. These explanations, we shall see, include not only rational explanations of behaviour (based on an assessment of benefits and costs) but also social, situational and habitual explanations (see, for example, **Chapter 8**). While caution is always required when using this kind of evidence (see **§1.6**), the analysis offered by our participants is striking in both its sophistication and credibility. Above all else, it emphasises the structured nature of the drunken night out.
If we want to understand why people do what they do on a drunken night out, then the answer 'because they are out of control' is no answer at all. If anything, it represents a refusal even to engage with the motivations and norms that shape the activity.

Furthermore, on a much more practical note, hand-wringing about 'out of control' drinkers offers no way forward for harm-reduction efforts. To develop more effective interventions, we first need to recognise the internal structures of a drunken night out, upon which any sustainable change will need to build. As Bartlett & Grist (2011) argue,

interventions need to be 'premised on a more realistic and accurate understanding of why people behave in particular ways'. For example:

- Social marketing approaches require the identification of alternative behaviours which offer a positive exchange – greater gains than losses – to the target audience: and without an understanding of existing motivations, neither gains nor losses can be identified. As Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) note (in respect of diversionary activities): 'responses need not only to divert but also to provide and address what is currently missing and found through excessive alcohol consumption'.
- In some cases, the existing structures of a drunken night out may provide the basis for interventions. As Martinic & Measham (2008) point out, 'most young people who drink to extremes want to end the evening safely'. If one can first understand more about the calculations of risk that people currently make on a drunken night out, the ways in which those calculations are distorted, and the mechanisms by which risk is managed, then one may also identify opportunities to help people *improve* these risk management strategies.
- In other cases, understanding the structures of a drunken night out will help in avoiding ineffective interventions. For instance, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) argue that, 'alcohol education focusing on the observance of unit intake per session and the promotion of 'sensible drinking' runs counter to the way alcohol is used within peer groups during young adulthood, and therefore seems unlikely to affect behavioural change in the short term'.

2.6 Stereotypes vs reality

At the beginning of this chapter we cited Griffin et al.'s (2009) description of a popular culture 'replete with narratives of young people drinking to excess'. Alongside these narratives, their paper represents an example of what Measham (2007) describes as:

A more cautious commentary reflecting the cyclical nature of such political and media concerns, which tend to draw together the typical favourites of young people, alcohol and disorderly behaviour in public places. This relates to the broader academic debate surrounding the 'problem' of youth; the 'problem' of unproductive working class leisure; and the relationship between 'deviant' youth, the media and the notion of 'moral panic'.

In particular, Griffin et al. (2009) draw attention to the ways in which gender and class have structured constructs of binge drinkers: 'whilst 'excessive' drinking practices might be condoned (within limits) amongst upper and middle-class men, for example in the initiation ('hazing') rituals of male university sports teams, public displays of determined drunkenness by young working-class men, and especially young working-class white women, are frequently constituted as the epitome of feckless excess'. They also pinpoint age as a critical dimension, arguing that 'young people's public displays of 'extreme drinking' help to constitute the equally excessive (but altogether more private) alcohol consumption of the middle-aged middle classes as civilised and moderate'.

An important theme of many papers is that constructions of binge drinkers reflect 'a neo-liberal social order which emphasises individual responsibility and accountability, with communal social activity underplayed' (Szmigin et al., 2011). Measham & Brain (2005) argue that the 'twin processes of seduction and repression which characterise consumer society' are at work here: 'the market is left free to seduce consumers while the consequences of deregulated consumer excess result in the repression and demonisation of those identified as flawed consumers'.

There are important practical implications for Drinkaware here. As an organisation focused on education and communications, creating (actual or implied) representations of the people who engage in drunken nights out is core business for Drinkaware. There is a need to test these representations on an ongoing basis to ensure that, at the very least, they do not reinforce unhelpful cultural assumptions and prejudices (for instance, around gender, class and age), and to look for opportunities actively to challenge such assumptions and prejudices.

In particular, Drinkaware must avoid two damaging and false equations which the term 'binge drinkers' all too easily brings to mind:

1. A false equation between alcohol-related harm and drunken nights out. For instance, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) argue that, 'despite evidence of a societal alcohol problem with cultural antecedents, problematic drinking in some quarters remains a problem of youthful exuberance in city and town centres'.

2. A false equation between drunken nights out and drinking by young people. The young people in Herring et al.'s (2012) study, who had themselves chosen not to drink, rightly 'challenged and were critical of what they saw as distorted and negative portrayals of young people as heavy binge drinkers in the media'.

3 Participation in drunken nights out

Key points

- Young adults who do drink are more likely than older adults to drink a large number of units on one or two days a week, but less likely to drink on other days.
- Certain types of venue in the night-time economy are dominated by this younger adult cohort. Field studies reveal widespread excessive drinking among users of the night-time economy – although much consumption may take place at home before going out.
- 41% of 18 to 20 year olds and 38% of 21 to 24 year olds agree with the statement 'I really enjoy going out to get drunk' (TGI). Agreement with this statement declines with age.
- Research with 18 to 24 year olds undertaken for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013) allows us to identify three groups among those who drink alcohol at least once a year in this age range, based on intentions to get drunk:
  - 15% were Regular Intentionals, stating that they drink with the intention of getting drunk every time or most times they drink alcohol.
  - 48% were Occasional Intentionals, stating that they drink with the intention of getting drunk some of the time they drink or occasionally.
  - 36% were Never Intentionals, stating that they never drink with the intention of getting drunk.
- A regular intention to get drunk is associated with drinking more frequently, drinking more, getting drunk more often, and running an increase 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.
- Drinking and getting drunk are gendered activities – as is apparent in the gendering of drinks choices. However, there are striking similarities in the behaviour of women and men in the young adult age range, especially with regard to intentions and consumption. An important difference is that women are significantly more likely than men to report many negative consequences.
- There is no evidence to suggest that students are more (or less) likely to participate in drunken nights out than non-student peers of the same age.

In this chapter, we explore what can be established from available data regarding patterns of participation in drunken nights out. Specifically, we review data on:

- Consumption on the heaviest drinking day (**§3.1**)
- Drinking in the night-time economy (**§3.2**)
- Enjoyment of going out and getting drunk (**§3.3**)
- Intentions to get drunk (**§3.4**)

This data is highly consistent with the hypothesis that there is a segment of the population who regularly participate in drunken nights out, and that this segment is concentrated among younger adults – although older adults may also be represented, and many young adults do not participate in drunken nights out. There is no evidence that participation in drunken nights out is more common in either gender (**§3.5**) or among students (**§3.6**).

3.1 Consumption on heaviest drinking day

As discussed in **§2.3**, drunkenness is not the same as intoxication, which in turn is not the same as consumption. Unfortunately, the available national statistics most relevant to an analysis of drunken nights out relates to consumption: specifically the number of units drunk on the heaviest drinking day (HDD) in the seven days prior to survey.

As **Table 3** shows, this data reveals a clear pattern by age, with over a quarter of those aged 16 to 24 drinking more than three times the recommended daily amount on their HDD. Just 3% of those aged over 65 drink as much as this on their HDD.

Table 3: Units consumed on HDD by those who had drunk in previous week, by age

Units (m/f)	16–24	25–44	45–64	65+
< 4/3	38%	40%	48%	69%
4/3 – 8/6	23%	27%	29%	22%
8/6 – 12/9	12%	15%	12%	5%
> 12/9	27%	18%	11%	3%

Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, Office for National Statistics 2012.
Base: all who had drunk in previous week (16–24: 490, 49% of all 16–24; 25–44: 2,240, 57% of all 25–44; 45–64: 2,670, 65% of all 45–64; 65+: 1,850, 53% of all 65+).

At least three caveats are required with regards to these data. First, figures such as those cited above are based on self-reports, and may therefore misrepresent actual levels of consumption. For instance, Bellis et al. (2009) have argued, on the basis of a comparison between self-reports of consumption and alcohol sales, that: 'while national surveys can usefully inform such discussions, there is good reason to believe that they grossly underestimate the scale of the problem and consequently, understate the need for action'. It is also worth noting that consumption in a single day is not necessarily the same as consumption in a single session.

Secondly, the selection of age ranges creates challenges of interpretation. For example, figures for the 16 to 24 age group are undoubtedly affected by the fact that the youngest members of this cohort cannot legally purchase alcohol. In fact, regarding the relatively low proportion of this age range which have drunk at all in the last week, the ONS (2013a) notes that, 'when 16 and 17 year olds are excluded, there is no difference between the proportions of 18 to 24 year olds and those aged 65 and over who drank in the last week. The proportion of 16 and 17 year olds who said that they drank in the last week was low. This is most likely because in GB the legal age for alcohol purchases is 18'. Further questions might be raised about, for example, the 25 to 44 age group, a period which typically covers a number of important life changes. The fact that the ONS chooses 25 as a cut-

off point should not delude us into thinking that behaviour patterns change suddenly on people's 25th birthday, and then remain fixed for the next twenty years.

Finally, it is important to note that the figures above relate to the HDD in one week only. The 27% of 16 to 24 year old drinkers who had drunk more than 12/9 units on their HDD could represent a hard core of individuals doing this every week, or a more widespread practice of doing this only in some weeks.

While young adults are more likely to drink excessively on their HDD, they are also less likely to drink at all on other days of the week. For example, data from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey for 2012 shows that only 3% of 16 to 24 year olds had drunk alcohol on five or more days in the previous week. This compares to 7% of 25 to 44 year olds, 14% of 45 to 64 year olds and 18% of those over 65. The ONS (2013a) summarises the pattern as follows:

Younger adults were less likely to have drunk frequently, but younger drinkers were more likely to have drunk heavily [defined as more than 8/6 units on HDD]. The opposite was true for older adults, who were more likely to have drunk frequently, but older drinkers were less likely to have drunk heavily.

The claim that young adult drinkers drink on fewer days of the week than older drinkers is also reinforced by data from the General Lifestyle Survey 2011, which provides greater granularity around the number of days of drinking in the week prior to the survey. Among those that had drunk at all, 76% of 16 to 24 year olds who drank at all had drunk on only one or two days in the previous week. This falls to 64% of 25 to 44 year old drinkers who drank on only one or two days in the previous week, and 48% of 45 to 64 year old drinkers doing so (figures calculated from data tables for ONS, 2013b).

Taken together, these data are consistent with the hypothesis that there are at least two distinct patterns of consumption here:

- Pattern A, more prevalent among younger adults, involves a large number of units being drunk on one or two days a week, but little or nothing on other days.
- Pattern B, more prevalent among older adults, involves more consumption of a smaller number of units on most or all days of the week.

The existence of Pattern A was more than borne out by our own qualitative work. Indeed, some of our participants spontaneously noted the existence of these two patterns:

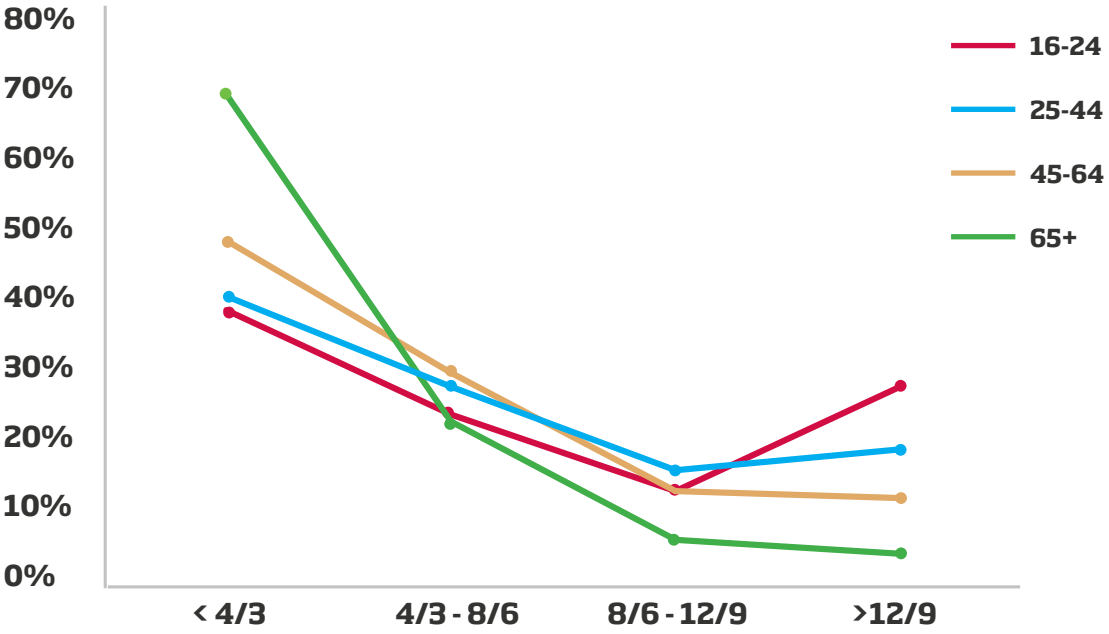
Last year it was getting to the point where I just needed to stop having a drink because I realised that I was doing that thing that old people do where they drink every night, not enough for it to be a binge, but so like me and my friend – because I lived at home – like me and my friend would share a bottle of wine every night or whatever, or I'd have a couple of beers every night. [m, 21, Int45]

This particular participant, it should be noted, had dealt with his need 'to stop having a drink' by cutting out the everyday drinking so that he could focus on his drunken nights out. We will discuss the instrumental relationship with alcohol which probably underpins Pattern A in **§9.2**.

It should be emphasised once more that, even if Pattern A is more prevalent among younger adults, this does not mean that older adults never engage in this pattern of behaviour. Still less does it mean that all young adults engage in Pattern A. Graphical representation of the data in **Table 1** – **Figure 1** below – lends visual credibility to the idea that a segment of the population can be defined by participation in Pattern A and focused among younger adults, while also reminding us that many young adults are not part of this segment.

Writing about a younger, teenage cohort, Measham (2007) has argued that, 'what we may be seeing is a polarisation of young people's drinking, with more abstainers and occasional drinkers, alongside more heavy consumption amongst those young people who are regular drinkers', and cites Balding and Regis's description of this as 'more alcohol down fewer throats'. Percy et al. (2011) point out that, 'comparing teenagers today with previous generations reveals that there has been little change in the proportion who consume alcohol or in the frequency of consumption. However, in recent years there does appear to have been an increase in the average volume consumed by teenage drinkers'. One way in which the average volume consumed could go up, but the proportions consuming and the frequency of consumption stay the same, is if those who do drink are drinking more per session.

Figure 1: Units consumed on HDD by those who had drunk in previous week, by age



Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, Office for National Statistics 2012.
Base: all who had drunk in previous week (16–24: 490; 25–44: 2,240; 45–64: 2,670; 65+: 1,850).

3.2 Drinking in the night-time economy

National statistics do not enable us directly to link different behaviour patterns such as Patterns A and B above with locations or contexts. Useful indications are, however, provided by data regarding the use of the night-time economy by different age groups. For instance, **Table 4** below summarises analysis by Mintel (2011) of the frequency of alcohol consumption in the on-trade by different age cohorts. This table shows regular use of the night-time economy concentrated in the 18 to 24 cohort, collapsing in the 25 to 34 cohort, and then picking up a little again in later life.

Other data from Mintel (2011) supplements this picture with indications of the kinds of venues in which these different age groups are doing their drinking. For example, as Table 5 below shows, use of nightclubs and late night bars is dominated by younger cohorts, while use of country pubs steadily increases with age as use of city centre and high street pubs declines.

Table 4: Frequency of alcohol consumption in the on-trade, by age

	Once a day 2 or 3 times a week	Once a week or 2 or 3 times a month	Once a month or less than once a month
18–24	24%	48%	27%
25–34	10%	44%	46%
35–44	9%	40%	50%
45–54	16%	38%	45%
55–64	19%	40%	41%
65+	16%	38%	45%

Source: GB TGI Q1 2011 (Oct 2009–Sept 2010), Kantar Media UK Ltd/Mintel.
Base: adults aged 18+ who drink alcohol out of home.

Table 5: Places visited for an alcoholic drink in the last 6 months, by age

	Country pub	City centre/high street pub	Nightclub/late-night bar
18–24	37%	52%	63%
25–34	38%	58%	41%
35–44	46%	49%	19%
45–54	45%	36%	7%
55+	52%	35%	5%

Source: Toluna/Mintel May 2011.
Base: 1,044 internet users aged 18+ who have drunk alcohol in the last six months at a pub/bar/restaurant/other venue.

These figures are certainly consistent with the idea that heavy sessional drinking (Pattern A in **§3.1**) is associated with the kind of night-time economy that has developed in the centres of many towns and cities.[10] That view receives extensive validation from field studies carried out in such locations, which show clear evidence of widespread excessive drinking. For example:

- A field study involving over 350 respondents in Manchester found that the average respondent could already be classified as a 'binge drinker' at the time of the survey, using the most common definition (8/6 units for men/women), and that respondents also indicated 'considerably more drinking planned… during the rest of the evening in order to achieve their desired state of intoxication' (Measham & Brain, 2005).
- In another field study involving 380 respondents, also in a city in the North West of England, the mean alcohol consumption reported was 23.7 units for men and 16.3 units for women. 90% of men and women qualified as 'binge drinkers' using the same unit-based definition (Hughes et al, 2007).
- Of 214 participants in a field study in Manchester, Liverpool and Chester, nearly half regarded themselves as drunk at the time of interview, while over three quarters of respondents (including half of those who considered themselves drunk) intended to consume more alcohol. Around one in ten individuals (15% of males and 4% of females) intended to consume more than 40 units during the night. The mean intended consumption was 27.2 units for men and 16.5 units for women (Bellis et al., 2010).
- A field study in Camden found a mean consumption at the time of interview of 10 units for women and 14 units for men, with 53% of respondents stating that they intended to continue drinking, and 12% of respondents (both sexes) having already consumed 22 units or more (research by Hadfield et al., cited in Hadfield & Newton (2010)).
- In a study involving 281 students attending commercial pub crawls, the total expected median alcohol consumption over the course of the pub crawl was 15 units: 13 units for women, 18 for men (Quigg et al. (2011)).

Hadfield & Newton (2010) conclude that, 'these targeted street-based studies suggest that participants in the night-time economy drink more than the national average and, more significantly, drink at levels which are above average for their age group'. They further note that, 'information regarding this sub-group of heavy drinkers is not identifiable by reference to routine national data collection exercises such as the General Lifestyle Survey, which select participants from the general population using random sampling methods'.

3.3 Enjoying getting drunk

So far in this chapter we have concentrated on data relating to behaviour – what people do and where. This picture is usefully supplemented by evidence regarding people's attitudes to getting drunk. The TGI database, for example, includes an item obviously relevant to this question: 'I really enjoy going out to get drunk'. Levels of agreement with this statement show a familiar age-related pattern, as shown in **Table 6** overleaf.

10 An important proviso is required here, however. Participants in the night-time economy may indeed be drinking more than the national average, and may as a result spend time very drunk in the night-time economy; but it does not follow that they are doing all or even most of their drinking in the night-time economy. We discuss pre-drinking at home in **Chapter 11.**

Table 6: 'I really enjoy going out to get drunk', by age

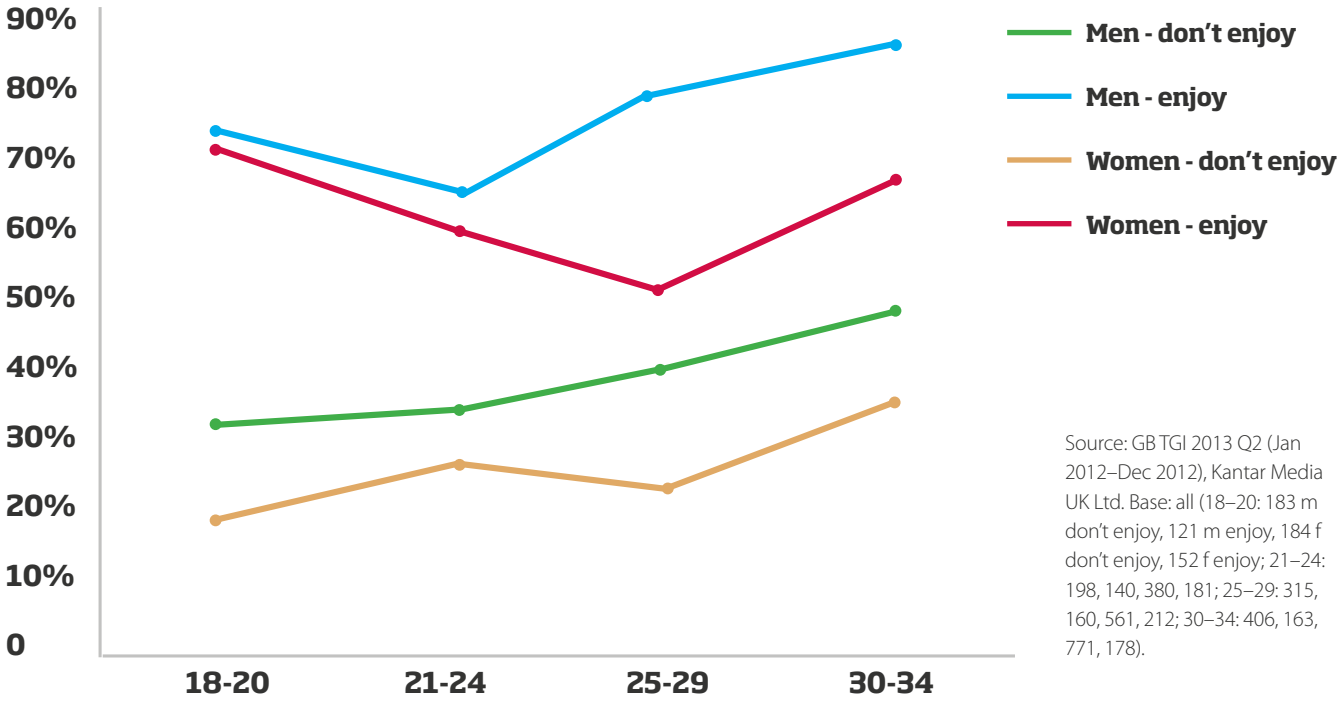
	18–20	21–24	25–29	30–34	All 18+
I really enjoy going out to get drunk	41%	38%	29%	23%	15%

Source: GB TGI 2013 Q2 (Jan 2012–Dec 2012), Kantar Media UK Ltd.
Base: all (18–20: 640; 21–24: 1,127; 25–29: 1,248; 30–34: 1,518; all 18+: 23,593).

The TGI database also provides evidence that these attitudinal statements are associated with drinking behaviour. This is apparent, for instance, if one compares responses to items regarding frequency of drinking (in home or out of home) by those who enjoy going out and getting drunk ('definitely agree'/'tend to agree') and by those who don't (other responses).

For instance, among those aged 18 to 20, 73% of men and 70% of women, who enjoy going out and getting drunk, drink at least once a week, compared to just 34% of men and 18% of women, who don't enjoy going out and getting drunk. Moreover, this pattern continues into the early thirties, as **Figure 2** shows – although those who don't enjoy going out and getting drunk do appear to start drinking more as they get older.

Figure 2: Drinking at least once a week by enjoyment of going out and getting drunk



Source: GB TGI 2013 Q2 (Jan 2012–Dec 2012), Kantar Media UK Ltd. Base: all (18–20: 183 m don't enjoy, 121 m enjoy, 184 f don't enjoy, 152 f enjoy; 21–24: 198, 140, 380, 181; 25–29: 315, 160, 561, 212; 30–34: 406, 163, 771, 178).

3.4 Intending to get drunk

The phrase 'going out to get drunk' implies that people are going out with the express intention of getting drunk. This intentional drunkenness is often highlighted as a defining feature of the drunken night out. Research undertaken for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013) allows us to examine the importance of such intentions in more detail. (Ipsos MORI conducted an online quota survey among a representative sample of 748 18-24 year olds across the UK between 29th October and 11th November 2013. The data were weighted by age, gender, region and social grade to the known offline population profiles.)

The sample for the research is limited to the 18 to 24 age range, so it is not possible to make comparisons between age ranges (as it is with the TGI data cited above). What this data does allow us to do, however, is to track the associations between intentions and a range of drinking behaviours and attitudes. The key question in the survey, for our purposes, reads as follows: 'When you drink alcohol, how often, if ever, do you do so with the specific intention of getting drunk?'

Of those who drank alcohol at least once a year (650 respondents), 4% responded, 'every time I drink'; 12% responded, 'most of the time I drink'; 20% responded, 'some of the time I drink'; 27% responded, 'occasionally'; and 36% responded, 'never'. (2% responded, 'don't know').

Three groups of 18 to 24 year old drinkers may be identified on the basis of these responses:

- Regular Intentionals (responding 'every time' or 'most times') – 15%[11]
- Occasional Intentionals (responding 'some of the time' or 'occasionally') – 48%
- Never Intentionals (responding 'never) – 36%

Responses to other questions in the survey by these three groups reveal a series of striking patterns in both reported behaviour and reported attitude. (However, in interpreting these patterns it is important to note that the base size of 100 Regular Intentionals is small, and that findings should therefore be considered as indicative only. Full details of the responses of these three groups to a range of questions are also provided in **Appendix 1.**)

Frequency of drinking

The first pattern is that Regular and Occasional Intentionals drink more frequently than Never Intentionals. For example, 76% of Regular and 73% of Occasional Intentionals drink at least once a week, compared to only 45% of Never Intentionals (base: all respondents). Regular and Occasional Intentionals are also more likely to drink out of home at least once a week (49% and 43%, compared to 24% of Never Intentionals; base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year). This pattern is consistent with the association in TGI data, noted above, between agreeing that 'I really enjoy going out and getting drunk', and drinking at least once a week.

11 Note that the apparent discrepancy here (15% is not 4% plus 12%) is owing to rounding.

In line with Pattern A drinking (see **§3.1**), however, Regular and Occasional Intentionals are unlikely to drink every day of the week. For example, 53% of Regular Intentionals report drinking once or twice a week, and only 5% report drinking on five or more days of the week.

Quantity drunk

A second pattern is that Regular Intentionals drink more than Occasional Intentionals, and Occasional Intentionals drink more than Never Intentionals. **Table 7** below shows the percentages of those in each group who drink at least once a week classified, on the basis of reported consumption in a typical week, as low risk, increasing risk and high risk drinkers.

Regular Intentionals reported a mean consumption of 25.19 units in a typical week, compared to 19.38 units for Occasional Intentionals and 13.94 units for Never Intentionals (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a week). In fact, 16% of Regular Intentionals claimed to drink more than 40 units in a typical week, compared to 9% of Occasional Intentionals and 3% of Never Intentionals.
A similar pattern was also apparent in reported consumption on the most recent night out. 47% of Regular Intentionals reported having drunk 11 or more units over the course of their most recent night out, compared to 34% of Occasional Intentionals and 12% of Never Intentionals (base: all who drink alcohol outside the home).

The evidence suggests that these patterns of increased consumption cannot be attributed to ignorance of guidelines. For example, asked how they would describe their own drinking habits, Regular Intentionals were significantly more likely than Occasional or Never Intentionals to select the response: 'I frequently drink more quite a bit more than what is supposed to be 'safe".

Table 7: Consumption in a typical week by intention to get drunk

	Regular Intentionals	Occasional Intentionals	Never Intentionals
Low risk drinkers	52%	61%	82%
Increasing risk drinkers	31%	31%	17%
High risk drinkers	17%	8%	1%

Source: Ipsos MORI (2013).
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a week (RI: 76; OI: 225; NI: 105). Note small base size for RIs.

Frequency of drunkenness

Given the above patterns, the third pattern is no surprise: Regular Intentionals report getting drunk more often than Occasional Intentionals, and Occasional Intentionals report getting drunk more often than Never Intentionals. Before being asked about their intention to get drunk, respondents were asked: 'when you drink alcohol, how often, if ever, do you end up getting drunk?' Responses are summarised in **Table 8** below.

Table 8: Frequency of getting drunk by intention to get drunk

	Regular Intentionals	Occasional Intentionals	Never Intentionals
Every time I drink	22%	1%	-
Most of the time I drink	63%	11%	1%
Some of the time I drink	15%	54%	7%
Occasionally	-	32%	48%
Never	-	3%	45%

Source: Ipsos MORI (2013).
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year (RI: 100; OI: 309; NI: 231).

Bad consequences

A fourth pattern is that Regular Intentionals are more likely to report having experienced a range of negative consequences as a result of drinking alcohol. For example, Regular Intentionals are significantly more likely than Occasional Intentionals (and Occasional Intentionals significantly more likely than Never Intentionals) to report getting involved in a fight or argument; regretting a decision to engage in sexual activity; having unprotected sex; taking risks with personal safety; being unable to remember what happened the night before; being a victim of crime; or injuring themselves. Regular Intentionals were also significantly more likely to report having got into trouble with the police as a result of drinking alcohol. We present more detail regarding some of these statistics in **Chapters 14** and **16**.

In summary, a regular intention to get drunk seems to be associated with drinking more frequently (though still within the bounds of Pattern A), drinking more, getting drunk more often, and running an increased risk of experiencing or causing harm.

Ways of drinking

Over and above this, there is also clear evidence in the data that the intention to get drunk is associated with a different way of drinking. We shall return to the differences between Regular, Occasional and Never Intentionals throughout this report, as we present detailed qualitative evidence regarding this different way of drinking (a full overview of responses from the three groups is provided in **Appendix 1**). For now, a single example will serve to illustrate the general pattern at this point.

Table 9: 'I could never see myself doing this', by intention to get drunk

	Regular Intentionals	Occasional Intentionals	Never Intentionals
Turn down a drink from friends	**29%**	**18%**	5%
Alternate alcoholic drinks with soft drinks or water	**28%**	**14%**	8%
Avoid drinking shots	**32%**	14%	15%
Avoid being in a round of drinks	**32%**	20%	17%
Avoid drinking too much before I have left home	**18%**	10%	8%
Drink lower alcohol drinks	29%	26%	25%
Avoid always having alcohol in the house	28%	33%	29%
Set myself a spending limit	13%	8%	14%
Leave my cash cards at home	26%	30%	35%
Have one or two nights off drinking	4%	4%	7%
Make sure I eat before drinking	3%	3%	3%

Source: Ipsos MORI (2013).
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year (RI: 100; OI: 309; NI: 231).

As part of the survey, participants were presented with a number of 'things people have said they do to control their drinking and avoid getting too drunk', and asked if they had tried any of these. **Table 9** *on the previous page* shows the percentage of Regular, Occasional and Never Intentionals selecting the response 'I could never see myself doing this' for each of these tactics. Percentages which are significantly higher than those in other columns are in bold.

The first observation to be made about this table is that attitudes to certain tactics show no association whatsoever with intentions to get drunk. Almost everyone can see themselves eating before they drink or having a few nights off drinking (something most people in this age group do already), independently of intentions. Resistance to lower alcohol drinks, to having no alcohol at home, or to leaving cash cards at home is not statistically different between the three groups.

Intentions to get drunk are, however, associated with certain specific resistances. For example, Regular Intentionals show a greater attachment to shots (see **§9.3** for the role of shots in instrumental drinking) and heavy pre-drinking (see **Chapter 12**). What is particularly striking is the extent to which the individual intention to get drunk has a *social* dimension – accepting drinks from friends, for example, or taking part in rounds. Throughout this report we shall highlight the intensely social nature of the drunken night out, and in particular the pivotal role played by the group of friends one goes out with and the ubiquitous influence of norms and rituals. The resistance to alternating alcoholic drinks with soft drinks or water, we would suggest, is an example of one such norm: for while participants in drunken nights out may sometimes consider drinking water later in the evening if they get too drunk (see **§9.3**), there is at all other times a strong norm of drinking alcoholic drinks (see **§10.1**).

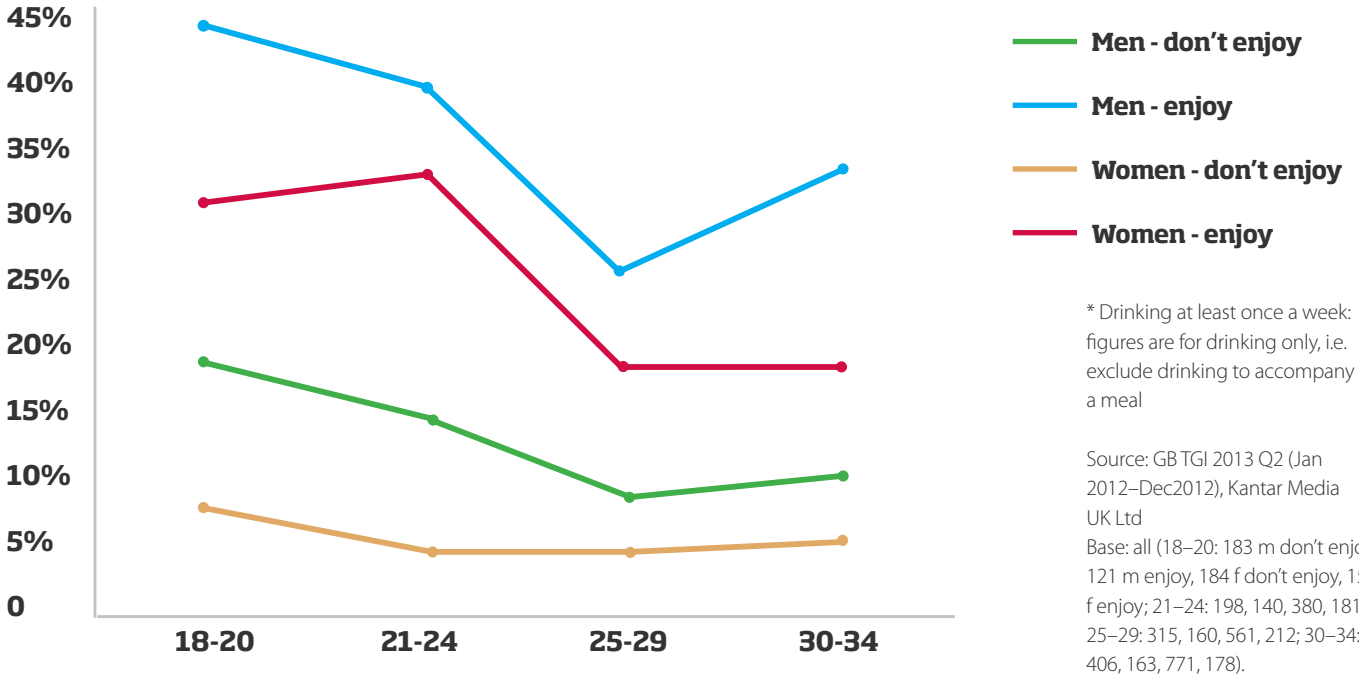
Intentions and venues in the night-time economy

Further analysis of the TGI database provides evidence of an association between choices of different venues in the night-time economy and the intention to get drunk.

As **Figure 3** and **Figure 4** *overleaf* show, the pattern seen above in connection with drinking in general is also seen for i) drinking at least once a week in pubs and ii) regular use of night clubs. These figures also indicate a downward trend in use of the night-time economy with age.

Research conducted with 18 to 24 year olds by Millward Brown (2010) for Drinkaware provides further evidence of an association between choice of venue and the intention to get drunk, especially in relation to nightclubs. Respondents who had drunk at different types of venue in the preceding seven days were asked: 'what would you say are the main reasons why you drank alcohol at [venue]?' and allowed to give more than one reason. **Table 10** below shows the percentages giving 'to get drunk' as a reason for drinking at each of the different types of venue.

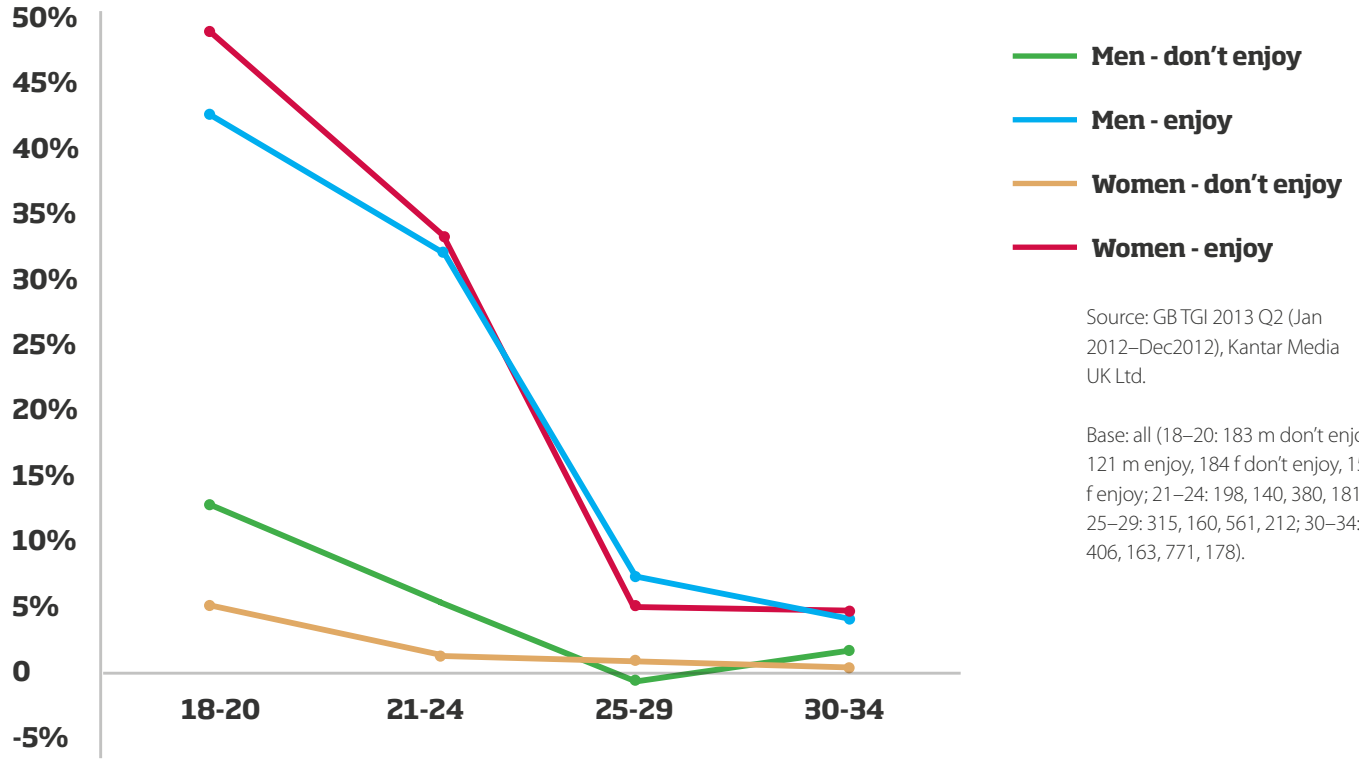
Figure 3: Regular drinking in pubs*, by enjoyment of going out and getting drunk



* Drinking at least once a week: figures are for drinking only, i.e. exclude drinking to accompany a meal

Source: GB TGI 2013 Q2 (Jan 2012–Dec2012), Kantar Media UK Ltd
Base: all (18–20: 183 m don't enjoy, 121 m enjoy, 184 f don't enjoy, 152 f enjoy; 21–24: 198, 140, 380, 181; 25–29: 315, 160, 561, 212; 30–34: 406, 163, 771, 178).

Figure 4: Regular use of night clubs, by enjoyment of going out and getting drunk



Source: GB TGI 2013 Q2 (Jan 2012–Dec2012), Kantar Media UK Ltd.

Base: all (18–20: 183 m don't enjoy, 121 m enjoy, 184 f don't enjoy, 152 f enjoy; 21–24: 198, 140, 380, 181; 25–29: 315, 160, 561, 212; 30–34: 406, 163, 771, 178).

Table 10: Drinking to get drunk at different venues among 18 to 24 year olds

Venue	Number of participants who drank at this venue in preceding seven days	Percentage giving 'to get drunk' as a reason for drinking at this venue
Nightclub	318	41%
Bar/Pub	609	28%
Private party	207	33%
Friends come to house	268	21%
Visit to friends	405	21%
Restaurant	309	4%

Source: Millward Brown (2010)
Base: 2000 GB 18–24 year olds, April 2010.

Intentions, plans and accidents

The observation that participants in drunken nights out *intentionally* get drunk is not a new one. For example, some ten years ago Engineer et al. (2003) noted that young people aged 18 to 24 (the focus of their study) 'often go out with the definite intention of getting drunk, [and may] deliberately accelerate or intensify their drunkenness by mixing drinks, drinking before they go out, or drinking beverages that they know have a strong effect on them'. The difference between intentionally getting drunk and other kinds of getting drunk is nicely captured by Campbell (2013) in this story:

Recently a young Greek studying at the LSE told me the story of his first Friday night here, when he asked a British student what he planned to do for the evening. 'I am going to get smashed,' said the Brit. The Greek looked confused. 'How do you know?' he asked.

The word 'intentional' is in many respects a very good one to describe what is going on here. Nevertheless, two cautions are in order.

The first caution starts with the observation that the concept of 'intention' belongs very much to *individualistic* and *rational* accounts of behaviour. We shall argue in this report that, while this kind of perspective has a lot to offer in understanding drunken nights out, it cannot offer a complete account. The reality is a lot more complex than individual people just carrying out their intentions.

For example, in the research undertaken for Drinkaware for Ipsos MORI, agreement with the statement 'I find it hard to turn down a drink on a night out, even if I didn't intend to drink alcohol' follows a familiar pattern: 51% of Regular Intentionals agreed with the statement. This is significantly more than the 39% of Occasional Intentionals who agreed, which is in turn more than the 14% of Never Intentionals (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year). Except in this instance, the pattern is somewhat puzzling: why would the frequency with which one drinks with the intention of getting drunk have any impact on how one behaved when one consciously intends *not* to drink?

To explain this behaviour, we have to look at other factors beyond *intentions*: habits, situational cues and, above all else social norms. Moreover, if those factors affect Regular Intentionals, Occasional Intentionals and Never Intentionals differently on occasions when they are trying *not* to drink, as the figures above suggest they do, then presumably they will also affect them differently on those occasions when they set out to get drunk. The influence of intentions on behaviour cannot neatly be separated from these other factors.

Participants in drunken nights out certainly know, like the British student above, that they are going to get drunk; they cheerfully embrace that end, and often describe themselves as intentionally pursing it. The term 'intention', however, fails to capture the complex dynamics of a drunken night out. In some ways, 'planned drunkenness' would be a better term than 'intentional drunkenness', thanks to the linguistic coincidence that one can plan on something happening even if one does not exactly plan *to* do it.

Yes, it's never actually planned, but I think subconsciously we know it's going to happen. We're just never... it's never intentional either. We're always like no, we'll just have a drink. We've got a lecture tomorrow, we've got this tomorrow, whatever, oh, but it's so cheap, so you only pay a third in [Bar1], so we have £1 drinks in [Bar2] or whatever, so it just tends to happen. [m, 25, Int31]

The second caution relates to the common tendency to see the opposite of doing something 'intentionally' as doing it 'accidentally'. In fact, 'intending to get drunk' has two opposites: 'intending *not* to get drunk' (a positive intention to do the opposite), and 'not intending to get drunk' (an absence of an intention). It is only someone who is intending not to get drunk, we would suggest, who should be described as getting drunk accidentally – if for instance they mistake the alcohol content of the drink they are drinking. Those who are merely not intending to get drunk – the far more common situation – should be described as getting drunk *negligently*.

The construction of oneself as 'accidentally getting drunk' may sometimes be little more than a rhetorical shuffle to avoid taking responsibility for one's own negligence. Meanwhile, the construction of others (young people in particular) as 'intentionally getting drunk' can, in some contexts, convey a tone of moral superiority. The concept of 'getting drunk accidentally' is a very reassuring one for many of us, and seems to describe a familiar experience. In reality, however, those who claim to get drunk 'accidentally' are usually adults with a clear understanding of the impact of alcohol and the approximate strength of the drinks they are, of their own free will, consuming.

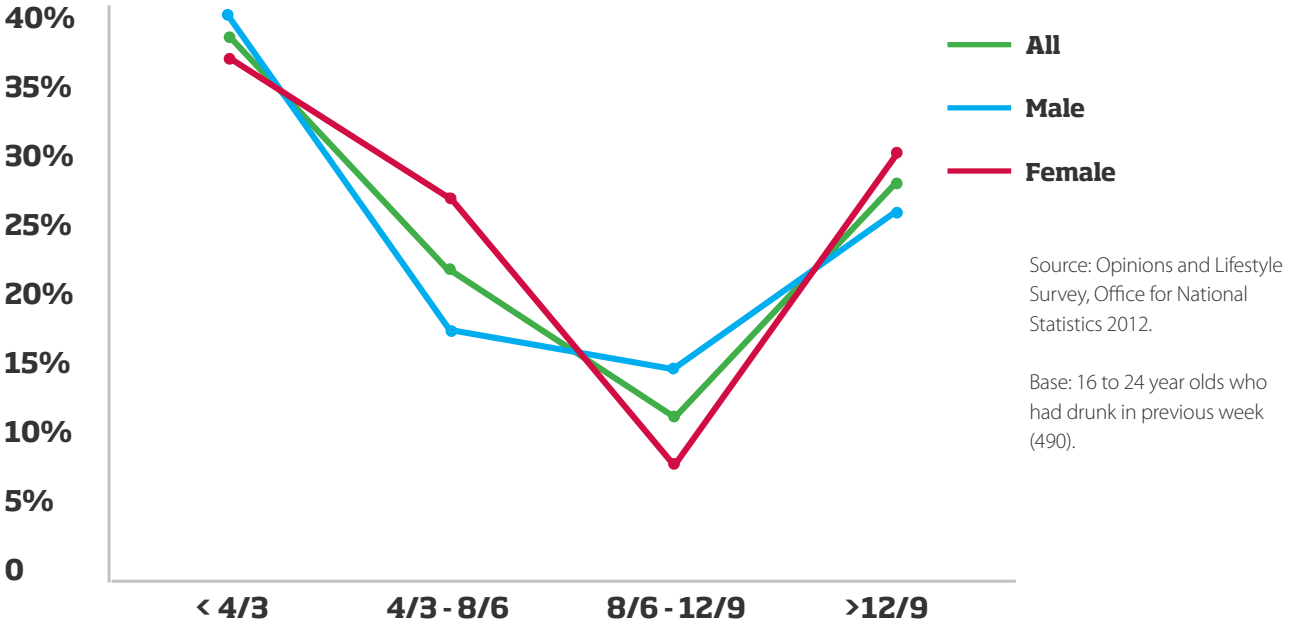
3.5 Gender

Drinking and getting drunk are heavily gendered activities (see, for example, de Visser et al., 2012), and this applies as much to young adults as to any other cohort. For instance, the ONS (2010) report very different choices drinks preferences by gender in the 16 to 24 year old age group, with the male drinks portfolio being dominated by beer, lager and cider, and females drinking more spirits and wine. Atkinson

et al. (2012) draw attention to the highly gendered ways in which 'alcohol and alcohol-related behaviour is depicted within a range of magazines read by 11 to 18 year olds in the UK'. In general, men also drink more than women: for instance, the ONS (2013a) draws attention to the fact 'male drinkers (29%) were more likely to be heavy drinkers [defined by the ONS as more than 8/6 units on the HDD] than female drinkers (21%), regardless of age.

Specifically among young adults, however, some of these differences are much less marked (although drinks choices remain highly gendered). For instance, the ONS (2013a) notes that a pattern of men being more likely to drink than women 'is true for all age groups *apart from those aged 16 to 24*. Men and women aged 16 to 24 were almost equally likely to have drunk in the last week' (our emphasis).[12] The differences in terms of consumption on the HDD also disappear among young adults if one looks only at 'very heavy drinkers' (those drinking more than 12/9 units on the HDD). Men and women aged 16 to 24 are almost equally likely to be very heavy drinkers (28% women, 26% men). Indeed, as **Figure 5** below illustrates, the data suggests that the distinction between two segments (those participating in Pattern A, and those not participating: see **§3.1**) may be even more pronounced among women than among men.

Figure 5: Units consumed on HDD by 16 to 24 year olds who had drunk in previous week



Source: Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, Office for National Statistics 2012.

Base: 16 to 24 year olds who had drunk in previous week (490).

12 The Institute of Alcohol Studies (2013a) notes that this reflects significant increases in the rate and level of alcohol consumption among young women over the past two decades. It is worth noting that TGI data tells a slightly more nuanced story in this respect, as evidenced by **Figure 2**, which suggests that the similarity between men and women in this age group may be primarily among those who enjoy going out and getting drunk, with differences apparent among those who don't.

It must be noted that the definitions of heavy and very heavy drinking used by the ONS, alongside unit-based definitions of binge drinking and government guidelines, incorporate from the outset a gendered view of what constitutes acceptable drinking (i.e. one which ignores differences *within* the genders and focuses exclusively on the statistical differences *between* them). To give one example, a man drinking 10 units in a single session would be defined by the ONS as a heavy drinker; a woman drinking the same amount would be defined as a *very* heavy drinker.

Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that, among participants in drunken nights out, the differences between genders may be much less pronounced than in many other settings in which alcohol is consumed.

Similarities between the drinking behaviour of men and women aged 18 to 24 are also apparent in the research undertaken for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013). For example, no significant patterns of difference are apparent between men and women in terms of intentions to get drunk; although when it comes to actually getting drunk, women are slightly more likely to report that they end up doing so every time or most times they drink.[13] There is some indication that men may drink more frequently: men are more likely to drink at least once a week,[14] and also to drink out of the home at least once a week;[15] while women are more likely than men to drink once or twice a month,[16] and also to drink out of the home once or twice a month.[17] Women also appear to be more committed pre-drinkers: 18% of women stated that they would *always* have a drink at home or at a friend's home before going out, against only 10% of men (base: all respondents).

Three key areas of difference between men and women are apparent in this data:

- Drink choices (as already noted above). It is also striking that men are much more resistant than women to lower alcoholic drinks,[18] and to alternating alcoholic drinks with soft drinks or water.[19]
- Attitudes: for instance, men were more likely to agree that, 'it is not as acceptable these days to get drunk as it used to be'.[20] Some other differences in attitude are discussed in **§4.2** and **§8.4**.
- Reported negative consequences: women are significantly more likely than men to report, as a result of drinking alcohol: getting involved in a fight or argument; regretting a decision to engage in sexual activity; taking risks with personal safety; being unable to remember what happened the night before; or injuring themselves. We present more detail regarding some of these statistics in **Chapters 14** and **16**.

13 22% of women vs 16% of men (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).
14 62% of men vs 48% of women (base: all respondents).
15 46% of men vs 27% of women (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).
16 24% of women vs 14% of men (base: all respondents).
17 37% of women vs 28% of men (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).
18 33% of men state that they could never see themselves drinking lower alcoholic drinks to control their drinking and avoid getting too drunk, vs 19% of women (base: all who drink).
19 18% of men state that they could never see themselves alternating alcoholic drinks with soft drinks and water to control their drinking and avoid getting too drunk, vs 10% of women (base: all who drink).
20 45% of men agreed, vs 32% of women (base: all respondents).

3.6 Students vs non-students

Drunken nights out have often been associated with student populations. For example, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) found that, 'the centrality of alcohol consumption to student lifestyles was recognised by all those who had experienced it and, to some, came as a shock when first encountered'.

It is unquestionable that drunken nights out are a key component of many students' experiences (though we should remember that, as with other young adults, many do *not* participate). It is equally unquestionable, however, that drunken nights out are common among non-students of similar age (as our qualitative work attests). The question is whether being a student makes a young person more (or less) likely to participate in drunken nights out.

The data here is inconclusive – not least because it is hard to find genuinely comparable statistics. The research for Drinkaware conducted by Ipsos MORI (2013) reveals only a few noteworthy significant differences between employed and student participants:[21]

- Students are more likely to drink out of the home at least once a week, with 41% doing so against 31% of employed respondents (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year). However, this may in part reflect the younger age profile of students: 18 to 20 year olds are also more likely than 21 to 24 year olds to drink out of the home at least once a week.
- Employed people are more likely to say that they always or usually have a drink at home, or at a friend's home, before they go out: 50% do so, compared to 38% of students (base: all who drink alcohol outside the home).
- Employed people were more likely to report having experienced problem consequences as a result of drinking alcohol than students. However, this may reflect the fact that, being older, they have had a greater exposure to risk: there were very few differences in the proportions of employed people and students reporting problem consequences in the previous three months – although more students reported experiencing no problem consequences in the previous three months.[22] See **§14.1** for further discussion.

A number of smaller scale studies have suggested that the reality may be far more complex than a simplistic contrast between students and non-students. For example, Ritchie et al. (2009) investigated drinking patterns among young adults through an analysis of 120 questionnaire responses, thirty from each of the following four groups:

- 18 to 23 year olds currently studying an undergraduate degree.
- 18 to 23 year olds never studied in higher education (non-graduates) and working.
- 24 to 29 year olds graduated and now working.
- 24 to 29 year olds never studied in higher education (non-graduates) and working.

Respondents were excluded if they did not drink alcohol, classed themselves as unemployed, were pregnant or had children under 14 living at home.

21 Figures for unemployed participants appear to follow a similar pattern to those for student participants: however, small base sizes mean that these findings can be treated as indicative only.
22 32% of students vs 22% of employed; base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year.

The results, argue the authors, 'strongly indicate that sometimes students may display similar behaviours to some other young adult groups whilst, at other times, their attitude, behaviour and interaction with alcohol is unique to their social group'. Unfortunately the small scale of their study means that this is no more than a suggestion, with the authors themselves expressing an intention to conduct a 'larger, statistically significant study'.

Taking a different approach, Craigs et al. (2012) look at variation *within* the student population, identifying four typologies among questionnaire respondents at Leeds Metropolitan University: non- or light drinkers; less frequent drinkers who binge drink; habitual drinkers who binge infrequently; and habitual drinkers who binge drink. Heather et al. (2011) find different patterns of consumption at different universities, and note what appears to be a south-north gradient.

Taken together, these findings remind us that student status is only one variable that may impinge on patterns of drinking behaviour, including drunken nights out. Moreover, it is reasonable to expect that these variables will include not only individual demographic and psychographic variables, but also social variables relating to the local context and culture. In the absence of a robust segmentation of participation in and behaviours during drunken nights out, there is little in the existing evidence base to warrant either i) elevating student status above other variables or ii) identifying either students or non-students as a priority audience.

Having said this, there are good pragmatic reasons for separating students and non-students when it comes to *interventions*, for instance in recognition of the very different channels which can be used to reach student audiences. Moreover, while participation in drunken nights out may not be higher among students, going to university is (for those that do it) an important moment in an individual's drinking career (see **§17.5**).

PART B
THE STRUCTURE OF A DRUNKEN NIGHT OUT

In this part of the report we provide an overview of the structure of a drunken night out, as described by the participants in our qualitative research. That overview covers four key topics:

- Norms and rituals (**Chapter 4**)
- The group of friends (**Chapter 5**)
- Other people (**Chapter 6**)
- The morning after (**Chapter 7**)

These four topics have been selected in part because they (loosely) correspond to the four key benefits of a drunken night out which we have identified in our analysis. These are:

- Escape (**§4.3**)
- Bonding and belonging (**§5.1**)
- Social adventures (**§6.2**)
- Stories (**§7.2**)

These benefits provide part – but only part – of an answer to the question: why go on a drunken night out? We examine that question in **Chapter 8.**

Readers may be surprised to find that some important topics are omitted from this overview of how a drunken night out is structured, in particular: alcohol, drinking and getting drunk. There are two reasons for this.

First, from a purely expositional standpoint, it is much easier to explain the particular ways in which alcohol is used on a drunken night out once we have understood its overall structure as a package of behaviours. We do this in **Part C** of the report.

Secondly, we suspect that the fact it is even possible to describe a drunken night out without reference to alcohol reflects a more fundamental point: that the drunken night out is merely the current occupier of an important social niche in the life of (primarily) young adults. Excessive drinking may be incomprehensible to many older people, but the reasons for going on a drunken night out will surely not be:

My Nan said that they used to go to dance halls when they were young. And they didn't drink. My Nan has never really drunk. She said that they just used to go out and dance. I think that was more of the thing and obviously we go out and dance now, but we don't, you know, we just move a little bit rather than actually properly dance. [f, 19, Int03]

Of course, this invites the further question: why do young adults these days feel that they do have to get drunk? We will offer a possible answer to this question in the next part of this report, in **§10.4**.

One further important topic is also only touched on in this part of the report. While we discuss at some length the benefits of a drunken night out, we say relatively little about the risks of harm. We return to these risks in **Part D**, after first introducing alcohol, drinking and drunkenness.

4 Norms and rituals

Key points

- Behaviour during drunken nights out is structured by norms and rituals. These may vary between different places, different nights of the week, different venues or different groups. Some norms and rituals exist solely at the level of a group of friends who go out together.
- Norms and rituals play a critical role in marking out a special social context distinct from the rest of life. In particular, the drunken night provides an arena within which more intense and extreme social interactions are permitted, both within one's group of friends and more widely.
- 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.
- One of the core benefits which the drunken night out provides to its participants is an escape from the norms of interaction in everyday life (and associated identity) to a more permissive social arena (and associated drunken night out identity).

Drunken nights out are structured by norms – more or less explicit social rules about what is required or permitted – and rituals – standardised and shared behavioural sequences. Many of these norms and rituals concern the consumption of alcohol and getting drunk – and we shall discuss these in the next part of the report. However, it is important to remember that the norms and rituals of a drunken night out cover a complete package of behaviours, not just those related to drinking and drunkenness. In this chapter, we use examples which are *not* related to alcohol to illustrate some key features of the norms and rituals which structure a drunken night out.

4.1 Reasons to conform with norms and rituals

Norms and rituals can be understood as mechanisms by which patterns of behaviour sustain themselves in a smaller or larger group of people. For example, there are clear norms about what one should and should not wear on a drunken night out.[23] There is nothing absolute about these norms: they vary from city to city, from venue to venue, and from night to night. But within the specific contexts to which they apply, they deliver widespread conformity:

It's weird, though, because when you go out, like, if I went out during the week it's much more relaxed and I wouldn't dress the same. So on a weekend you've got to, like, get proper done up and make an effort whereas through the week I'd say it's more laid back, like, you could go out in flat shoes if you wanted and, kind of, not really care as much. [f, 25, Int20]

Why do people conform to norms and rituals? In some instances, norms and rituals may be formally codified and enforced – as, for example,

23 While norms clearly exist for both male and female dress, it was mostly female participants who talked about what they wore, and the quotations in this section reflect this fact.

when a club has a dress code. Direct and explicit pressure from peers can also play a role – if, for example, someone were to comment on what one was wearing. But neither of these mechanisms is required: in the case of dress, for example, none of our participants mentioned either formal enforcement or direct peer pressure as reasons for dressing as they did. Instead, they explained their conformity in terms of:

- The negative feelings associated with non-conformity.
- The positive benefits of conformity.

Negative reasons to conform

The negative reasons to conform to norms relate to the feelings associated with non-conformity – feelings of discomfort, social separation and self-consciousness. These may again be illustrated using the example of dress:

It is good though if you wear black. If I was in like a bright pink dress I would stand out, because you don't kind of fit into the… I don't know what it is. [f, 19, Int01]

I can't. All the girls can go out in casual, they could just go out in flats, but I don't feel comfortable. I always wear heels which I must be mad to walk in them, but I feel more comfortable in heels than I do flats. [f, 20, Int05]

Avoiding these feelings by conforming to the required norms and rituals is more important than the actual outcome achieved by doing so:

Like, by the time you leave the house, it's [make-up] all half come off anyway and you don't care when you're drunk, you don't care anyway. […] But you've still got to do it otherwise you don't feel nice. [f, 20, Int04]

Moreover, the discomfort of not conforming can be more than enough to outweigh the literal discomforts associated with conforming:

Yes, definitely [I wear high heels]. And the next day my feet are killing. Like, some people say, why do you wear them? My Nan will say: why do you wear heels as big as that? But, if you went out in flats, just, like… Some people do, but everybody usually goes out in heels. But by the end of the night I'm taking them off. [f, 19, Int02]

Positive reasons to conform

The positive reasons to conform to norms and rituals fall into two broad classes, which can again be illustrated using the example of dress.

First, norms and rituals provide structures for joint activity within a group. There is pleasure to be derived merely from the experience of doing something together:

We used to plan, like, all week so, like, at first, like, Monday at break-time, we'd be planning what we're wearing Friday night and, like, you'd plan all week and you'd get excited to go out. [f, 19, Int41]

Secondly, norms and rituals play an important role in marking out a special context distinct from the rest of life. Far from imposing constraints on the

individual, they afford special opportunities which would not be practical on a day-to-day basis.

I don't really like… not necessarily bother with myself but when I go out I sort of wear make-up and do my hair nice, and things. But usually I don't really bother with that, so yes, that's another good thing, I can get myself glammed up. [f, 22, Int28]

The positive nature of these two classes of reason to conform to norms and rituals is underlined by the fact that they can be enhanced by introducing *more* norms – as is the case with fancy dress. Far from making a drunken night out more onerous for participants (by requiring even more complex behaviour from them), fancy dress enhances the night out by creating additional opportunities for joint activity and by marking out the context as even more special and set apart:

When there's a themed, like, party, we always dress up, like, party in town and dress up and things like that. But it brings more fun into it, really, and it's all really fun when other people's dressing up, and you don't feel as silly then. Like, when we went there as well, all the room was all Hawaiian theme, so we really got into the mood. [f, 19, Int02]

4.2 Variation in norms and rituals

There is no single set of norms and rituals defining all drunken nights out. Norms and rituals vary in multiple ways: for instance, as we have seen above, dress norms vary by location and time. Norms and rituals can also change from one generation to the next – the most obvious example being the use of styles of dress to establish a generational identity. Within the context of a drunken night out, 'generations' can be very short indeed:

I always wear heels. I do think that's the difference nowadays coz when I go out I see younger girls wearing converse or flats and I think, like, it's Saturday night, put some shoes on. But then that is probably coz I'm, not old obviously, but four years is a big difference kind of thing. I wouldn't feel dressed if I didn't wear… had flat shoes on a Saturday night. [f, 21–24, WSD]

In some cases, norms and rituals exist solely at the level of a group of friends who go out together. An extreme case of this pattern is provided by the norms and rituals of sports clubs (see **§5.3**); but participants with no involvement in such clubs provided examples from their own groups of friends:

The rule is if you fall asleep on the train [on the way home] you're going to get left on the train. [m, 23, Int09]

We always say if we take pictures or videos on a night out we all watch them first and see them before they go on Facebook. No, so no-one uploads anything without permission. [f, 20, Int05]

Percy et al. (2011) describe the 'shared system of knowledge, behaviours and customs' developed within a group of friends as the group's 'alcohol idioculture', distinguishing this concept from the simplistic notion of peer pressure. The concept of an 'idioculture' is a useful one. However, to make it more applicable to young adults (as opposed to the underage drinkers in Percy's study) we would suggest linking it not to alcohol but to the drunken night out as a whole, since the norms of that idioculture cover many behaviours other than those related to alcohol consumption.

In practice, many of a group's norms and rituals will reflect, more or less closely, norms and rituals that are shared more widely with other participants in the drunken night out. A good example of this is provided by the routes groups of friends take through the night-time economy.

Many groups have a standard route – a 'ritual progress' which starts at someone's house, passes through venues in a more or less consistent order, and invariably ends at a takeaway:

It's kind of like a routine, it's like half seven to eight you go down a girl's flat, you pre-drink and then you go out at like eleven. [f, 19, Int01]

A proper night out would be drinks in the house first, probably a few shots in the house first as well, and then start off at the more sensible low-key bars and then gradually get either louder music or cheesier music the further the night goes on. [f, 28, Int24]

It's part of the rules, you eat on the way home. Whether you want to or not, you get food on the way home. [m, 25, Int31]

Indeed, the association between a group and a route may be so strong that individuals who have parted company with a group may actually start avoiding venues as a result:

I don't go there any more. […] It's just your group of friends really, I've distanced myself from my old group of friends. I think it's just from growing up and growing apart, going in different directions. So I don't tend to drink there. [f, 20, Int06]

Behind the strong association between a group and its standard route, however, lie wider patterns of behaviour. Because part of the purpose of going out is to be around other people (**see Chapter 6**), the standard route followed by any particular group will reflect these wider patterns.

There's a very regimental way you go out. You start in the [Bar], then we go to a cocktail bar and then we'll go to the main street. We'll go to a few places there and then you go to the big club, and you do that every time you go out. You can't go the opposite way, you can't do anything like that. You have to do it that way. You start from the top and you work your way down. […] Everyone I know goes out in that order. […] I couldn't name one person who goes out and doesn't go out in this kind of way. [f, 20, Int47]

In smaller towns and cities, with limited numbers of venues, the consequence of these wider patterns may be that only one viable route is available on any given night, leaving no scope for variation in routes at the group level:

That's pretty much how it was every week, you know, Mondays was [Bar1] and Wednesday was [Bar2] and that's how it was and most people… especially in [City] because it's not an enormous... it's not Manchester, you know it's not massive, there's only a limited number of places, so people went to the same bars normally. [m, 29, Int33]

Routes through the night-time economy are an example of group rituals which are heavily influenced by both wider patterns of behaviour and the options actually available in the wider

environment. The same applies to many other norms and rituals in the drunken night out – including those which relate to drinking and drunkenness.

4.3 BENEFIT A: Escape

The role played by norms and rituals in marking out a special context distinct from the rest of life is central to the first benefit associated with participation in a drunken night out, which we call 'escape'.

The idea of a night out as an escape from ordinary life is widespread in our society. Its most obvious expression is in the idea of de-stressing after a week at work:

Just constant working; it's just not good for you. You need to switch off from it. In my work, I could, literally, go and go and go and go and go, and make myself… some people do make themselves ill with it, but I'm not prepared to do that. [f, 25, Int19.]

We don't take things too seriously. I mean, we've got really serious jobs, so we work hard and we play hard. So, we just like to sort of let our hair down and go a bit crazy on days off. [m, 25, Int31]

The job I'm in, I can't drink all week because I've got to drive every day, so it's almost like a wind down, just chill out and you get that from having a drink. [m, 21–24, WSI]

In and of itself, this representation of a night out as an enjoyable contrast to the rest of life does not need further explanation. For at least one of our participants, the specific structure and content of a drunken night out was not the point: anything that relieved the boredom of everyday life was welcome:

Basically it's an escape from everything that's going on around you, that's the main way I see getting out, just from what's going on. I mean, even now I'm doing something every night of the week that doesn't involve drinking. It's like swimming or cycling, I'm out the house every night as an escape from boredom, to get away from boredom, and just away from everything that's around you. Like some people will watch a film, I like to get out and do something. I don't really watch a lot of TV. [m, 20, Int16]

Escape of this kind could be characterised as *negative*: the focus is on what one is getting away *from*, and what one is getting away *to* does not really matter. For most of our participants, however, the drunken night out represented a *positive* escape: other activities could not deliver the same things as a drunken night out could.

So what kind of escape does a drunken night out offer? A clue is to be found in phrases in the quotations above such as 'play', 'let our hair down', 'go a bit crazy', 'chill out', 'switch off', all of which capture the transition from an everyday context, which is experienced as more constrained and requiring more active regulation of behaviour, to a special context, experienced as freer and more permissive. Particularly important in this respect is the absence of social expectation and judgement:

I think fun for me is just going out and having a laugh, not having to worry about what anyone else thinks and just having a ball, like, dancing and drinking basically. [f, 20, Int06]

It [sexual behaviour] wasn't necessarily expected but nobody bats an eyelid, nobody says anything. [f, 22, Int28]

I think the excitement of not knowing what's going to happen, and I love that. I hate… I hate the fact that I know what's going to happen on… what's going to happen the next day. When you go out drinking, you just don't know what the end result's going to be. I love it. […] You're so used to following timetables and you go to work, you have to follow the timetable, you go to uni, you have a timetable. When you go out drinking, you do what you want. Like, you… obviously there is that, kind of, you're not allowed to fight, but you don't know how everyone else is going to react and I love seeing people react, who may not usually react the way you expect it… following the social norms. I like the fact that people come out of their box… that little box they've been pushed into, and you see people in a different light. I love that. [f, 20, Int47]

There is an odd tension here. The quotations above describe a drunken night out in terms of not worrying about what others think and not knowing what is going to happen. However, as we have seen, accounts of drunken nights out are also dominated by norms and rituals – having to dress the right way so that one does not feel self-conscious, following a standardised route through the night-time economy, and so forth. Indeed, to a non-participant, participation in a drunken night out – and conformity to the mass of associated norms and rituals – looks like hard work rather than a release. So the characterisation of the drunken night out as entirely lacking social expectation and judgement, implicit in the quotations above, cannot be quite right.

The point of a drunken night out is not that it lacks norms and rituals, but that the norms and rituals are *heightened*, compared with those of everyday life. It is this fact that sets the drunken night out apart as a special context, and underpins the idea of 'escape'. In some areas – dress, for instance – norms and rituals may in fact be more onerous than in everyday life. In other areas, however – and in particular in the area of interpersonal behaviour, the drunken night out is much more permissive.

In particular, we shall argue, the drunken night provides an arena within which more intense and extreme social interactions are permitted, both within one's group of friends (see **Chapter 5**) and more widely (see **Chapter 6**). It is to this arena that participants in drunken nights out escape.

These contextual permissions provide an opportunity for people to do things they would not normally do. Indeed, as the phrase 'people come out of their box' indicates, people can play not just with alternative behaviours, but alternative identities.

A number of participants drew explicit attention to the way in which a drunken night out allows one to adopt a different identity – with some distinguishing context-specific personae for themselves or friends:

You get to be someone different from what you usually are. You get to kind of get out of your normal life and do things you wouldn't normally do. [f, 21–24, WSD]

It's just a release. If you've been working, you've had a hard week, if you get really drunk you can just act completely different, let all your emotions go and just have a good time. [m, 25, Int32]

Being among friends, drinking, socialising, it gives me the opportunity to be – not something I'm not – but something that I've always wanted to be, like more confident – it sort of brings my confidence out, which is nice, like, and people enjoy me when I'm out. [m, 24, Int08]

Bar-Debbie is like I'm shy, but at the same time if I'm talking to someone I can be quite chatty. But it's like getting to the stage where you actually are talking to them like is easier for bar-Debbie than sober-Debbie. [f, 18, Int46 – name changed]

Over time, an individual may establish a stable 'drunken night out identity', the regular and expected destination for their escapes:

Yeah, certain people in the group, you know what they're going to be like when they're drunk so there's a preconceived idea and they've got to live up to that expectation, even if it's a subconscious thing. [f, 21–24, WSD]

You've always got that mate who gets special drunk, you know, you've got that one mate that when they're drunk they're just the best drunk there is. [m, 21–24, WSB]

The norms and rituals that structure a drunken night out, along with the different behaviours and identities they permit, are central to the idea of 'escape'. Of course, the intoxicating effects of alcohol play a role in all this – and we shall consider this role further in **§9.4**. But just as it is not sobriety which puts people 'in a box' in everyday life, so too it is not intoxication that allows them to 'escape' on a drunken night out. The critical variable is not alcohol, but the norms and rituals that structure each context, the differing social expectations that underpin them, the opportunities and permissions they create, and the identities they make possible.

5 The Group of Friends

Key points

- A drunken night out is undertaken not by individuals, but by groups of friends. It provides an opportunity for this group to strengthen their bonds and collective identity, while also confirming individuals' identities within the group.
- Central to these benefits are the permissions to engage in interactions which might not normally be possible (for example, 'banter') and to synchronise behaviour within the group (for example, through dancing).
- Groups tend to be stable over time. In some instances, the drunken night out provides 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.
- Sports clubs can be understood as more intense, but also more formalised versions of the groups that sit at the heart of all drunken nights out.

Drunken nights out are undertaken not by individuals, but by groups of friends. Going on a drunken night out without a group of friends was simply inconceivable for most of our participants – with drinking alone being associated (like 'drinking every day') with problematic drinking:

I'm not a kind of person to go out and drink by myself. It's not because I'm depressed or anything that I drink, it's because I want to socialise and obviously that involves having somebody else there as well. [f, 23, Int25]

A good night out is a social event, it's just when you go out with all your mates. [m, 21–24, WSB]

In the same vein, based on their qualitative study, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) highlight an 'imperative to seek intoxication only in the company of others and, in particular, peers'. There is, they argue, an 'informal prohibition […] against drinking alone. Although respondents were aware of wider cultural ideas, 'handed down', that alcohol could be used to deal with problems and relieve stress, drinking for individual problem-solving was almost universally seen as indicative of problematic drinking'.

So pivotal is the role of the group in the drunken night out, indeed, that one may legitimately question whether the individual drinker is the most appropriate unit of analysis for either research or intervention. In their study of underage drinkers, for instance, Percy et al. (2011) note that most epidemiological studies, including their own, 'identify and select the individual as the primary unit of analysis. […] Whilst such work has undoubtedly led to significant advances in our understanding of the natural history of alcohol consumption in teenagers, it has ignored the fact that underage drinking is undertaken in groups'.

5.1 BENEFIT B: Bonding and belonging

A drunken night out provides a particular kind of opportunity for a group of friends to strengthen their bonds and collective identity. At the same time, the drunken night out confirms individual identity within the group. The sense of belonging both to a group and within a group was identified by many of our participants as a key benefit of a drunken night out:

Your bonds grow bigger and bigger because you've gone out drinking together. [f, 20, Int47]

I always wanted to feel appreciated, in a sense, and when you're hanging around with other people and you get on with them and you make bonds, in a sense, and like they'll become your new family in a way. Like an extended family, and it's just nice because you can go out with them and they respect you for who you are. [m, 24, Int08]

It's nice to go out and like catch up and have a laugh and spend time together and maybe do silly things. [f, 20, Int42]

As the last of the quotations above indicates, 'doing silly things' is central to the opportunities for group bonding afforded by a drunken night out. Just as important as 'doing silly things', however, is the permission which a drunken night out gives for a different kind of verbal interaction within the group – what participants invariably described as 'banter'. Within the context of a drunken night out, one can say and do things one might not say or do otherwise. A few participants even commented, light-heartedly, on their tendency to fall out with each other during a drunken night out:

We had arguments in the past, haven't we? Which wouldn't have been said if we were sober. It's just little things, which seem like a big deal when you're drunk, and then it all comes out in a way that it shouldn't. [f, 18–20, WSA]

One of my friends, we just… we used to just totally clash. We were like the best of friends but every time we were out we would argue with each other all the time. We'd wake up in the morning as if nothing happened, just laugh about how stupid we are like. [f, 21–24, WSH]

People used to be, like, she said this and she said that and we'd have an argument and then half an hour later we'd be friends again. It was just, like, entertainment. [f, 25, Int20]

These fallings-out do not, however, persist beyond the boundary of the drunken night out: the argument does not end the friendship. As noted in **§4.3**, the drunken night out is an arena within which more intense and extreme social interactions are permitted and given temporary free play.

Alongside 'doing silly things' and 'banter', one of the most striking features of a drunken night out is dancing:

We'd literally just stand in a circle just singing to each other, dancing to each other. We didn't do that in town though, just at the house where no-one sees. One of them has always got their phone on recording it. It always ends up on Facebook. [f, 20, Int05]

Times like that, where we're all standing together, we've all had a fantastic night, and at the end of the night Armageddon comes on and we're just there, singing our hearts out, thinking, these are the best lads that I know, and I'm going to know them for, like, the rest of my life, hopefully. So when you wake up in the morning with a headache, and you're hanging, you just think, I hope this day ends quickly, but last night was just amazing; because you're just with your mates having a fantastic time, and you sort of just are really close. [m, 20, Int18]

None of our participants made the link between dancing and group bonding, so our observations on this point are speculative. It seems, however, reasonable to suggest that the synchronisation of movements within the group further contributes to bonding. The above examples of group dancing and singing – the first at pre-drinks and the second at the end of house parties – are good examples of this kind of synchronisation in a setting where bonding appears to be the only possible explanation.

Building on this point, it is not entirely fanciful to see the drunken night out as a whole as a kind of dance, or exercise in synchronisation. The reference to 'stupid things' in the second quotation suggests that 'doing silly things' and 'banter' represent other forms of group synchronisation. And even without 'doing anything silly' or engaging in any 'banter', the members of a group confirm their identity as a group, and their identities within the group, through the enactment of shared norms and rituals which provide another opportunity for synchronisation. As noted in **§4.1**, pleasure may be derived merely from the experience of doing things at the same time as each other.

5.2 The composition of the group

The groups that undertake drunken nights out tend to be stable over time. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how they could deliver some of the benefits above if they were not so:

There's like ten of us in my group of my friends, so I go out with the same people. Sometimes not everybody's there but it's the same people I go out with most weeks, yes. [f, 21–24, WSH]

I'd feel like it wasn't a very good night if I went with a few of the boys who I wouldn't usually… they wouldn't be the first people I'd, sort of, call to go out. Or if I went there and there was no-one there that, sort of, struck me. [m, 24, Int07]

The stability of the group, however, is in turn sustained (in part at least) by regular participation in drunken nights out:

With us it's every Wednesday. It's a regular thing. So we see people throughout the day, don't we, and everyone's like, oh are you out tonight, aren't you? But if you're not, you know everybody's going to be out. [f, 18–20, WSA]

Indeed, as people take on more responsibilities – work, partners, families – and have less time to see their friends, the relationship between group and drunken night out will often become a reciprocal one. On the one hand, one can't go on a drunken night out without the group; on the other, it is only drunken nights out that hold the group together:

The thing that we all have in common is Friday nights. So despite like, going our separate ways

after school, we will always know on Friday night we're going to see each other. Sometimes it changes, week by week, sometimes it will be a Saturday, but normally it's a Friday, always. It's just something that we know we've got to look forward to after work, we knew we were going to see each other. [m, 20, Int16]

I work all week, so, really, at the weekend it's a chance to catch up on all of it. I don't see them all week. [m, 21–24, WSI]

Drunken nights out as a tool to build groups

In certain circumstances, drunken nights out may be used as a tool to *build* a group where one did not previously exist. Not surprisingly, this is particularly the case at university, where young adults find themselves thrown together with strangers (see **§17.5**). Some participants also noted the role that drunken nights out can play in developing bonds with work colleagues:

You've got to, kind of, mix, you know, work with pleasure, in the sense that, you know, you've got to see… so when you go out, well, you obviously get to know people better. So when you're in your work environment everybody gets on better, and you, you know, you're laughing and joking, you've got things to talk about because literally you'd been out, you get to see people in a different light. It just made work better. [m, 29, Int36]

Here, however, there is a mixed picture. Work colleagues are of varying ages, and have varying ideas of what makes a good night out:

It's not anywhere as near as bad [with my work colleagues] as when I'm with my mates, because, like, some of the older people just go for the meal, have a couple of drinks then go, and there are normally sort of three or four of us, out of a group of 12, left at the end of the night. […] One's five years older than me and she likes to go to different places to… I'd never go to some of the places she goes. And then one's just finished uni and she goes to similar places that I do and then the other one will just go with the flow. It is harder to enjoy yourself because you're going to some, what I would call dingy, places that the older people want to go to. [m, 25, Int32]

A drunken night out only achieves all its benefits if all the members of the group that goes out sign up to the same norms and rituals. Perhaps as a result, nights out with colleagues and other groups are typically rare events alongside regular nights out with a long-standing core group:

There's different people from like work or people like from the flats or school and kind of things like that, you've got like different groups of friends, but there's generally the one group of friends that I tend to go out with, the other ones I just go out with once in a blue moon. [m, 18–20, WSG]

Friendship groups and gender

The need for alignment between all the members of the group may go some way towards explaining a tendency for groups to be single-gendered, especially with increasing age:

I found, as I got older, we go out less with the girls now, because they, sort of, like, the girls go out with

their own groups, and things like that, now. So I… we go out… we know a lot of girls, just we go out as a group of boys and then we, basically, go and see them after. They don't tend to come over ours anymore. They tend to go to their house. [m, 21, Int10]

In some cases, this gendering of groups may reflect the intention of individuals to have a sexual encounter – to pull:

Because it's boys, you're just going, like, okay, the object tonight is to get a girl; and you all… that's what you do. But if you go out with a group of girls you don't have to like them, you're just friends with them, and you just, like… it's a different night, like. [m, 21, Int10]

This, however, cannot be the whole story, for a number of reasons:

- The gendering of groups does not seem to be a feature of groups of students living away from home, which among our participants were typically mixed gender. While some of those students may not be looking to pull, it would be fanciful to suggest that none of them are. Interestingly, one female student who had experience of both single-gender and mixed-gender groups described the difference not in terms of intentions to pull but in terms of different internal norms within the group (the specific norms mentioned below appear to relate to group safety: see **§15.2**):

  I think there's like untold rules that everyone follows. Especially like whenever I go out with girls, because its quite unusual for me to go out with girls, and I struggle with the ground rules sometimes, like sticking together, going to the toilet in twos and stuff like that, because I'm not used to it. So maybe I don't know the unwritten rules in that situation… if it's mixed groups I can do it, but just girls I struggle to know the rules properly. I think every group has different rules. [f, 18–21, WSE]

- Some participants – especially females – explicitly described their nights out in terms of bonding within the group, with limited interest in others (male or female) outside it:

  It's just a whole group of girls, like not interested about anybody else, we just used to get together, and all go out together. [f, 25, Int21]

- The gendering of groups continues – perhaps even strengthens – when people enter a relationship and consciously stop looking to pull. Drunken nights out rarely involve partners, who will often continue to go out with their own distinct groups:

  We don't mix. It's funny actually, I don't have many… me and my boyfriend don't have like, many friends the same. Like, he always goes out with his friends, and I'll go out with my friends, but unless it was like a big occasion, like where we'd take boyfriends… but, we don't actually, we don't. We see each other's boyfriends when we go to each other's houses, because some of them obviously live together now, we know each other's boyfriends and stuff. But we would never say, oh let's all go out together, because

we just chat, most girls. We probably talk about them sometimes, we have a good twist about them. [f, 25, Int21]

I would rather go out on a night with my friends, and [Partner] says I don't blame you, that's fine, I totally see where you come from, than just me and him. I wouldn't have the same kind of night out if I just went out with me and [Partner], even if he was a bigger drinker, than I would with my friends. [f, 28, Int24]

- Fourthly, the intention to pull hypothesis would only explain the gendering of groups of heterosexuals, since for gay men and lesbians people of the same gender are not necessarily just friends. (Only a few of our sample were self-identified gay men, with no self-identified lesbians or bisexuals.)

Rather than being a mere function of wanting to pull, the gendering of (some) groups may reflect a broader need for alignment and common purpose within the group that undertakes a drunken night out (with pulling being just one such possible purpose). Gender is one of the factors likely to underpin this kind of alignment and common purpose, which is why gendering of groups is common. It is not, however, the only factor.

It is also possible that the gendering of groups has little to do with the drunken night out per se, and instead reflects broader patterns around gendered behaviour. It is worth noting that, in research with 18 to 24 year olds conducted for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), Never Intentionals (see **§3.4**) were more likely than Regular or Occasional Intentionals to agree with the statement, 'I don't get really drunk when there are both boys and girls in the group'.[24] This would be consistent with the view that the gendering of groups in the drunken night out represents a weakened version of a wider norm regarding not getting drunk with the opposite gender. A similar pattern is apparent with regard to the statement, 'If I'm out with my girlfriend or boyfriend I don't drink a lot', with Regular and Occasional Intentionals slightly more likely to disagree with this statement.[25]

Strikingly, males are more likely than females to agree both that 'If I'm out with my boyfriend/girlfriend I don't really drink a lot',[26] and that 'I don't get really drunk when there are both boys and girls in the group'.[27] This is also consistent with the idea that the gendering of groups reflects wider norms around gendered interactions, although investigating this is beyond the scope of the current report.

5.3 A special case: the sports club

A small number of our participants told us about their experiences as members of sports clubs, both in university and outside it. The striking thing is the extent to which these clubs can be understood as more intense, but also more formalised versions of the groups that sit at the heart of all drunken nights out.

24 36% of Never Intentionals agreed, vs 18% of Regular Intentionals and 18% of Occasional Intentionals (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).
25 24% of Regular Intentionals and 19% or Occasional Intentionals disagreed, vs 8% of Never Intentionals (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).
26 48% males agree, vs 32% females (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).
27 30% of males agree, vs 18% females (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).

For example, in the university sports club described below, the group culture has been developed into an elaborate, codified social structure, with multiple roles, rules and rituals:

They [the social secretaries] are the social police. They're… well, I think they prefer dictator, sounds better but, yes, then below that there's a very strict hierarchy. […] So you've got social secretaries, president, alumni – so people who graduated – third years, second years and then freshers, right? So when I was a fresher, an alumni came to a social. […] Because I'd abused an alumni he was able to give me whatever fine he wanted, effectively, so I got a three litre dirty boot. [m, 21, Int44]

The participant in question went on to describe the benefits of submitting to this regime in terms of bonding and belonging:

I mean it's, I don't know, it makes you… it's bonding, it's like, I mean they do it in the army, it makes you, you know, once you've gone through what everyone else's gone through, you really are able to, I don't know, like me and the boys… like I used to, I wasn't like massive on being naked in front of other people apart from girls. I wasn't massive on the whole communal showering sort of thing when I was younger but after having gone through the things that I've gone through in [Sports Club], like, I have no problem, I would have no problem with just walking around naked in front of any of the [Sports Club] guys at all because we're just, it's like it is a family effectively, like, and you know that no matter what they'd do anything for you and you'd do anything for them sort of thing. [m, 21, Int44]

Moreover, the social aspect of the sports club extends these benefits of bonding and belonging to people who may not actually be very good at the sport – making them an important site for socialising at some universities:

Being a part of your sports team is, kind of, a big thing, like, you may not be a major role in the actual sports team but, at the socials, you're proud to be out with them and you want to fit in. [m, 21, Int44]

This particular participant was also at pains to point out that the elaborate system of rules included formal opt-outs, meaning that no-one was obliged to do any of the things they were asked to do if they did not want to:

This one girl for like absolutely no reason just had a panic attack over the amount of drink that she had to do. So I took her aside and calmed her down and she didn't have to do anything for the rest of the night. She could… she was allowed to carry on drinking if she wanted to but she didn't and, you know, she was absolutely fine after that. She still came out to the club afterwards… like people have this whole thing of sports clubs being unruly, and there's no order to it, and everyone just gets dicked on, and you have people vomiting everywhere and all this. I mean people do throw up, in my first year I threw up every social, but that's because I wanted to make sure that I was doing everything I was told. That was my choice, you know, I didn't have to… like, say, that three litre boot, for example. [m, 21, Int44]

No-one is obliged to do anything. But the status of an individual is subtly altered by their choices, meaning that the choice cannot be said to be entirely neutral:

What I'm saying is that in a social, if I hadn't done what I was told when I was this fresher, then I couldn't now tell freshers what to do, because it would be unfair for me to say something that I haven't done. […] The idea is it would be unfair if someone could get an easy route and then be horrible to all of the freshers because they haven't gone through it themselves. So anything that you haven't done personally you're not allowed to do to someone else. [m, 21, Int44]

However many safeguards are put in place, the norms of the group ensure that the benefits of bonding and belonging are only available in full to those who conform in full. The desire to conform to the norms is assured by the benefits that arise from conforming to them.

One further point worth noting is that, while many of the rules and rituals of a club like this revolve around alcohol, they do not do so exclusively. As noted previously, the norms and rituals of a drunken night out cover a complete package of behaviours, not just those related to drinking and drunkenness:

If you're the loser of your group, so you've lost most of the games in your group, they all come together and they have to, if they want to, down a litre of milk and then run up to a tree, twirl around and run back. So obviously that's nothing to do with drinking but it's still part of the drinking aspect because obviously you do drink as an aside, like on the side of that. [m, 21, Int44]

The same mix of behaviours is apparent in the following description, from another participant, of the initiation rites of a non-university sports club, which shifts seamlessly from the consumption of alcohol to the consumption of breakfast cereal:

Obviously, like, at 16, when you're new, and you have to do, like, a naked run around the town and then… well, [Suburb], which is a part of [City], that's who I played for, and, like, we had to do a naked run to the shop and back, and when you'd get back, then, they have a drink, like, called Rat Brains. […] Baileys, lager, cider, and vodka; and it curdles, then, goes all lumpy; do that, and then you've got to do the yard of ale, or whatever it is. […] And it all curdles in your stomach, then, and you're just sick. And you do like… do that. And I've seen, like, some people do the Weetabix challenge, and… […] You've got to eat the dry Weetabix; and it's, like, quite hard; and then they do the gallon of milk in an hour; just stupid things like that; and you've got to do it. But you… that's what we used to do. You dread it; you go, oh no, I don't want to do that; but you do it; and that's it, done, then. So you just watch other people do it when they're turning 16. […] It's good bonding as well. It's fun. [m, 21, Int10]

6 Other People

Key points

- Other people outside the group of friend 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Just as the behaviour of individuals on a drunken night out needs to be understood in the context of the group they are part of, so too that group needs to be seen in the context of all the other people and groups going out in the night-time economy. For example, as we saw in **§4.2**, the standard routes of different groups tend to align to establish a common norm.

Other people, however, are not just a source of norms and rituals. There is a reason why people want to go out at the same time and to the same places as other people. The presence of other people underpins a third kind of benefit associated with the drunken night out, and arguably provides an answer to the question: why go out at all, rather than just stay in?

6.1 Why go out?

If drunken nights out were solely about escaping to an arena in which more intense and extreme interactions are permitted, and using those permissions to bond with one's group of friends, one might wonder why anyone ever bothered to go out. As a number of our participants noted, house parties or pre-drinking at home provide a much more conducive environment for interaction with one's friends than a noisy club where it is hard to keep the group together, let alone hear them:

I think parties are better because everyone's just there and that's the night that you're having, so everyone's together. I always feel like when we go to town people just go away, like, everyone disappears and splits up. [f, 25, Int20]

Sometimes we'll see each other through the week, just if we pop over to someone's house just to say hi but, no, on the weekends like for a pre-drink it's to sit down and have a chat first and where it's quiet, then go into town where the music's blasting and then you can hardly speak to each other. [f, 20, Int05]

We will have more to say about the practice of pre-drinking in **Chapter 12**. The important point to

make here is that house parties and pre-drinking cannot, by themselves, deliver the whole package of benefits associated with the drunken night out. Even those participants who felt that, for them, pre-drinking was the best part of a drunken night out, went on to argue that this was in part a function of the expectation of what was to come later:

Pre-drinks are usually the best part of a night […] I suppose it's more social, isn't it? When you're in the club you're not… well you have a bit of conversation but you're not really talking to people, are you? Yes, it's just more fun I guess because you have a chat and the games are fun and stuff. […] [But] once you're drunk you do kind of want to go to the club. [f, 20, Int48]

You can all meet up in a quiet place, have a good, good fun before going out then to like a louder, more raunchy place like a nightclub. [m, 21–24, WSB]

The following, for example, is a typical quotation from a participant describing the benefits of house parties and pre-drinking in terms of social bonding and escape:

When you're in someone's house you're just completely relaxed, you're with your mates, there's no bad things are going to happen because you're all mates, and you can do what you want, sort of thing. Like, you can make a tit out of yourself; you've got the music that you want; it's just… you have a lot of good times in your own house without having to worry about a thing.

In response to this, the interviewer asked whether one could therefore just drink at home. Why go out? The response clearly pinpoints the missing ingredient:

I would have to mix it up, because, as I say, what can make a night in town is if you just get drunk and just go up and talk to some people; even if you make a tit of yourself, making them laugh, making them have a good night, that just makes the night even better. Going on the karaoke, a chance to, maybe, get with a girl… [m, 20, Int18]

Above all else, going out introduces other people – new people, people you do not know – into the mix of a drunken night out:

There's got to be a lot of people for me to want to have a good time, like. […] I don't know, it just kind of like boosts the atmosphere. If it was… there weren't a lot of people around you don't really want to get up and have a dance or drink as much, and stuff like that, so… [f, 18–20, WSJ]

Sometimes you can meet really nice people that obviously you wouldn't have met if you didn't go out. Or someone could do something really stupid and you want to be there to see it. Like sometimes… there's this stupid giraffe statue outside my accommodation and people are always trying to jump on it, that's quite funny to watch. But it's only funny if you're like out there watching it. [f, 18, Int46]

6.2 BENEFIT C: Social adventures

In **§4.3**, we argued that the drunken night out is an arena within which more intense and extreme social interactions are permitted. Within the group of friends who go out together, this permission creates an opportunity to strengthen bonds and confirm the individual's sense of belonging and identity by doing silly things, engaging in banter, dancing and so forth. But the permission for more intense and extreme social interactions also extends outside the group, to interactions with strangers. In fact, this wider social permission is essential for such interactions to happen at all – with many participants noting that, in other contexts, they simply would not initiate interaction with strangers (or respond positively to initiation by others):

On nights out, everybody just talks to each other and you… I think you tend to be more friendly really, when you're on a night out. You don't, you don't, like, prohibit yourself from doing things as much, I don't think. [f, 19, Int03]

This willingness to interact, combined with the presence of lots of other people, underpins the third key benefit of a drunken night out – which we call the 'social adventure'.

In their most intense, most extreme forms, social adventures provide the stuff of tabloid headlines – as in this recollection from a participant who had once worked in a bar:

There'd be people, like, having fights in the toilet and just horrible stuff, really, that you don't really want to see, like people having sex outside the toilets and stuff. […] And then you've got to clean all of it up at the end. That's the worst. [f, 25, Int20]

For many of our participants, however, a social adventure could be something as simple as talking to a new person to whom one would not have spoken outside the context of a drunken night out:

The best bits have been getting to know people, spending time in other people's company when they are relaxed and they are prepared to tell you about themselves, their stories and their experiences in life, that's great. [m, 29, Int33]

When we do go out, we do like to speak to other people as well. It's nice. I just think it's nice to get to know other people, even if it's just… I don't suppose you'll keep in contact with them or anything, it's just nice to talk to others and socialise. I'm a big social person. [f, 19, Int03]

I like to talk to people I don't know. I think sometimes people have got such funny stories, especially when they've had a lot to drink and, like, you end up talking to someone and think, you've had far too much, you're telling us your life story. […] Like, in a McDonalds' queue, people might be, like, less wary and, like, they turn around and just start to chat, whereas once you've had a drink, people are a lot more open. [f, 19, Int41]

Meeting and talking to new people can be seen as the least extreme point on a continuum of extremity, the baseline for social adventures. Everyone we spoke to enjoyed meeting and talking to new people – this was the basic, universal form of the social adventure. This universality started

to break down, however, as one moved up the continuum of extremity.

Pulling

A good example of this is provided by pulling – i.e. an adventure that has a sexual dimension. The possibility of this kind of adventure was a big attraction of the drunken night out for some of our participants – especially among the males:

Fingers crossed, getting lucky as well. [m, 24, Int07]

I like trying to go out and pull, and things like that; I enjoy that. [m, 21, Int10]

You also get girls, as well, that… that's another thing that attracts you back. [m, 19, Int37]

Really, a night out with my mates consists of drinking as many bottles of vodka as you can and pulling as many birds as you can. [m, 21–24, WSI]

Not everybody, however, was interested in pulling. Among female participants, for example, there was less mention of this as a desirable social adventure – though this may be an artefact of the research context (or wider social norms), with male and female participants applying different standards in terms of the image they seek to project to older interviewers and, in workshops, to peers of the same gender (see **§1.6**):

Just girly nights really, but we do always end up meeting a few of the boys we know. Which is nice then, because you're socialising with other people, not just girls. [f, 18–20, WSA]

We don't go out to pull, no, we wouldn't say, oh, I want to go out tonight to meet someone. No, I've never thought like that to go out. We just go out if someone speaks to us I'll speak to them, but I never… [f, 20, Int05]

Stated interest in pulling also varied according to an individual's current relationship status, with single people more likely to go out with the definite intention of pulling:

I know a couple of the people I go out with are single and part of their plan when they go out is to look for someone like that. So to a certain extent it does because if they're looking, someone will generally go up and chat to them and try and set the other person up, sort of thing. So it does involve a bit of that, yes. [m, 25, Int32]

Some of our participants claimed to prefer being single, precisely so that they could participate in this kind of social adventure (though note again that the male participant couches the adventure in terms of at least a kiss, while the female participant focuses on speaking to boys):

We've just thought, no, right, let's just stay single and have a good time together, and if a girl comes along then let's give it a go. Just… only for… like, even if it's just a kiss, and all that; still it makes your night, it makes your night, especially if, you know, you've got your beer goggles on and they stand in front of you… [m, 20, Int18]

I think that's why we don't have boyfriends because some of our friends we go out with now, if some boy speaks to us, they get, not jealous, but they get

protective. So I think that's why we like not having a boyfriend because there's no trouble on a night if a boy speaks to us, we can speak to them. Yes, no-one getting jealous we can speak to who we want to speak to. Yes, I think I prefer to be single than in a relationship at the moment, yes. [f, 20, Int05]
I normally just go out and see if I can pull on a Saturday night or something, or a Friday night. But yes, I'd rather be single, to be honest, at the moment – because we do generally go out every weekend, I feel less restrained than maybe some of the other boys do. [m, 23, Int09]

In the following quotation, a participant explicitly links coming out of a relationship to being able to be his 'drunk self' again – a very clear example of how the norms of a relationship can override the norms of a drunken night out and thereby undermine the opportunity for 'escape':

I felt like I could be myself again. My drunk self, if that makes sense. […] And I'd go out, and when I was… when I had my girlfriend I'd go out and I… just always in the back of my mind, if she… like, she'd either be there or even if she wasn't, like oh, I've got to behave, got to behave. The only person I've got to behave for now is myself, and I won't tell myself off too bad for being a bit out of order, like. [m, 24, Int07]

As well as noting different levels of stated interest in pulling, we should also remember that this concept itself covers a very wide sweep of the continuum of extremity in social adventures, ranging from 'just a kiss' onwards. Participants indicated very different personal thresholds with regard to sexual activity as part of a drunken night out:

That's where most of my embarrassing moments have happened in my life – having sex with people in doorways, flashing people on the dance floor, things that I'd never think about doing usually. [f, 22, Int28]

You just can't believe people are like that. I was looking through old pictures to show somebody something and I was, in the background, I just noticed… I'd never noticed it before, it was a few years ago… and in the background there was actually a girl sitting on a chair and a guy's like got his head down there. […] And I'm thinking oh my God, that's in a nightclub, and it's just crazy. [f, 21–24, WSH]

The emphasis on people doing things they would never usually think about doing was a common feature across descriptions of social adventures by all of our participants. Where people differed was in how far they are willing to go, or wished to go, even within the context of a drunken night out – how far along the continuum of extremity they wanted their social adventures to extend. As with so many aspects of the drunken night out, this personal threshold may also be context-dependent:

Things like girls just having sex with guys on the boat with everyone. It is, like, disgusting, some stories that happen, but if that happened in [Holiday Resort]… if I'd gone on a boat party, I wouldn't think anything… I wouldn't be like, oh my God, that's disgusting. Whereas if you were at home on a boat, someone started doing that, you'd be like, oh my God, what are you doing? You kind of have that in the back of your head but because you're in [Holiday Resort] or wherever, you're like, it doesn't matter. [f, 20, Int06]

Fighting

Attitudes to fighting also demonstrated a range of choices along the continuum of extremity in social adventures. Participants offered two distinct types of explanation for the prevalence of fighting in the context of a drunken night out. On the one hand, fighting was explained in terms of the effects of alcohol and situational cues – a type of explanation to which we shall return in **§9.5**. On the other hand, it was traced back to people wanting to fight, independently of the effects of alcohol:

Well, a couple of them. I think probably boys are worse than girls, obviously, because boys like fighting, don't they? Some boys do like fighting. Yeah, they will just go out and look for one and they'll follow you and stuff just to have a fight with you. It's just pathetic. [f, 20, Int04]

You get people that say they have a really good night when it ends up kicking up, and that's bad, for me, that's not a good night. But there are people out there that do it. They go out looking to have a fight. [m, 21–24, WSI]

I think they start the night before they even drink thinking oh, I'm going to get some action tonight, and, sort of, have a fight. [m, 20, Int18]

Generally, being aggressive, how you go into it will affect it. I know a guy who goes out and loves getting rowdy, he pushes people around. [m, 18–20, WSC]

Deliberately seeking a fight in this way can be understood as the pursuit of another kind of social adventure – an extreme and intense interaction with another person. Like pulling, it is a social adventure which is desired by some but not by others. Unlike pulling, deliberate fighting was almost always presented by our participants as something *other* people did. Personal involvement in fights was, with only a few exceptions, explained by the effects of alcohol and situational cues.

As with reticence around pulling, this may to some extent be an artefact of the research context, driven by the desire to project a particular image to older interviewers or peers (see **§1.6**). For example, one participant saw fights as part of the general 'craziness' that appealed to him so much in a drunken night out. He described his own highly provocative banter towards strangers, yet maintained that he himself did not seek fights. Note, for instance, how in the following account of 'craziness', pulling is something in which he willingly participates, while fighting is something he sees around him:

I like it because it's crazy. It's like you could… when I go on a night out, I never expect the things to happen that happen. I'd never think, oh, I'm going to go out and this is going to happen. […] Well, the other week I went into… I went into town. We went into one bar, and we've gone upstairs. We go to the bar… as I'm walking to the bar, I've just had a girl grab me and start snogging my face off. Never met her, no introductions, nothing. I was just… okay. What else? It's just… obviously there's the… there's the seeing the fights… fights around us. People doing silly stuff, like stealing hats off, like, people wearing, like, novelty hats or whatever. They'll steal them and run away. Then you've got, like, the hen parties, the stag dos. It's just crazy. It's just drunk

people just doing everything they wanted to do but wouldn't do before they were drunk. [m, 24, Int07]

Even allowing for this kind of uncertainty, however, it was clear that, far from seeking out fights, many of our participants actively avoided them. Some expressed their incomprehension as to why anyone would deliberately look for a fight:

I understand the feeling of getting drunk, having a good time but if you know you're going to get aggressive I don't see why people go to that point. But that's not something I quite… I don't quite understand that. [f, 22, Int26]

Fighting as a substitute for pulling

To the extent that participants did have an explanation of the desire to fight, this tended to be in the context of a failure to pull. The desire to fight, that is, was presented as a sort of substitute social adventure. This view was typically based on personal experiences at the receiving end of such aggression – in the examples provided by our participants, this was invariably aggression by males after failed attempts at heterosexual advances.

In some cases, this aggression was directed towards the woman who had refused the advances. The examples given were of sexualised verbal aggression:

My friend, we've gone on a night out, and because my friend wouldn't kiss this boy, he got really aggressive. Told her, like, luckily she was in a club with quite a lot of people, but he was getting like really narky with her. Like shouting at her, calling her everything under the sun. [f, 18–20, WSA]

f1 We sat on the bench. Just, we were sober. Sat on a bench. It was only about eleven o'clock, and they asked us to go home with them. And because we told them no, they were just like 'Slags! Prostitutes!', screaming at us, in the middle of the street.

f2 Because they got rejected. They can't take being rejected. [f, 18–20, WSA]

Fights, by contrast, arose when aggression was directed towards a male third party, typically a friend of the targeted woman:

We went to that place, [Club], last week and there was about ten people in there. And we left and one of the people that was in there came out and punched a friend of mine. Knocked a couple of his teeth out and there was blood everywhere. […] I think that the guy tried, we were, there was a girl in our group and I think he'd tried to dance with her on the dance floor, but this guy had, sort of, got in his way. So, and then obviously, he saw us leave and thought, oh, I'm having him, so, he's gone outside and hit him. […] He's got to have a root canal on one of his teeth so… [m, 20, Int44]

This guy, my mate, [Male] got kicked in. He was the nicest boy ever, would never say anything wrong to anyone, he was stood outside with one of our mates, [Female], this guy came up to [Female] and said, oh, I want to fuck you and [Female] said, yes, like go away. Well, probably like fuck off or whatever and the guys went, oh, why is this your boyfriend?

So [Female] went, no, that's not important and the guy just kicked the fuck out of [Male] just because [Female] had told him, no, effectively. [m, 21, Int44]

One participant described an underlying shift in the intentions of some of his friends if they failed to pull:

You talk to a certain girl and a boy that's been looking at her doesn't like you and then all of a sudden, there's animosity. […] The way I see it, to have a good night in town, you've got to feel like a man at the end of it. So you've either got to pull and if that doesn't work, then they'll probably end up having a fight and be like, oh yes, we had a fight last night. And then they can say their night was good. […] I've got mates that I have to calm down at the end of the night, where they've had, tried it with a girl. She hasn't been interested and then they've gone… their focus has gone from, let's get some girls, to all of a sudden you see in their face, you see in their attitude, and they're like, now I want to fight because I'm pissed off because I didn't get a girl. [m, 24, Int07]

In all of the above examples, aggression and fighting are presented as substitute social adventures – undertaken only because one has failed to pull, and in part to shore up one's desired drunken night out identity in the face of that failure. On this account, it seems to be less that people go out with the intention of fighting, and more that they go out with the intention of pulling, but make do with a fight if this does not work out.

Fighting as an adventure in itself

Having said this, there was evidence that – for some people at least – fighting can be an end in itself, a desirable social adventure independent of whether or not one has pulled. One participant, for instance, had been a member of a football firm when younger, and had engaged in bouts of organised and consensual fighting:

I think the thing is, with violence, there's a very fine line between pain that hurts and pain that's enjoyable. I mean, for example, sex, like there's the aspect of sex that people hurt each other to enjoy it and obviously, 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. […] I think it's… Getting your frustration out is really… it does feel really good. I mean it's like I mean it's more a girl thing but occasionally like you just want a big, like, you just have a massive cry and then afterwards you just feel like that's that and done and if you have a fight occasionally like if you really, like that's how I used to feel afterwards, it's a cathartic thing. [m, 21, Int44]

The participant in question had since taken active steps to manage his own violent behaviour, and claimed not to have been involved in similar deliberate fighting in the context of a drunken night out (although he had got involved in fights reactively). It is plausible, however, that similar sorts of feeling might explain why others actively look for a fight in that context. The participant had this to say:

The guys who go out looking for a fight, I think it's a, I think that's more of an insecurity sort of thing. I think they go out and they might feel shit about themselves or they might feel like they can't live up to something or whatever, and I think because of that insecurity I think they feel the need to, it's just a bully tactic, you know, it's bullying outside of the playground. It's… you go out and you just want to put someone else down and make sure they know they're below you, and make sure everyone around you knows that you're above others. And so I think that kind of thing, the whole just going out and starting on anyone who looks likes they can get beaten up, I think that's just the same as bullying. I think it's just either insecurity, lack of self-confidence, something like that manifested in I have to be on top of everyone else in order to feel good. [m, 21, Int44]

He also drew a distinction between the bullying behaviour of people looking for fights in the night-time economy, who might pick on anyone, and the fights organised by the football firm, which were consensual on both sides:

I think the firm's sort of thing, it's kind of like, right, I want to make, we want to make our own set of rules and have our own sort of mini-society where we can take out our frustration at the rest of society. I mean because it is sort of, I mean in very loose terms it's sort of like a fight club in a sense that it's only with other people who want to do it but, yes, I think it's definitely to do with insecurity, the random fighting, because they are just bullies effectively, that's exactly what they do. [m, 21, Int44]

Whether or not he was right in his analysis of the firm (a question which is beyond the scope of this report), it is very useful to note the distinction drawn between, on the one hand, fighting with people who also want to fight and, on the other hand, starting fights with people who may not want to get involved.

If we accept that fighting can be a kind of social adventure, an extreme and intense kind of interaction (like sex) pursued in its own right, then we have to allow for the possibility that fighting, like sex, may be consensual. The following description – this time taken from the night-time economy – has clear parallels with the organised and consensual fights of the football firm about it (albeit not for the speaker and his friends, caught up in the mêlée):

I remember one time coming out of a club, and then there was a big group of boys there. There was only a couple of us, and it wasn't nothing to do with us, so we came out and we went to the side. Then these two big groups of boys started fighting, and they're saying, oh… then one of them turns round. From [City], he was. He's like, boys, it's [City] versus [Town]. [Town]'s the next town down. So all of a sudden, there's just this massive brawl, and we weren't even fighting, but there's punches getting thrown at us, and we were… oh, we're just moving out of the way and stuff, but they were going at it, like it was a… […] Then the bouncers came out, and then it just became like a free-for-all between three groups of people, just… and us just caught in the middle, like, whoa, whoa. […] Someone was knocked out, but I don't think he was hurt so much. [m, 24, Int07]

Some kinds of behaviour can even be seen as invitations to participate in this kind of consensual behaviour, in the same way that chat-up lines are invitations to participate in sexual social adventures:

There'll be times where you're walking down a street and there'll be a big crowd of people, sort of, walking past each other and there'll always be the one that sticks their elbow out thinking they're funny and stuff. [m, 20, Int18]

6.3 Other people and bad behaviour

In some respects, social adventures are much improved by diversity in the pool of people one has an opportunity to interact with:

I think if there's a variety of… if there's just one type of person that goes to a place, you're going to run into the same people again and again. When it's a variety of people, like, if there's loads of different groups that don't know each other. Like I say, that group comes one week, then the next week they bring back a few of their friends because they had a good time. And then so do they, and so do they. It just sort of diversifies it a bit. [m, 24, Int07]

Not all diversity is good, however. The existence of a continuum of extremity, and the fact that some people seek social adventures of greater extremity than others, creates a clear risk for participants in drunken nights out – the risk that they will get caught up in interactions in which they do not wish to participate. These non-consensual interactions range from relatively minor awkward moments, through behaviour that is inappropriate, to sources of serious harm – such as violent attacks, sexual assault and rape.

We recognise that there are many ways in which the range of incidents listed here neither can nor should be compared. Nevertheless, at a purely conceptual level, they do all have one thing in common: the fact that one participant in the interaction – the perpetrator – goes further than the other participant wishes. In the worst cases, the other participant does not want the interaction to happen at all, yet cannot prevent it, in which case they may be described as a victim.

Why do non-consensual interactions happen in the context of a drunken night out? Why do some people go further in interactions than the other participant wishes? Three broad classes of explanation for this kind of bad behaviour can be identified in the accounts of participants. These explain the behaviour of the perpetrator in terms of:

- The perpetrator him/herself
- Lack of clear boundaries
- Alcohol

We will return to the third of these classes of explanation in **§9.5**, where we consider the downside of drunkenness. The first and second classes of explanation are considered in turn below.

Bad people

The dark side of diversity in the drunken night out was aptly described by one of our participants who, as part of his pre-work, submitted an abstract

picture with, in one half, a mix of melding colours and, in the other half, an expanse of blue. He explained why he had selected this picture as follows, starting with the mix of colours:

Well, obviously you get just a massive range of people in town; so many different backgrounds, so many different styles of people and the different clubs to accommodate. But when everyone's drunk it doesn't matter which background you come from; everyone just seems to get on. I mean, there are the few which don't like to mix, that's the blue section at the top which, sort of, keeps to itself. They're the ones that are quite aggressive and stuff. They'll, sort of, go to town looking for fights and thinking, oh, if anyone says anything tonight I'm going to ruin their night, pretty much. [m, 20, Int18]

This kind of behaviour, he insisted, had nothing to do with alcohol or the context of a drunken night out: it was just how some people were. A similar argument was made by other participants:

They will just go out and look for [a fight] and they'll follow you and stuff just to have a fight with you. It's just pathetic. […]. It's just really annoying because then you end up losing it. […] [Friend 1] was in one of the clubs there and one of the girls tried to start with her. She was younger than her, and then she [i.e. Friend 1] went over to [Friend 2] because she was, look, I just want to get away from her. The girl followed her over there so she came out then and the girl hit her. So she batted the girl and then the girl had gone out now and told the police that this woman's attacked her – that one of the girls had attacked her when it was her who followed her and just wanted to fight with her. So then she told the police or whatever, so then they both got sent home then. But people do do it, like, just want to go out and have a fight and I think people do it as well because they can brag about it then. […] They'd be, like, yeah, I went out and had a fight last night and I battered them and stuff like that. [f, 20, Int04]

In **§6.2**, we noted that some participants in the drunken night out want to have fights. The point being made here, however, goes a little further: some of those people specifically want to have non-consensual fights. If their intended victims walk away, they will follow them:

They come up to you and you literally can't get away, you can't just let someone just hit you, because you're going to be on the floor getting your face stamped on. [m, 20, Int18]

A similar pattern was apparent in participants' views on rape:

Somebody who commits rape is a rapist. [m, 21–24, WSB]

I think if a man's going to do it [rape] he's going to go out and do it regardless. [m, 21–24, WSB]

Attributing bad behaviour to bad people may be no more than a tactic that enables individuals to distance themselves and their friends from the behaviour in question. For example, there was clear concern in some of our all-male workshops about the lack of clarity that can exist in sexual encounters between drunk people, and a real fear of being accused of rape. The assertion that rape is

committed by rapists carries with it a kind of faux-logic excuse-in-advance: I'm not a rapist, so even if I make a terrible mistake, it won't be rape.

However, it is also entirely plausible that the drunken night out, full as it is of provokable and vulnerable people, acts as a kind of magnet for those who wish to commit acts of violent and/or sexual assault.

A lack of boundaries

The role played by a lack of clear boundaries in bad behaviour can best be explained by means of a thought experiment. Suppose that a version of the drunken night out existed in which i) there were no bad people who actively wanted to go further than the other participants in their social interactions wished, and ii) no-one drank alcohol. How might problems nevertheless arise?

One of the key attractions of the drunken night out, we have argued, is the fact that it provides an arena within which more intense and extreme social interactions are permitted, including more extreme interactions with strangers – social adventures. Everyday boundaries of behaviour are suspended. That however, does not mean that anything goes. Individual participants in the drunken night out still have their own personal boundaries – limits of behaviour or interaction beyond which they do not wish to pass, and do not think others should pass:

I think there's a limit, like, see this whole like, oh, I was sick in the street last night… I can get over… everyone can get over something like that, but I think for somebody to say, oh, I punched somebody last night, or… there is a limit, so I'm talking about behaviour but I'm talking about really out of order behaviour, like, don't do it again. [f, 21–24, WSH]

What people want from the drunken night out, we might say, is bounded licence – permission for participants to go further than they would in everyday life, but not too far. In the following quotation, a participant wrestles with this distinction between boundaries that are crossed and boundaries that are maintained:

I mean, obviously, we've never started fights; we would never, ever grope lasses; you see lads doing it and you just think, how horrible that must be for them. I mean, to be fair, I've had it done to me a few times, but off girls, and you don't really expect that. But I think it boils down to a different view for that: I think I turned around and I was, like, all right, then. But I think now we went out and we went on the karaoke, which… I still see that as mature; and it came to an instrumental part and the DJ handed us a blow-up guitar, so there was me playing my air guitar. So it might be immature in a sense, but it's the immaturity of an adult. [m, 20, Int18]

Once the everyday boundaries of behaviour are suspended, however, it is neither clear where the new boundaries lie nor how this might be established. A diversity of personal boundaries does not easily translate into a single set of mutually agreed boundaries – especially in a context in which the suspension of boundaries is central to the overall experience of escape (see **§4.3**).

This difficulty can become apparent even around less extreme behaviours, such as jokes:

I don't, like, get the boundaries for jokes. Like when you meet someone new and they make a joke that you're like a bit like, well, it's too racist or whatever, it's just a bit like, you just kind of like, you kind of ignore it because you don't want to start an argument with someone you've just met, well that's what I do anyway. Unless you actually think you're going to see them again and you're going to be friends, there's no point bringing it up. [f, 18, Int46]

Crucially, as the last quotation illustrates, a lack of clarity around boundaries can also mean that the individual who feels things have gone too far may not even bother to challenge the offending behaviour:

The way that some people act, there's no need for it. I wouldn't do it so why should it be acceptable for you to do it? Some people think, like, I should say something, but then you have to take a step back, there's no point, you're not going to get anywhere if you do it. [f, 21–24, WSD]

The lack of overt social disapprobation may further weaken any sense of boundaries. Little by little, the drunken night out becomes a kind of social Wild West:

Even the men being more aggressive to women in, like, the sex in public, stuff like that… that's just something you wouldn't get yourself involved with, so you would kind of turn a blind eye to that. Like, I would say that's something where you'd say I don't really want to be involved. [f, 21–24, WSH]

For some participants, the resulting risk of bad behaviour was something one just had to accept, an unavoidable downside of the general permissions that make participation attractive in the first place:

It sounds terrible but I think that's all part and parcel of a night out. […] It's not right; no, it's not right, but I think you just come to accept that kind of behaviour because… not that it's normal, but… […] It's more and more common and people just, like, behaving in that kind of manner. It's, like, rife, people being cheeky. [f, 21–24, WSH]

There could be trouble… there might not be. There could be girls… there might not be. […] Just when you're drinking… lads, testosterone, women around… it just… it's going to happen eventually, isn't it? [m, 24, Int07]

m1 As you said, you never go out looking for fights, but I think everyone who has been out has probably been in a fight. I think, as you said, if you're looking for a fight…
m2 You'll find one.
m1 Yes, you'll find one.
m3 Yes, you'll always find someone.
m1 But sometimes you have to stick up for yourself, you will get into a situation where you can't talk yourself out of it, if you're sober or drunk, and you'll have to front up, and you'll have to fight. [m, 21–24, WSB]

One of our participants arrived at the interview with a broken nose, from a random attack during a night out earlier in the week. When asked how he felt about this, his response was:

It doesn't really bother me because I know it happens a lot, like, and, yes. [m, 21, Int10]

Examples such as these illustrate that the bad behaviour that occurs in the absence of clear boundaries in the drunken night out extends far beyond racist jokes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most commonly cited problems concern a lack of common norms around what is appropriate in sexual approaches:

I'd never go into a club and pinch a boy's bum, so why do boys think they can do it to girls? [f, 18–20, WSA]

Boys overstepping the mark. […] Who seem to think they have the right to do things that they don't in that situation. [f, 18–21, WSE]

Obviously you can have a mess around with them [girls] and stuff like that, but I've seen some lads just go up to them and they take it far too far, and they try pulling them and they've said no, and then they're getting them to back off and they just haven't. Then they start calling them slags and stuff like that, and I just think there's no need for that. At the end of the day, if a girl doesn't want to dance with you or get with you then just leave her alone, you know what I mean? You don't have to pester her and near enough abuse her and stuff. [m, 21–24, WSI]

While the quotations above all refer to behaviour by males towards females, it is worth noting that this kind of behaviour can also come from females, directed at males, although it is perhaps less likely to be unwelcome:[28]

It just depends on what type of girls you are I suppose. Like, some girls are as bad as boys. Obviously, girls will do it to boys as well. It's not just boys. Like, it's girls. But, it's a bit disrespectful really. [f, 18–20, WSA]

I've seen loads of times where it's not just boys, it's girls as well. […] I think it's just because maybe a girl feels much more frail, I think maybe points that fact out, where a guy just thinks, oh, she just felt my arse, sweet. [m, 21–24, WSB]

In some cases, the problem can be female behaviour towards females. The following workshop discussion follows a question from the moderator about groping:

f1 That's really bad. That's standard.
f2 You get used to it.
f3 I think sometimes girls can be as bad as guys definitely. I've got a friend who's very well endowed boobs-wise and girls think it's acceptable just as much as guys to go up to her and squeeze her boobs because they're so big.
f2 I think you're right, yeah. Especially in the toilets, as well. That's what happens when you drink alcohol. [f, 21–24, WSD]

So this kind of behaviour can be explained by the lack of clear boundaries, without reference to either bad people or to alcohol: people behave like this because, in the context of a drunken night out, they think doing so is acceptable.

28 We have no direct evidence from this research regarding similar behaviours in non-heterosexual contexts.

The last quotation above, however, illustrates a recurring pattern. Accounts of a lack of clarity around boundaries would often be rounded off with a reference to alcohol or drunkenness:

They [boys] will just come up to you, and grab your face, expecting you to just go along with anything. That would never happen when you were sober. You would never, ever just walk up to somebody normal, on a normal day in the street, and just grab them, and expect something to happen. [f, 18–20, WSA]

In the real context of a drunken night out, the suspension of everyday norms always occurs at the same time as the consumption of alcohol. Social permissions and drunkenness co-exist, and the two types of explanation become intertwined. We return to this topic in **§9.6**.

Saying 'no'

There are ways in which clearer boundaries around social interaction can be established in the context of drunken nights out. The first of these depends on the differentiation of venues in a diverse night-time economy. A fetish bar, for example, provide a very obvious example of a venue which clearly advertises the kind of extreme interactions on offer, allowing those not interested to go somewhere else. Even without explicit marketing such as this, some venues may acquire a word of mouth reputation for sex or violence, allowing participants in the drunken night out to decide whether or not to take part:[29]

Everyone is up for it in [Bar], which is, kind of, why it's like a sort of breeding ground, as such, like the watering hole. Everybody there is… you kind of expect it there, I think it's why everyone goes. [f, 22, Int28]

Another participant drew attention to a different kind of boundary-management system, which did not rely on people attending different venues. One of the Freshers' week events she had attended was a Traffic Light Party, which enabled participants clearly to signal, at least to some extent, what kinds of interaction they did and didn't want to consider:

It's a way of, like, boys and girls getting together really, so it's, red if you're single, no… You wear red if you're in a relationship, to say no; amber if you're, like, single, but you're not really interested; and then you wear green if you're single and you're looking for something. [f, 19, Int03]

The accounts of our participants suggest that examples such as these are relatively rare. In general, drunken nights out are characterised by a lack of clear boundaries regarding what is and is not acceptable in social interactions.

Even in the absence of such boundaries, a simple, universal boundary-management system exists in the shape of the word 'no'. Unfortunately, the evidence from our participants suggests that this particular approach has limited effectiveness in the context of a drunken night out:

29 Such diversification is clearly more possible in the context of a large city. Given this, it would be interesting to explore whether issues around boundaries of behaviour are more problematic in smaller towns and cities, where there is less opportunity for people to mix with likeminded people and avoid those who want other things.

People not understanding the word no… I was out a couple of weeks ago and I met this person in the smoking area and I found… they had my wrist – it was like what you doing? Get off me. When you say no you mean no. I'm in my bubble, don't invade. [f, 18–21, WSE]

What was particularly striking was the extent to which an effective 'no' required the presence or intervention of other people. In the case of unwanted sexual advances on women, just having other people around – ideally men – can be an adequate deterrent:

My two flatmates that are girls, they went out together on their own, and they came back really early because they just said that all the boys were like all over them and stuff, and they didn't like it. Whereas when I go out there I never have that problem, because I just hang around the boys and that's why the other boys kind of stay away, I guess. [f, 18, Int40]

A similar strategy can also be effective in deterring violence:

Quite a few times I've been on a night out and I don't know, I've seen one of my friends get targeted and stuff. And you can see people getting aggressive towards them, staring at them and stuff like that. And you just get the rest of your friends and go around and just stand with them and what not, and they soon change their mind when they realise they're not on their own, there's actually quite a lot of them. [m, 21–24, WSI]

Recipients of unwanted sexual advances may also seek help from bouncers – although this kind of help can cut two ways:

If someone's like harassing me in any way I'll just speak to the bouncers and they get kicked out, so I don't have any problem with letting people know. […] That [being groped] happened to me in the week and then I told a bouncer and I had eight boys who wanted to apologise to me. Because if they didn't they were going to get kicked out. They all came up to me and said they're extremely sorry; well, I don't know, they did, so, yes. That sort of thing happens. [f, 20, Int42]

A boy lifted my dress up when I was out once, and I pushed him, and he went flat on his face, but I could have, again, with a bouncer situation, I could have got into trouble for that. Which, a woman has, in this one club back home. She punched a boy in the face, I think. From him doing the same thing, and she got thrown out. [f, 18–20, WSA]

More often, intervention will come from other participants in the drunken night out: friends of the perpetrator, friends of the recipient, or strangers. The friends of the perpetrator in particular can play an important role, both in challenging inappropriate sexual behaviour, and attempting to defuse potential fights (although, unfortunately, they can also egg on either behaviour):

If it's within the group, like maybe somebody's being an arsehole, I'd just tell them the next day, look, last night you were being a… but if they're not within the group and they're going outside the group and going out to other people who were

on a night out, then I'd step in on the night then because when you're all together, like, ah, he's been like… leave him, fine, but when he's going and causing other people trouble, I'll pull him aside and say. [m, 21–24, WSB]

If it is kicking off with your mates to sort of intervene and jump in between them both and just say, look, come on, you've both had too many. Let's go our own ways. And that sort of sorts it out, really. [m, 21–24, WSI]

m1 They can try and defuse it a little bit so that, you know, if you are that loud and abusive one and you're shouting and you'll be like ah, man, just move on, do you know what I mean, just forget about it. We've had a good night kind of just forget about it. We'll go get a taxi or we'll go and get a chippy and go home.
m2 If someone is being like that it's probably the best to get it from you.
m1 Yes, exactly, if you hear it from someone like a complete and utter stranger who're just going to think, who're you're talking to and the drink makes you more kind of aggressive it makes you get your back up a lot easier. [m, 18–20, WSG]

One participant described how he attempts to manage the moment when his own friends' attention shifts from pulling to fighting:

I just distract them, do you know what I mean? I'll just start talking about something else and all of a sudden, they're… the person they were going to start on has walked past and they haven't realised. […] I don't tend to go out with people that I know that are going to be like that anymore. [m, 24, Int07]

The role of friend of the victim is more limited. Friends are unlikely to be able to defuse aggression from outside the group. But they can step in to challenge unwanted sexual advances – something strangers can also do:

You've always got people who try it on with the girls, sort of thing, but if they're a bit like no, then we'll just say, like, turn the bloke around like, sort of thing. […] Because we'll always step in. Not to be confrontational, just to look out for our friends and just we haven't come out to have any trouble and have a fight or anything, so. [m, 20, Int44]

m1 Chivalry is rife… In a world of equality all of the bad things are slowly slipping away but the chivalry still stays strong.
m2 I'd definitely say that because I've seen guys try it on with girls and other guys come along…
m3 Quite a lot of fights are guys sticking up for girls. Even guys who don't know girls will still get into fights.
m1 If I see that happening I would step in and be like, no stop. [18–21, WSE]

As the last excerpt and the next anecdote illustrate, this kind of intervention can itself become the starting point for a fight. As we saw in **§6.2**, those who fail to pull may turn their attention to other kinds of adventure:

I've been with her [my wife] while a lad has tried to grab her. I was on my own at the time and I stopped this lad, got kicked out of the club, obviously, and then they all jumped me. It was a big group of them and I'm just trying to protect my missus and I got filled in for it. [...] What they did is they kicked me

and this guy out of the back door, and he went, what the hell happened there? And I went, oh, sorry mate, some guy tried to grab my bird and I had to intervene. I don't know why they threw you out with me. They must have just thought you were with me or something. We were having a chat. Got round to the front of the club and, once all his mates were there he whacked me. [m, 21–24, WSI]

Far from preventing harm, an attempted 'no' can merely shift the focus. In fact, in some instances, intervention of this kind may be little more than a pretext for starting a fight:

There was one time when I was literally just talking to them and this girl, and the only thing I can put it down to – she was quite a good-looking girl and she was with an older boy who really wasn't good-looking but he was a bit of a bad boy so she was with him, and I think he did get a bit possessive over her and literally we were just talking because she was out with the group we were in and then he came over with his mates and just started a fight – just because he thought I was trying it with his girlfriend. So it's just nights like that – petty fights over nothing really. [m, 25, Int32]

In quotations such as the following, it is hard to know whether the root issue is one person being inappropriately persistent in a sexual advance, another person looking for a fight, or a mixture of both:

There's been a couple of times that I've wound up the wrong people not knowing I've wound them up and then got myself in a couple of situations I've had to be helped out of. [...] It might not be them, it might be somebody that you're talking to like somebody's girlfriend or something like that and then, you know, he's six foot four and built like, do you know what I mean? [m, 18–20, WSG]

There have been occasional nights when [Friend], mainly, gets drunk and he will – again normally it's around girls – he might try it with someone and the boyfriend will get involved. [m, 25, Int32]

The critical point in all of this, however, remains the fact that interventions from other people are needed at all to back up a 'no' to an unwanted sexual advance. The fact that this basic boundary-management system appears to break down in the context of a drunken night out is disturbing enough in and of itself. Even more worrying are the questions it raises about what happens later on, when other people are no longer around:

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 let's 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, who's to say that they might not say something afterwards? [m, 18–20, WSC]

These questions were a source of clear anxiety for a number of our participants, especially (though not only) in all-male workshops. For example, there was unprompted discussion in two of the workshops of a recent advertisement which shows a young man, carried away, assaulting a young woman who is clearly saying no to going any further, while the same young man hammers on a window and begs himself to stop. Often, the anxiety was

apparent in attempts to repress it: for example, we suggested above that the assertion that rape is only committed by rapists may serve as one such defence mechanism. In some workshops, discussion of risk of rape in the context of a drunken night out would be deflected into discussion of the possibility of false accusations of rape in instances where a person says 'no' only after the event:

It's the girl's fault sometimes. Like they say, they get drunk and then they go on… and that's their fault for getting in such a state, consenting to it, then not. [m, 21–24, WSB]

I know sometimes girls can't defend themselves but I think people are judgmental on guys and at the end of the day you don't know what happened and there were a lot of claims about rape that just didn't happen. Sometimes girls do consent to it and then change their minds in the morning. So I think that's a very clouded subject. [f, 21–24, WSD]

It is true that the drunken night out affords multiple opportunities for confusion about what people do and do not want to do. People can sometimes misread the invitations they are receiving from others – something that can happen with respect not just to invitations to engage in sexual activity, but also invitations to fight:

There's a difference between having a bit of banter with people, a bit of abuse and starting a fight. […] It starts off funny then sometimes it crosses a line. [m, 18–20, WSC]

It is also true that people change their minds, deciding that they no longer wish to continue with an interaction they have started:

You get that thing where drink's involved where like… where the girl… or not just the girl, it could be either one, I don't want to like say it's more one than the other, but you get in the position where it's about to, and then one of them pulls out and then all of a sudden it's rape when it wasn't a second before, if you know what I mean, and that's the alcohol I guess. Or they're coming down off it, I guess. [m, 21–24, WSB]

Drawing attention to these possibilities, however, does not change the fact that, in the context of the drunken night out, people also get ignored even when they do say 'no' – although it can help to undermine those who have been ignored:

I think its easier for them to do it [sexual assault] and easier to get away with it as well because you can't prove that you didn't give consent. [f, 21–24, WSD]

7 The Morning After

Key points

- 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, with experiences that were uncomfortable, painful or distressing being transformed into positive and amusing stories. However, there are limits to the extent to which bad experiences can be transformed in this way.
- 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.
- Such stories may become genuinely shaming, however, 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.

We bring our review of the components of a drunken night out to a close with an account of the 'morning after'. Often depicted as the aftermath of a drunken night out – the moment when one counts the costs – the morning after can also be seen as the concluding phase of a drunken night out, i.e. part of it, rather than merely after it. In particular, the morning after can serve as a time when the benefits of the drunken night out are banked in the form of stories.

7.1 The costs of a drunken night out

The phrase 'morning after' is traditionally associated with the costs of a drunken night out: a raging hangover, a hole in your wallet, a gap in your memory and – in the modern world – embarrassing pictures on social media. Hangovers in particular were cited by a number of our participants as the worst aspect of a drunken night out – although they themselves noted the emptiness of any resolutions made on the morning after:

You always say, like, oh my God, I'm never drinking again and then, five days later, you're drinking again nevertheless. [f, 21–24, WSH]

Sometimes I'll say to myself, that's it, I'm not drinking for ages, like, it's ridiculous, I've drunk too much, and then I'll go a week and I'll think, like, oh, I feel fine, I'm not hungover, I'll have a drink. [f, 25, Int20]

The next day I feel like, oh, I'm not… I don't fancy a drink now. But then, like, as soon as my hangover's passed, I'm like, oh, yes, I did enjoy it; but the next day you think, oh, why did I do that? But then you obviously, like, enjoy it, doing all these years. [m, 21, Int10]

In fact, however, we shall see in this chapter that most of the costs listed above are only partially viewed as such. The same is true of associated protestations: 'I'm never going out again', for instance, is more likely to be a semi-ritualised statement of how good the night was than a genuinely entertained resolution. The ambivalence of hangovers and embarrassment are discussed later in this chapter, in **§7.2** and **§7.3**; we return to the topic of lost memory in **§11.2**.

The only non-ambivalent cost of a night out appears to be the financial cost; and even here there is a mixed picture regarding how keenly this cost is felt. Some participants described spending large amounts – in the hundreds of pounds – on drunken nights out, with a few having got into financial difficulties as a result. Others pointed out how cheap a night out could be:

Go to the clubs and then just do loads and loads of shots because they used to be, like, five for £3, or something ridiculous like that, so, obviously, it was really cheap. […] We got shots so cheap, so we could just do lots of them. [f, 24, Int29]

There's one place on a Wednesday night which is 60p for a vodka and mixer, which is lethal as you can imagine. [m, 19, Int38]

Among some of our younger participants in particular, there was a sense of having little else to spend one's disposable income on:

Usually, because I make about, it's usually £250/300 a week, I get paid weekly. I leave about £80 of it for the next week to get to work and that. And then the rest of it, it's usually 100/150, a lot of the time I'll just spend that over a weekend. It's horrible when I say it. Usually, I probably spend about £50/60 on a night out depending on how many nights out we go. If it's, like, two nights out I'll easily spend over £100. [m, 20, Int17]

Every week I just spend me wage. I don't really think about it. [m, 18–20, WSC]

The picture varies from one individual to another; but overall it is clear that the costs associated with the morning after may not be experienced as costs at all. Moreover, a list of costs associated with the morning after omits the last key benefit of a drunken night out: the stories one has to tell:

If you're out with, if you're out with a good bunch of mates obviously, you're always going to have a story regardless. [m, 21–24, WSB]

7.2 BENEFIT D: Stories

Good stories are not just the measure of a good drunken night out. They are valuable in themselves – a kind of narrative currency, minted during the drunken night out, which can later be traded for personal and social benefits:

I like to have a story the next day. […] Something that when you tell someone they, you know, they pull that face. […] I don't know, like something ridiculous, something ridiculous happening. Yes, or a… yes, I don't know, just like, it's everything really isn't it? […] It's just having a completely good night if you've got a story to tell the next day. [m, 21–24, WSB]

At times, some of our participants seemed almost to suggest that the story was more valuable than the experience itself:

You make memories, kind of, like… when my sister and my brother talk about when they went out, you laugh about all of the funny things that happened on so and so night and, like, even when I talk to my friends now, you'd be, like, oh, remember that night, it was so funny, had a good dance, had a good laugh. […] You, kind of, just have a laugh and then obviously when people have had a bit to drink, they do silly things and then you, kind of, you take photos, you've got those photos and you can laugh about them. [f, 21, Int27]

The memories that you have when you're out with your mates are just made by little events, like even the silliest things of a stupid dance; last night me and [Name] on the karaoke; just complete embarrassment for yourself, but you will remember it for the rest of your life, thinking, oh, remember when we were, sort of, on the karaoke, had everyone cheering and all that. You just get the best memories ever. [m, 20, Int18]

It's quite fun to go out and get a girl too. It's part of it. You wake up in the morning and you get to tell a story. [m, 21–24, WSI]

While we can only speculate on this point, we suspect that this 'future perfect' stance on experience – with half an eye on what one will be able to say one has done even as one is doing it – may reflect a more general trend associated with the widespread use of social media to curate a public identity.

Storytelling and group bonding

Storytelling after a drunken night out has two kinds of value associated with it. The first of these is individual: one can derive pleasure from telling oneself stories about things that have happened, i.e. from reminiscing:

Like, just things that have happened when you're out, and it's just funny, like. Like, I can think back, then, and just laugh. [m, 21, Int10]

One participant described the stories generated by drunken nights out as a kind of narrative pension, to be drawn on in later life when one no longer engaged in such behaviour:

It gives you something to laugh about; it gives you some sort of amusement to your life; you, sort of… you don't want to have a dull life where you think, oh, what did I do when I was younger? Did I really just stay really sensible and not do anything that, sort of, might be a bit of, sort of, adrenalin rush or anything? It was just like, I wouldn't want to grow old thinking, oh, I spent my nights doing work; that's just not me. [m, 20, Int18]

Crucially, however, storytelling is also a joint activity, something undertaken by and with the group that went on the drunken night out. Note how in the quotation that follows reminiscing shifts back and forth between an individual activity ('I remember', 'I reminisce') and something clearly undertaken with others ('do you remember?', 'we can look back'):

Sometimes when you reminisce and, like, you think, oh, do you remember that night we went out? Like,

I remember when we went to York one night and, like, I just remember my friend fell over so many times she grazed her knees, like, and it was, like, she was a little kid, like, we can look back on that and laugh and, like… You do, like, when I reminisce, I can think of such funny nights. [f, 19, Int41]

In their qualitative study, Griffin et al. (2009) draw particular attention to the role played by storytelling in the development and maintenance of bonds within a group of friends:

Sharing drinking stories that are collaboratively constructed plays a key role in young people's social lives, binding their friendship groups together in a highly gendered process (Engineer et al., 2003). Our participants recounted stories of drinking to the point of losing consciousness, losing their memory of events, vomiting, and waking up in hospital, representing their actions when drunk as beyond their control, awareness and responsibility. Some of these practices were constituted as excessive, undesirable, unpleasant or 'weird', but they were also recounted as a source of entertainment as part of a 'fun' night out in the context of a widespread culture of 'extreme drinking'. […] Part of the allure lay in the integral relationship between excessive drinking and 'fun' as central to the cohesiveness, intimacy and care provided by young people's social friendship groups.[30]

This use of storytelling as a mechanism to continue the bonding of the drunken night out was also strongly in evidence among our participants. Group storytelling typically starts on the morning after:

You wake up in the morning and you think 'last night was nuts' and you go and see your mates and you talk about doing things and that was class. Going back to someone's flat and throwing shoes out of the window. Putting vodka in someone's milk. Stupid stuff when you're out sort of thing. [m, 18–20, WSC]

Group story-telling even redeems the hangover – with the hangover day becoming a ritual in and of itself, and the scale of hangover new material for stories:

You know the next day you're going to feel like crap, but when I'm hungover, I can't be on my own anyway, I feel too needy when I'm hungover, so I'm with all my friends, I always make sure I'm with my friends. So, I suppose, look, it sounds horrible to say but the worse you get, the more fun you have and the day after, you've got more to laugh about. [f, 20, Int06]

I know this is so weird, but sometimes me and my friends say: I do quite enjoy a hangover day. Like, where you're a bit too ill to go out and do anything so you just, kind of, sit and reminisce on the night before. […] It was amazing, just an amazing hangover day. But it's better when you have, like, if loads of events happen throughout the night and then you remind yourself of how much of a dick you were being when you're drunk. [f, 25, Int20]

The term 'recollection' rather aptly describes this group activity on the morning after, with stories often needing literally to be pieced together again from the patchy accounts of different members of the group:

30 The omitted section of this quotation is reproduced and discussed below.

Normally the next day you'll meet up with your friends somewhere and they'll say oh, I can remember doing this, and you'll say no but then you'll say can you remember doing this and they'll say no, so you normally patch it together. [m, 23, Int09]

The best stories can then be repeated again and again – and may even be fed back into the behaviour of the group on subsequent drunken nights out, with the sharing of stories becoming a kind of ritual in its own right. Indeed, sharing stories can sensibly be seen as an extension of banter beyond the confines of the drunken night out:

Just, like, being with all your pals and things, something like… say if you're out now and I say something stupid that only your pals will know, so it's just like a personal joke, but a bit of banter between you as well that you all remember. [f, 21–24, WSH]

The importance of this shared storytelling as a form of group bonding is underlined by the experience of not being able to participate in it:

All your friends were out and you couldn't go out, you'd be frightened in case you missed something. Even the next day, on a Sunday, if you go to the pub on a Sunday afternoon, like, we'd be talking about it and you would say I don't know what you're talking about because you didn't come round, and then you'd be gutted. It's not the same. [f, 28, Int24]

Transforming experience

Storytelling is an important form of group experience following a drunken night out. But stories also have content in their own right. They construct people and events in particular ways, and as such, they can play a vital role in creating and maintaining a group's shared sense of its identity, and of the identity of its individual members. Stories are not just neutral representations of what happened: they also construct what is desired.

As noted in **§1.6**, this raises important challenges for qualitative research such as ours. What we hear in interviews are stories – reconstructions of events, not the events themselves. Those reconstructions sometimes include direct acknowledgement that the funny story may involve a transformation of the experience on which it is based:

The next day would be funny to, like, look back and think oh my God. Like, say if it was me I'd say, oh that's disgusting. Like, you can laugh about it… after, you can laugh about it but, at the time, obviously it's not funny. [f, 20, Int06]

It's weird because like when you're really drunk, like on a [sports club] night, sometimes you think, God, why have I done this to myself? But then you wake up and you just think this was hilarious because the things that happen are just brilliant. [m, 21, Int44]

More often, this transformation of experience is a matter of inference and guesswork. One participant, for example, described how, on a holiday abroad, one member of the group had been so drunk that he had ended up smearing vomit and excrement around their apartment. This story now formed part of the group's repertoire of rituals: they would retell it whenever the person in question tried a sexual advance. When asked, the

participant insisted that the events in question had been funny at the time as well. We have no way of knowing whether this is true or not.

Other examples include instances of injury, such as a story told by a participant who had, when drunk, fallen and dislodged her braces, pushing them up into her flesh. This had been painful and required an emergency appointment. The group's story, however, focuses on the funny fall:

I fell on my face, like… my friends that I was out with were my dancing friends actually. And they just said it was the funniest fall ever, like, I don't even know how I had done it because, like, I'm normally very good, like, if I have fallen over I always fall on my hands. [f, 19, Int41]

The transformation of experience in stories is apparent in terms such as 'messy', widely used by participants to describe drunken nights out. This is the response of one participant when asked to explain the meaning of this term:

A lot of sick and there's a… well, there's a lot of shenanigans going on, like. It's good; a good night. We played drinking games and obviously a lot of stuff happens as well when you're out. We've had some stories and stuff. [m, 21, Int10]

Often the transformation of experience was apparent not in the actual words used by a participant but in their tonality and expression. The tonality of the following account is pointed out in the interviewer's question towards the end:

The day after, when we're having, like, a hangover day, we always say, like: why did we get that drunk? Because we always think the best bit of the night is where everyone's just merry and that's where we're all having a good time and then as soon as someone gets drunk that's when people start falling apart and you're like, where's [Name A], where's [Name B] gone? You don't know where people are. Because obviously drink does different things to different people, so some friends are sitting crying, some are dead angry, some are going wild in the corner, so the night just falls apart.
Mod But you're kind of smiling describing it. Because it's funny thinking about it. Like, it just reminds us of situations, just how stupid it makes you. [f, 25, Int20]

There are limits, however, to the extent to which bad experiences can be turned into good memories. Drunken nights out have a darker side which even collective storytelling cannot redeem. For example, in the passage omitted from the quotation cited earlier, Griffin et al. (2009) draw attention to one element of this darker side of drunken nights out, which casts shadows across the narratives of young women in particular:

Young women struggled to manage the spectre of sexual assault, shame and the loss of respectable femininity associated with getting very drunk and passing out. Young men's 'passing out stories' were more straightforward tales of ritualised 'determined drunkenness', although young women also represented their alcohol consumption in this way, the language (and practices) were generally less extreme.

We return to this darker side of drunken nights out later in this report.

7.3 Embarrassment

It was relatively common for participants to describe stories about their behaviour during drunken nights out as 'embarrassing'. A naïve reading of this term would suggest that this implied some kind of regret on their part – a wish that they had not done what they did. However, this is not always the case:

You know… if you go to [named night], you know it's going to be… you're going to get drunk, you're going to have a laugh, there's going to be stories, there's going to be photos that you don't want people to see, but that's part of the fun of it, isn't it? [f, 20, Int47]

m1 Your mates will take the piss out of you but it's the definition of a mad one, a good night out.
m2 They're good and bad at the same time. They're bad at the time, but they're part of a good night. [m, 18–20, WSC]

But saying that, I don't think [an embarrassing picture on social media] is such a negative consequence as long as you don't take yourself too seriously. Like there's one very embarrassing video of me and I've made peace with it. Now I tell it as a funny story. I'm not telling you guys though! [m, 18–21, WSE]

Far from being a sign of regret, embarrassment is seen as part of the fun. One wants people to see the embarrassing pictures on social media, because the stories and photos which occasion this kind of embarrassment are also helping to establish one's drunken night out identity – as the kind of person who can take a joke, the kind of person who can have fun. Indeed, in the following quotation, an embarrassing story of this kind is presented as the making of an individual's future identity and status within the formal structures of a sports society:

I woke up and I was so embarrassed because they had all taken videos of me, and I thought 'my life's over, I'm not going to do anything', and then one of the seniors came up to me and he said, 'you're going to be social sec next year,' he said, 'that was the best thing I've ever seen', and now I look back on it and I realise that that was, like I love that… like I love that story and if anyone ever says, 'oh what's your most embarrassing story?' I'm like, well, I'm not embarrassed but it was embarrassing and then I'll tell them it. [m, 21, Int44]

Crucially, however, this drunken night out identity is (as we noted in **§4.3**) distinct from one's everyday identity. This difference is part of what makes the drunken night out an escape. Expressions of embarrassment provide a convenient way of reaffirming this distinction, while at the same time embracing both identities.

Once again, there are limits. While most of what is described as embarrassing is in fact the source of a kind of social pride, it is still possible to go too far and to feel something closer to genuine shame about one's drunken night out identity:

There's two, sort of, types of it; there's an embarrassing, and then there's like… but a funny embarrassing, and then there's a bit-of-an-idiot

embarrassing, that sort of thing, so, you know, you don't want to get to the stage where you're at the idiot embarrassing. I think the funny embarrassing's not too bad, you can… although it might be embarrassing, it's… you know. [m, 19, Int37]

I think its more the embarrassment though, coz if you, like, poo yourself in front of everyone that's really embarrassing. If you're sick, it's more understandable. [f, 18–21, WSE]

In some cases, it was hard to tell which of the two types of embarrassment a participant was expressing:

The worst things are the embarrassment afterwards. I always, without a doubt, do something embarrassing, every time, and it's usually something sexual. […] I've never been out or to a party or something where I haven't thought to myself the next morning, like I'll cringe. [f, 22, Int28]

In many cases, we suspect, the answer to that question will lie not in the individual but in the context in which the story is being told. Drunken night out identities are intended for one's group of friends and other participants in the drunken night out – other people, that is, who play by the same rules. Within those circles, the embarrassing story plays a positive role, helping to construct and maintain a desired identity. Outside those circles, however, the drunken night out identity is meant to be kept hidden, and the embarrassing stories become much more problematic. In the following quotation, for example, a participant discusses how she would feel about different people seeing a video of herself when drunk:

I think, with your friends, they know what you're like. So, it's people who you're comfortable around, again, isn't it? You don't care then. But then, if my Nan was to watch it or something, I'd die. Because I think, 'my Nan doesn't know me like that'. Whereas my Mum, and people who are close to me, do. [f, 18–20, WSA]

For one participant, the mere presence of older people not playing by the same rules was enough to break the spell of the drunken night out, and replace embarrassment with something closer to shame:

Say you're in a pub and you were by older people and you're just dancing, making a show of yourself… but when you're on a night out, people your age don't bother because they do the same thing. [f, 18–20, WSJ]

8 Why go on a drunken night out?

Key points

- The decision to go on a drunken night out can be seen as a rational choice, made on an assessment of benefits and costs.
- Apart from the drunken night out, there are few if any other social experiences which provide the same mix of benefits – in particular, the opportunity for social adventures. Many participants in drunken nights out find it hard to think of other things they could do.
- Going on a drunken night out can also be explained in other non-rational ways:
  - Social: in terms of social norms or other kinds of social pressure.
  - Situational: as a response to prompts in the situation.
  - Habitual: as a self-sustaining pattern of behaviour.
- In practice, all of these different kinds of process are likely to be involved.

Thus far in the report, we have discussed four key benefits associated with drunken nights out:

- Escape
- Bonding and belonging
- Social adventures
- Stories

These benefits provide the basis for one kind of answer to the question posed in this chapter – why go on a drunken night out? – an answer which positions participants in drunken nights out as rational consumers of a social product (**§8.1**).

However, full answer to the question of why people go on drunken nights out from this perspective also needs to take account of what alternative options are available (**§8.2**). There are, moreover, other kinds of answer to the question, which explain participation in terms of social factors, situational cues, or habit (**§8.3**).

8.1 Benefits and rational choice

Although they have been presented and discussed separately, it will not have escaped notice that the four benefits associated with a drunken night out are intimately connected. **Figure 6** *overleaf* offers a schematic representation of these connections.

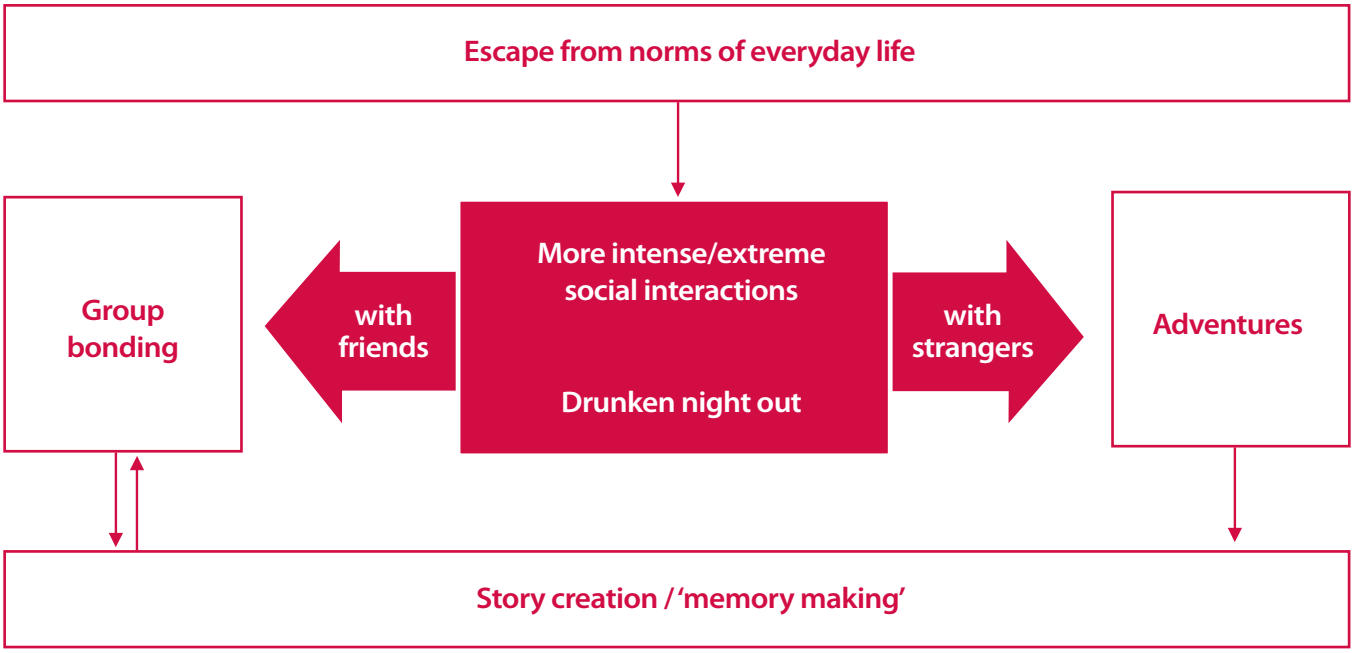
Many of the descriptions offered by participants combined the benefits of a drunken night out in similar ways:

Girls and… just memories. Memories and meeting new people, and letting… letting my hair down, kind of thing. Just de-stressing. [m, 24, Int07]

The secret ingredient is everyone you're out with getting on well and meeting new people as well. [m, 18–20, WSG]

I think a good night out should have alcohol, girls, friends and music. [m, 21–24, WSI]

Figure 6: The benefits of a drunken night out



The best bits are, you know, just letting your hair down and having a good night, like, if you've had a stressful week, meeting new people, like, just having a laugh and it just cheers you up, going out to have a dance, listening to music, getting ready, making yourself look nice, feeling nice, just something to look forward to. [f, 20, Int04]

It's not like my life revolves around alcohol, but the whole bonding and going out together and waking up next to one of the girls and being like, oh shit, what have we done and you know, then like finding out that one of the boys, I don't know, vomited on a bouncer or something, you know, stuff like that. [m, 21, Int44]

A number of participants distinguished between different kinds of drunken night out according to their particular focus – for example, whether there was more emphasis on the group of friends or on meeting new people. One participant even drew a distinction between different types of drinking occasion he had identified in the interview, on the basis of how much importance was attached to the memories being made:

[Type A] It's just, it's not a special occasion. It's living to the moment that. [Pointing to Type B] That party and Paddy's [St Patrick's] weekend, that was living for the memories, sort of thing. We will always look back and remember that Paddy's weekend where we all lived at [Friends' house] for the weekend, and we all remember [Friend's] 25th birthday where we were all wearing our masks and stuff. Whereas these ones [pointing to Type A again], sod it, we're students, go on then. [m, 25, Int31]

Rational choice, based on an assessment of costs and benefits, is one element of human behaviour: and there is no obvious reason to deny it a role in decisions to participate in drunken nights out. There are clear benefits to participation, and it is highly plausible that, for those who do go out, these outweigh the perceived costs (many of them ambivalent, as we noted in **§7.1**) and risks (to be discussed later in this report). Such a decision would be no more inherently irrational than, to pick an example at random, the decision to go on a skiing holiday. The mere fact that other agents, with different priorities, would not weigh the benefits and costs in the same way is not evidence that those who do participate are thereby irrational.

This does not mean, however, that an enumeration of the benefits and costs of a drunken night out provides a complete answer to the question: why go on a drunken night out? This is for two reasons:

- First, any choice is circumscribed by the available options. People don't just choose to go on drunken nights out: they choose to do so instead of doing something else. An account of costs and benefits needs to be supplemented with a review of the competition – this is what we will look at more closely in **§8.2**.
- Secondly, rational choice is rarely, if ever, a complete explanation of human behaviour: and there is no obvious reason to claim that it is a complete explanation in the case of participation in drunken nights out. Three non-rational explanations of participation in drunken nights out are reviewed in **§8.3**.

8.2 The competition

What alternatives are there to a drunken night out? Are there other social products on the market which could meet some or all of the same consumer needs? For a number of our participants, the answer was a simple 'no':

It's really, really hard for people our age to find something to do for enjoyment without drinking and to have like a real social time. [m, 20, Int16]

We all go in and go, it's a crap night again, like it's just the same thing every week. We've done it too much. There's nothing else to do, that is the only thing to do. [f, 20, Int04]

It sounds really bad but I can't think of any that's not… […] No but it's really strange, it's just that the pub is such a good place to meet and it's quite… it's not too expensive so… No, I can't think of anything really. [f, 23, Int30]

Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) report similar responses from participants in their study:

Drinking to achieve drunkenness was seen as a 'default' choice for peer socialising. Many found it difficult to imagine realistic alternatives to alcohol consumption for getting groups of young adults together.

In research with 18 to 24 year olds undertaken for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), 25% of those who drank alcohol at least once a year agreed with the statement 'It is difficult to think of things to do

on a night out that don't involve alcohol'. This rises to 47% of Regular Intentionals (§2.4), compared to 30% of Occasional Intentionals and 10% of Never Intentionals.

Based on their research with young people who choose not to drink, meanwhile, Herring et al. (2012) conclude that:

There should be more opportunities for young people to socialise without alcohol or where it is not the focus of the event, for example in events promoted by further and higher education institutions. Such steps would help to support individuals who choose not to drink and foster a culture where heavy drinking is not seen as essential to a good night out. For such changes to be effective they would need to be replicated more widely and be part of broader efforts to shift social and cultural attitudes and perceptions more generally.

Some possible alcohol-free alternatives to the drunken night out – in particular going to the cinema – were dismissed by our participants as failing to deliver the same benefits as a drunken night out:

I've been to the cinema a few times since uni, but it's not the same. Like you can't get to know someone whilst you're sitting there silent watching a film. Whereas if you're like in the bar talking to him, and actually getting to know them, it's a lot different. [f, 18, Int46]

Eating and sport were also mentioned, though without any great conviction. Note how, in the second quotation, the group try to capture some of the intensity and extremity of a drunken night out by trying to eat as much as possible:

I don't know, like, if I'm honest with you. The thing is, if you don't drink you end up eating, do you know what I mean? So if we think, we'll not get drunk, we'll just go for a nice meal or something or, like we'll have a takeaway and X Factor night, so you'll sit and eat loads of shit and just watch TV. So we need to do something like… I don't know. Everything's bad for you. [f, 25, Int20]

The other week we went to… because we used to play golf, went to the driving range on, I think it was through the week, like, either a Wednesday or Thursday night or something, just for a change really, something to do. Apart from that there's not really much we do unless we sometimes go out to like have a meal, like all you can eat, Chinese and stuff like that. We sometimes go to them and try to eat as much as possible. [m, 20, Int17]

Meanwhile, alternatives which were felt to do a better job of delivering the benefits of a drunken night out – activities such as paintballing, go-karting, quad biking or bowling – were felt to be either too hard to arrange or too expensive to do on a regular basis:

I don't think they're readily available. I think you have to go out of your way to… you have to put a lot of effort in to do the alternative. [m, 21–24, WSI]

I don't think there's much to do that doesn't involve money, where you can see each other, in a way. Because we're trying, like we found it hard last year to stay living as friends and not as just housemates, so we're trying to organise more nights out together and more things to do together. [f, 20, Int42]

Things are often expensive as well when you're not drinking. I know that sounds like… but if you're wanting to do something, like make some memories, have a laugh, then you're going to be paying for it. Like an experience, like go quad biking or go paintballing, like bowling is probably the cheaper option, but there's like all those things, there's like loads to do, but it's expensive. [f, 25, Int22]

Having said that, drunken nights out also involve money. Another participant felt that alternatives such as those listed above were in fact quite comparable in price:

I'd say if you're going out to the same club week after week, there are other activities out there. It doesn't really seem like it all the time but yes, like 40 quid, you can probably spend that on a night out but that could be paintballing, go-karting, cinema. There's a lot you can do instead of just going out and getting drunk. [WS1]

Asked by the moderator why these options are not taken up more often, his response was simple: they are not available at the same times as a drunken night out:

There's not much to do in [City 1], other than go out like that. [You could] stay in and watch TV, like; just boring. Because we could go bowling, it's in [City 2]; but the night's over by about 11 o'clock then, and I like to stay out till five in the morning, so… [m, 21, Int10]

These comments invite a further question: why is it important to be doing things so late? The answer almost certainly lies in the tendency, noted in **§4.2**, for people to align their behaviour with the wider population. Previously we noted how this leads to people going to the same venues in the same order. A similar pattern can also explain why people tend to go out at the same time as each other:

All the things happen later on in the night, like, it's a better atmosphere. And if you go out early in the night, it can be quite boring because not many people are out and nobody's really dancing, so you're just, kind of, like, waiting around for it to start getting good, really. [f, 19, Int02]

Not only does this explain why drunken nights out start so late (and why they keep getting later: no-one wants to be the first in the bar); it also provides an additional reason for choosing to go on a drunken night out at all. The single greatest advantage that drunken nights out have over the competition may be the fact that everybody else chooses to go on drunken nights out – a classic example of a network effect.[31]

With this in mind, another point is striking. Paintballing, go-karting, quad biking and bowling – or for that matter, watching *X-factor* or eating as much as possible – all provide possible settings for group bonding and belonging and an opportunity, as one of the quotations above notes, to make some

31 The network effect describes situations in which the value of a product to a consumer depends on how many other people are using it. Social networks are a good example of the network effect in action.

memories. They deliver many of the same benefits as a drunken night out. But it seems unlikely they can compete when it comes to social adventures – the defining feature of the 'out' part of a drunken night out. For social adventures one needs to be where all the other people looking for social adventures are: and all of those people are on drunken nights out.

8.3 Non-rational explanations

As noted in **§8.1**, rational choice is rarely if ever a complete explanation of human behaviour. For their part, our participants certainly did not seek to explain their own participation in drunken nights out solely in terms of the costs and benefits of doing so. Alongside rational explanations, they offered at least three other kinds of account of their own behaviour:

- Social: behaviour is explained in terms of social norms or other kinds of social pressure
- Situational: behaviour is explained as a response to prompts in the situation
- Habitual: behaviour is explained as a self-sustaining pattern

As will soon become apparent, these categories are not entirely clear-cut, with social explanations in particular sometimes difficult to distinguish from the three other types of explanation.

It is worth stressing that all we are doing here is noting different types of explanation in the accounts offered by our participants. We are not at this point advancing a model of human behaviour (a topic to which we return in **§19.3**).

Social explanations

As was argued in **Chapter 3**, norms and rituals play an important role in structuring behaviour within a drunken night out. By the same token, participating in a drunken night out can itself be seen as a kind of norm or ritual – especially at the level of the group of friends, for whom going out may be a regular practice on a specific day (see **§5.2**).

Just as not conforming to norms on matters such as what one wears can leave an individual with feelings of discomfort and social separation (**§4.1**), so too, not conforming to a group's norm of going on a drunken night out can leave a person feeling left out. This can drive conformity even when the person doesn't really want to go out:

I don't know, really. It just… just seemed like everybody was like interested in… I think I'd personally rather have a good sober night out than a good drunk night out, but most people just want to get drunk, so that's what we do. [f, 18, Int40]

See the worst thing is, is, like, I've tried that [skipping a night out] and then all the boys are saying, oh we're going out on the weekend. Oh, me too! Just because I can't sit at home. [m, 21–24, WSB]

There were some nights where you really couldn't be bothered going out but you see everyone going out and I used to have a real fear of missing out so I'd go out anyway. And I knew from the start I wasn't going to enjoy it so it would be harder to drink or you'd be feeling rough and they weren't as fun, I wouldn't get as drunk. But most of the time I did, yes. [f, 23, Int30]

It should be apparent that the distinction between rational and social explanations is not a simple either/or one. Conformity to group norms, and feelings of bonding and belonging, are intimately interconnected.

Situational explanations

Situational explanations emphasise the role of prompts or cues in the context in bringing about behaviour. Once again, the distinction between these and other explanations is not entirely clear-cut. In particular, since the prompts in question will often lie in other people's behaviour, situational explanations often blur into social ones.

Situational explanations will play an important role in later parts of this report, in particular as we look at people's behaviour when they are drunk. They were less common – though still present – in accounts of the decision to go on a drunken night out, and here too typically involved the effect of early drinks on later decisions:

You go out, and it's not like… I can easily go out and just have one or two pints, have a couple of games of pool and go home, it's just when you go out with your friends and the atmosphere is there. [m, 24, Int08]

We went to the [Bar] and we were all, like, oh we'll watch the match, we'll have a pint and then we'll all go back to someone's house and have a takeaway or something. Takeaway never happened because one drink led to another to another to another and then the next day I'd look at my bank account and be, like, oh my God… because I never took cash with me, I took, like, a £10 note… I took £10 with me thinking oh, I'm only having one drink, used my card, and I think the minimum you could spend in the [Bar] was £10, so you'd have to keep topping up drinks you bought. The next day you'd realise how much you spent and it would be horrific. [f, 20, Int06]

Sometimes the situation can be the mere fact that it is the time of day when one would normally go out – although this could also be seen as an example of the last type of explanation: habit.

I think it's just, on the night, we've done it before haven't we, we said on a Wednesday, we'll go to the cinema, instead. We got home from the cinema and it was like, oh it's only nine o'clock, let's go out. You just, when you're there, and you're thinking, oh, everybody else is going to be out, and I could be having a drink, and having a laugh, instead of going to bed. You just think, oh, let's just go. There's nothing stopping you, so… [f, 18–20, WSA]

Habitual explanations

Habit is a powerful force in human behaviour, and one that is often overlooked – both in psychological theories and in everyday explanations of our own behaviour. In line with this, there was relatively little reference to habit in the accounts offered by our participants. Nevertheless, it was possible to discern the workings of habit in some responses:

I wouldn't say it's... 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, 24, Int07]

Obviously we knew we would go out because she'd come home with me [friend from university] but we didn't plan anything. We just went out and we just always saw the same people at the same kind of places. [f, 23, Int25]

If we do end up meeting up we'll have a couple of drinks, and after a couple of drinks we will end up going out and going out to [City], because it's easy. [m, 23, Int09]

Since a habit is essentially a repeated pattern of behaviour, there is again a potential overlap with social explanations.

PART C
ALCOHOL, DRINKING & DRUNKENNESS

In this part of the report, we explore the roles played by alcohol, drinking and drunkenness in the overall structure of a drunken night out.
In the first two chapters we address two simple questions:

- Why do people drink?
- Why do people get drunk?

One way of answering these questions is to look at how the behaviours in question deliver the benefits of a drunken night out, as described in **Part B**. This is the perspective taken in **Chapter 9**.

However, as discussed at the end of **Part B**, rational choice is rarely if ever a complete explanation of human behaviour. Thus, in **Chapter 10**, we explore a different perspective on the same two questions. This is a social perspective, that emphasises the operation of norms and rituals.

Situational explanations also play an important role in participants' accounts of certain kinds of drunken behaviour, including drinking beyond one's intended limit. Intended limits are the topic of **Chapter 11**.

An important theme running through this part of the report is that many behaviours in the drunken night out can be explained in more than one way. It might be tempting to argue that one explanation is right, and the others wrong. This, however, is not our response. Instead, it is our view that the different kinds of explanation – rational, social, situational – overlap with and complement each other, and that a single behaviour can fulfil multiple functions in the drunken night out. In **Chapter 12**, we look at the many functions fulfilled by pre-drinking and drinking games.

In developing an account of the roles played by alcohol, drinking and drunkenness in the overall structure of the drunken night out, we should never forget the possibility of a fourth kind of explanation: habitual. We will touch on the possible role of habit at the very end of this part of the report (**§12.3**).

9 Reasons to drink and get drunk

Key points

- Much, perhaps most drinking in the context of a drunken night out is instrumental. Alcoholic drinks are treated as ethanol-delivery mechanisms, with calculations of 'units per pence' and appropriate concentrations guiding choices of drink.
- For some participants, this was the only relationship with alcoholic drinks. For them, drinking without getting drunk was a waste of alcohol.
- 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.
- The risks of drunkenness were recognised. Because alcohol makes you less likely to think twice, when drunk 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 i) even when drunk, you can in fact stop yourself and ii) you are still morally responsible for what you do.
- In practice, the physiological effects of alcohol in a drunken night out always co-exist with extensive social permissions for more extreme interactions. When we talk about disinhibition in a drunken night out, we should remember that this comprises both an individual and a social element, inextricably woven together.

In this chapter we explore the extent to which drinking and getting drunk were explained by our participants as rational choices, based on the benefits associated with those behaviours.

The chapter should be read alongside **Chapter 10**, which sets out an alternative perspective on the same behaviours, as reflections of norms and rituals.

These two types of explanation should be seen as complementary, rather than contradictory. A complete account of the place of alcohol in the drunken night out should draw on both.

9.1 Why do people drink?

Outside the special social context that is the drunken night out, one reason why people drink alcoholic drinks is because they like the taste. Within the drunken night out, however, this is emphatically not the case. Not only are people not drinking for the taste, they are often drinking despite the taste:

I've bought some wine for like pre-drinks and before I go out I down a bottle of wine.
Mod Do you like wine?
Not really. [m, 21–24, WSI]

I don't really like the taste of alcohol at all, not really. Wine I do, but not other alcohol, I never really have. [f, 22, Int28]

Honestly, I used to knock them back so fast I didn't really taste them. [f, 22, Int28]

Drinking in this context is instrumental, with the purpose being to get drunk; and alcoholic drinks are little more than ethanol-delivery mechanisms, chosen not for their taste but for their effects:

Alcohol doesn't interest me. I don't find it a pleasurable drink. I only drink because we get drunk. [f, 18–20, WSA]

I wouldn't go out and just have a drink, this is probably not a relevant point, because I don't like it and I drink for, well, for the effect of it really. […] It's not going to quench your thirst, I don't like the taste of it particularly. [m, 20, Int16]

[In the club I drink] Vodka lemonade and vodka cokes. […] It's just tried and trusted, really. […] Its ability to get you drunk. [m, 21, Int39]

Mod Why would you drink something you don't like the taste of?
I don't know. That's a good question actually. I think it's just because it is just to get drunk really sometimes, like, you think, oh, it's quite strong, I'll drink it anyway. Like a shot… like, shots just aren't pleasant anyway, like, especially Vodka ones. [f, 19, Int41]

I… this is really bad. I don't enjoy the taste of alcohol. I don't enjoy it but I enjoy the effects of it. […] I mean, some of them I do, like, the alcopops; they're easy to drink and the cocktails, obviously, because they're made to taste nice. Whereas, Sambuca, like, I drink it because I know it'll get me drunk. [f, 20, Int47]

For some of our participants, the purpose of mixers (including pre-mixed drinks) was to make the alcohol palatable:

I'd say [my favourite drinks are] Vodka Cranberry and Vodka, Lemon and Lime just because they cover up the taste of the alcohol. Yes. [f, 21, Int27]

It was three for one drinks so you'd get – say you paid £2.20 for a drink, you'd then get another couple for free, so you'd get three drinks for the price of one. […] So it would normally be a shot to get drunk, and then obviously either like a WKD or a vodka mixer – it would normally be a Smirnoff because they weren't that expensive. And you'd drink the shot and then you'd have some of the WKD and some of the mixer to take the taste out of your mouth, so you wouldn't have the taste of the shot in your mouth. [m, 23, Int09]

Some participants even described having to get a bit drunk on more palatable (often sweeter) drinks before they could cope with unmixed stronger drinks, such as shots:

I couldn't go out and have a triple vodka on the spot; I couldn't do it. I really don't like strong vodka when I can taste it; that's why I usually start off with a, as I've mentioned, with a couple of ciders or something like that, because I really like the taste of it; it's really sweet, it's not so strong; and as you start

to get a bit tipsy the, sort of, taste of the vodka gets a bit less, so you start with maybe a double and maybe move onto a treble if you've started getting a bit drunk. [m, 20, Int18]

The point here is not that everyone on a drunken night out dislikes everything that they are drinking. This is not the case: a few of our participants liked the taste of stronger drinks:

I think to be honest I just like the taste of it. I like the taste of vodka in my Coke, sort of thing. [m, 25, Int31]

Overall, however, it was striking just how irrelevant factors like taste were to the instrumental drinking of a drunken night out, with drinks regularly selected despite tasting bad.

9.2 An instrumental relationship with alcoholic drinks

The instrumental drinking of a drunken night out was in stark contrast to the drinking patterns which some participants described outside the context of a drunken night out:

If I do it [having a drink when not going out] it's literally just for sort of the taste. It's not really for a buzz or anything. I can't really be… if I'm just sat in my house on my own, I might have, like, one… maybe if it's cold I'll have a Jack Daniel's or something... a whisky just to sort of warm me up. But I can't sit in, like, a closed space and be drunk. [m, 24, Int07]

If I'm just meeting someone in a bar and a date then I just have one or two drinks and I'm not really focused on drink. I'm more focused on talking to them, but the drink, kind of, is there just to… you know, because we're adults now and thinking… You know, I like the idea of having one or two drinks while talking to someone. It appeals to me for some reason. [m, 19, Int43]

It was striking, however, that for a number of our participants – especially among the younger ages – these alternative forms of drinking were either very rare or did not exist at all. This is in line with Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010), who found that, 'for many of our participants the consumption of alcohol had become synonymous with the pursuit of drunkenness':

I wouldn't go out and just have one because I can't, if I just go out, I know I won't, so there's no point in saying that in the first place. But at the same time, if I go out during the week I tend to drink soft drinks, like I do drink soft drinks every now and again, or I have to take the next day off work, because I know for a fact I'm just going to end up drunk. [m, 20, Int16]

I don't drink, really, unless I'm on a night out but I have… I go and play golf in the summer, I will go to the beer garden and I'd have one pint of Fosters; I enjoy the taste of the lager, the beer; lager beer. But spirits, no. I'd never drink one just to chill out, just enjoying it, like. Sometimes, well, if I'm on holiday by the pool, like, a nice lager in the sun, but I would never have, like, a drink, a spirit. I only drink them just to get me drunk, like. [m, 21, Int10]

Most of the time whenever I drink I get drunk, to be honest. I mean, occasionally we go out and have

just like one or two pints but that doesn't happen that often, to be honest. [m, 20, Int17]

I like drinking more if I'm going out, rather than just drinking in the house socially. […] I'm not a lover of alcohol. I like it for more the social side of going out, but I wouldn't really chose to drink it… [f, 19, Int02]

Drinking with food was particularly unpopular among this group, with the idea that an alcoholic drink would ruin one's food being mentioned by a number of participants:

I can't drink alcohol with food. […] I don't like mixing them. I like enjoying my food, and I wouldn't enjoy my food if I had that with it. [m, 20, Int16]

I drink to get drunk, I think, mainly, because I wouldn't like have a drink with my dinner or anything, I'd just… Because I don't know… I don't really like the taste that much like to think that it's nice to have with dinner or something. I just drink it because I want to get drunk and go out and stuff. [f, 18, Int40]

The strength of the connection between drinking and getting drunk in some participants' minds is illustrated by the following exchange, in which the gap between the interviewer's and interviewee's conception of what it might mean to drink with food comes to the fore:

Mod Do you ever drink with food?
No, not really. I mean, if I'm out… Every now and then if I'm ordering pizza with a few friends I might have a few drinks but not really too much. We all focused now we've got food there, we, kind of, want to enjoy our food not get drunk, in a sense.
Mod Yes, but could you not have drinks without getting drunk?
What do you mean, drinks, like getting drunk?
Mod Well, I mean…
Do you mean around people…
Mod A lot of people, other people… For instance, there are probably from, say, from my generation, it's quite common to have food and to have a glass of wine with it.
Ah, see, that's never appealed to me. I don't do that. I prefer… If I'm out or maybe if I fancy a drink if I'm in restaurant, I might order one or two, but I'd always prefer to just have had, like, a soft drink, and I think I enjoy my food a bit more if I have soft drink as opposed to getting drunk. [m, 19, Int43]

In some instances, participants went so far as to argue that drinking if one was not getting drunk was a waste of alcohol:

I don't really see the point in drinking if you're not going to get drunk, if you see what I mean. I don't really – I do enjoy drinking but I prefer a cup of coke than a cup of beer, like, with my food. […] I wouldn't just sit there and have one vodka. I just think there's no point. [f, 20, Int04]

The majority of the time, like, if we were just going to have one drink, we wouldn't bother, because we'd think, we may as well save the vodka, because obviously it all costs money, we may as well save the vodka until we go out. So, if we go out properly, then we can have another drink when we go out, rather than just waste one drink now. [f, 19, Int03]

The idea that drinking is wasted if not in the context of getting drunk has been observed in a number of previous studies. For instance, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) provide examples of similar views in their participants. Indeed the observation has a long history, as Szmigin et al. (2008) note, 'Brain and Parker (1997) refer to the economic rationalisation or 'equation' young people make, that to drink and not get drunk would be a waste of money; alcohol is consumed specifically for its psychoactive properties'.

An indication of the prevalence of this relationship with alcohol (which surely goes some way to explaining the pattern of drinking a lot on a few nights and nothing on other nights: see **§3.1**) is provided by responses to a statement in the TGI database: 'The point of drinking is to get drunk'. As **Table 11** below indicates, 1 in 5 of 18 to 24 year olds agree with this statement, with agreement declining as people get older.

Table 11: 'The point of drinking is to get drunk', by age

	18–20	21–24	25–29	30–34	All 18+
The point of drinking is to get drunk	21%	22%	17%	14%	9%

Source: GB TGI 2013 Q2 (Jan 2012–Dec2012), Kantar Media UK Ltd.
Base: all (18–20: 640; 21–24: 1,127; 25–29: 1,248; 30–34: 1,518; all 18+: 23,593).

Even if we look only at the 'definitely agree' responses, we still find 6% of 18 to 20 and 21 to 24 year olds, together with 4% of 25 to 29 and 30 to 34 year olds, definitely agreeing that 'the point of drinking is to get drunk'. To put this another way, around one in twenty people aged 18 to 34 take the view that alcoholic drinks are first and foremost the delivery mechanism for a psychoactive drug.[32]

9.3 Instrumental drinking practices

The use of alcoholic drinks with the primary purpose of getting drunk is reflected in a number of practices reported by our participants regarding the selection and consumption of drinks.

Units per pence

The first of these is the practice of choosing drinks on the basis of how much bang you get for your buck – or what one participant described as a 'units per pence' calculation:

That's how you work out, when you're buying beer now, you work out units per pence of what to buy. […] So you know what…how much you're going to spend per unit, so you try and get the cheapest thing that's going to get you the drunkest. [m, 21, Int39]

If we pre-drink everyone buys the cheapest bottle of wine and just drinks it regardless of what it tastes like particularly. [f, 20, Int42]

32 Note that it is possible that some of these people are not themselves drinking. For instance, it is possible that some people do not drink precisely because they see alcohol as a drug.

I used to drink vodka all the time because vodka is really cheap when you go out so if there's an offer on, vodka is always included in it. [f, 25, Int20]

Vodka, that's yes, I drink that because it's cheap. In most places they'll do vodka for £1, so yes, we tend to have vodka. [m, 25, Int31]

You know, the WKDs, and the Smirnoff Ice type drinks. They are horrible, just sugar. I think [I drank them] because they were just half the price, at the time, yes. I'm not sure why. […] I hate alcopops. I mean I did even when I was younger, but it was just because it was cheap. [m, 29, Int34]

If I've got a certain amount of money to go out because I know, like, I go out a few nights out over the month, I'll be like, I need to drink something stronger and that's when you go, like, well I'll skip that and go straight to the hard stuff. [...] You go out a bit later and then drink stronger stuff to save money. [m, 21–24, WSB]

Not surprisingly, this kind of calculation can also weigh heavily in the selection of venues:

There was this particular bar in town which does big jugs for £5 so we'd sometimes go there. It's not a very nice bar but you would go, put up with it for 20 minutes to try and share the jug, and then leave. [f, 27, Int23]

That's why people love going there. It's like, oh, it's cheap trebles. Yes, but they're horrible and they get me too drunk. [f, 25, Int20]

The last participant quoted above even went on to muse that, rationally, it would make sense for her to set out to reduce her tolerance to alcohol, just so that she could get drunk more cheaply:

If I don't drink as much… if I stop drinking as much then it would take us less to get drunk, then I won't spend as much money. But then it would be good because I'm still drunk.
Mod Run that past me again.
Right, so if I start drinking less then my body will not be used to it, so then when I do drink I'll get drunk quicker on less drink and I'll not spend as much money and I'll be drunk on less drink. [f, 25, Int20]

Alcohol concentration

Cost, however, is not the only issue. Alcohol concentration is also an important factor: the weaker a drink is, the more one has to drink to get drunk, and the more one therefore runs the risk of getting bloated:

Yes, pre-drinking would be vodka, Pimm's, some wine maybe, and the Bulmers, then we'll go out to a pub and again it will be Bulmers, WKDs, and then by the time we're in town, it's got to be spirits by the time you're in town, else you get all bloated. [m, 25, Int31]

[Vodka and coke is a favourite drink] just because it was easiest to drink, because I've always thought – with lagers and beers – they're quite gassy and you can't really, especially for games like ring of fire where you need to drink quite a lot in a short amount of time – it's just easy to drink. It's like drinking coke with a bit of alcohol, whereas lager

is really gassy, you know, it makes you feel a bit bloated. So that was why I drunk that. [m, 25, Int32]

m1 I always have to pee too much.
m2 After like four pints, use the toilet all the time.
m1 I get on the shorts, shots and shorts. [m, 21–24, WSB]

I still drink Blue WKDs. […] They're cheap, they're nice, they're really easy to drink. You don't get all bloated on them, so you can just keep drinking them all night. Yes, I think that's it really. You can just drink and drink and drink. I'm painting a really bad picture of myself! [m, 25, Int31]

When it comes to concentration, however, there is a tradeoff to be made. More concentrated drinks, and shots and neat spirits in particular, were described as an excellent way to consume a swift dose of alcohol, to 'take it to a next level':

A shot is guaranteed, for me, to take it to a next level. Say… it's like… I almost see it as in, like, levels. You're this drunk, this drunk, this drunk, this drunk… until obviously you're so drunk you pass out. But, like, it might take you a while, if you're drinking a drink, to sort of go up, but a shot… take that. Within a couple of seconds, you're… so if you just keep taking shots. [m, 24, Int07]

Once you're in the clubs you want… you just have smaller drinks, really; I suppose it gets you drunk a bit quicker. I mean, like, smaller in size but more alcohol and stuff. [m, 19, Int37]

[I always drink vodka] Because it gets… it just gets me drunk quicker. […] Because downing wine would make me feel sick, shots aren't really strong enough, even Stella, but, no, vodka, I can just, say, put, like, that much fruit juice in, so you can't really taste it as bad. [f, 24, Int29]

[The purpose of shots is] to get drunk quicker, basically. [m, 19, Int43]

Because it takes longer to consume the same quantity of alcohol, by contrast, less concentrated drinks are useful for pacing one's consumption, or maintaining a level of drunkenness already achieved:

[I avoid vodka because] There's the taste and I basically get drunk too quick. I like to pace… I try my best to pace myself basically that's why I always try my best just to drink Fosters, like, lager. [m, 20, Int17]

We'd drink shots as well but the Budweisers were kind of just the maintenance drink. If you've always got one in your hand, you'll stay pissed for the rest of the night, kind of thing. [m, 24, Int07]

I'd always go for a beer [in a pub]. […] It does last longer [than a vodka lemonade] as well, but they're sort of, the same price, you get to…so you have less of them, so the money thing again as well. Rather than just having a small drink and drinking it quickly and then you like, need another one. Beer can last you sort of, two or three times as long, so… [m, 21, Int39]

In the earlier part of the evening, the critical factor in the choice of more or less concentrated drinks may be a simple one of how much time one has to reach a desired state of drunkenness:

[We'd move from lager to shots because] you're looking at your watch thinking well we need to be in the [Club] in an hour and I'm still sober, you know, so that generally was quite a lot of the push, I think, to get drunk quickly before we get to the [Club] or before we get in wherever. [m, 29, Int33]

Stella, like, probably at the weekend because we could have longer to drink, obviously, so… well, if it was from seven to ten on a week day, we just used to drink, like, vodka really quick because it gets you drunk quicker. [f, 21, Int27]

Even this consumption needs to be managed, however, with a view to being able to stay the course for what may be a long night:

Obviously you don't want to be drinking absolutely loads at the beginning because then you're not going to be still going by then when everyone's still going. [m, 21–24, WSI]

At the other end of the spectrum, less concentrated drinks may sometimes be deployed when a person feels they are getting too drunk, as a way of slowing down.[33] The logical extreme of this practice is to drink something with no alcohol content at all – a practice described by a few of our participants:

I know that as well, like I drink and drink and then I know when I'm getting too drunk and then I will go and order, like, just get a water and then start drinking again. Water and then vodka but at least it's something. [f, 21–24, WSH]

Some participants even thought that drinking water might throw the process of getting drunk into reverse – or at least seemed to do so.

Basically, I think water helps sober up. I don't know if it's real or not, but for me it's, sort of… maybe it's a placebo effect, I don't know, but for me I start… when I want to stop drinking I start drinking water because it helps me sober up a lot quicker, and then if anyone's got any bread I'll start on a bit of bread. You know, I deliberately start taking measures to sober myself up. [m, 19, Int43]

I know it's psychological, but you seem to sober up when you drink a lot of water. [f, 21–24, WSD]

Research with 18 to 24 year olds undertaken for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013) provides some interesting further insight here. Participants were asked whether they had ever tried various tactics to control their drinking and avoid getting drunk, with one of the possible responses being 'I could never see myself doing this'. **Table 12** *overleaf* compares the responses of Regular, Occasional and Never Intentionals (see **§3.4**) for two of these tactics: drinking lower alcohol drinks, and avoiding drinking shots.

33 Water is also drunk after a drunken night out because it is believed to reduce hangover symptoms. One participant even argued it would reduce damage to his liver: 'I do drink a lot of pints of water when I get in. I try and get at least two litres but I always thought that if you've got a lot of vodka inside of you, that it helps to dilute it and like make it thinner, so when it's going through your liver then it's not as strong. If it was say 40%, it's now 20% because you've drunk two litres of water. I always thought that, and I've never wake up really with a bad hangover when I've drunk loads of water.' [m, 21–24, WSI]

Table 12: I could never see myself doing this', by intention to get drunk

	Regular Intentionals	Occasional Intentionals	Never Intentionals
Avoid drinking shots	32%	14%	15%
Drink lower alcohol drinks	29%	26%	25%

Source: Ipsos MORI (2013).
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year (RI: 100; OI: 309; NI: 231).

Regular Intentionals are much more resistant to the idea of avoiding shots. This, we hypothesise, is because shots are a vital component of the instrumental drinker's arsenal, the ideal way to get to the next level of drunkenness. Avoiding shots is much more problematic for an instrumental drinker. By contrast, there is no difference between the three groups with respect to drinking lower alcohol drinks. This is a perfectly satisfactory strategy for an instrumental drinker, one way to pace yourself (having used shots to get up a level). Resistance to this tactic is presumably based on other factors, such as personal taste.

Differences are also apparent in the drinks preferences of Regular Intentionals. In a typical week they are significantly more likely to drink spirits (with a mixer or neat), cocktails and alcopops – see **Table 13** below. By contrast, the choice of lager, cider, wine, other beer or ale or champagne appears to be unrelated to intentions to get drunk.

As noted in **§3.5**, however, drinks choices are also highly gendered. Of the drinks in **Table 11**, spirits with mixers, cocktails and alcopops are also much more popular among women. Only shots are equally common among men and women.

Table 13: Drinks drunk in a typical week, by intention to get drunk

	Regular Intentionals	Occasional Intentionals	Never Intentionals
Spirits (with a mixer)	64%	48%	33%
Spirits (as shot/on own)	28%	21%	12%
Cocktails	25%	18%	11%
Alcopops	24%	16%	11%

Source: Ipsos MORI (2013).
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a week (RI: 76; OI: 225; NI: 105). Note small base size for RIs.

Other instrumental practices

Alongside cost and concentration, a number of other practices were mentioned by participants which reflect their instrumental use of alcoholic drinks as a means to get drunk. For example, a few participants mentioned mixing drinks as a deliberate tactic to get drunk more quickly (whether it actually works is another question, beyond the scope of this report):

Mix your drinks and it makes you… hits you better. […] I have that mix because I know that gets me drunk; and I only take about 30-odd quid out; so I know I can get drunk off that, and that's my night, like. [m, 21, Int10]

If you mix your drinks you get drunk quicker. […] I've learnt from experience with that; I know all the tricks of the trade. [f, 22, Int28]

Another way of getting drunk more quickly and maximising the bang for your buck is to avoid eating before going out – the 'eating is cheating' rule:

I went out with my brother one weekend and he's on the rugby team, and they're like: eating is cheating. It was like oh, what do I do with this, and I had eaten, so it looked like… I just didn't claim to have eaten. So I was like I'm more sober than all you rugby lads, but that's just because they hadn't eaten for about 12 hours and I had dinner. [m, 25, Int31]

Sometimes you have the kind of eating is cheating where you're like I'm not going to, like, I don't know, have to spend more money if I have to drink more because I've had a big, heavy dinner before I go out. [f, 21–24, WSH]

Well, we say, they use… eating's cheating. So whenever we're drinking we don't eat, but if we go on a night out or drink we eat at the very end of the night when everybody's had a night out or… And it usually makes us feel a bit better. [f, 19, Int02]

As the last quotation above indicates, while people may choose not to eat before a drunken night out, in order to get more drunk for less money, they invariably eat at the end of the night. Food consumption such as this also features in strategies to manage one of the negative consequences of drunkenness – the hangover. Water may also be drunk as part of a hangover management strategy:

I hate hangovers. But usually I don't get… If I have food at the end of the night, and a good night's… Well, not a good night's sleep but a certain amount of hours, I can wake up and feel fine. But if I feel as if… If I've been drinking all night and then wake up and haven't had nothing to eat, I feel really… I don't know, I feel a bit sick and then I can have headache as well if I haven't had… if I only have a few hours' sleep, I wake up feeling really rough. [f, 19, Int02]

If I was to go out, say, on Saturday, and I was doing a shift at work, I'd drink water all day at work, thinking I'm going to be all right, and I'll have my tea, and I'll be fine. You know what I mean, I could drink as much as I want. I've got it off to a tee. I'll be all right. But you know, you never know. [f, 25, Int21]

The tactical chunder

Perhaps the strangest of the drinking practices described by participants, however, is the 'tactical chunder' – deliberately vomiting so that one can carry on drinking.

To start with, it is worth noting that, while none of our participants liked vomiting (or watching other people vomit), doing so was treated as a very normal part of a night out and one that had little impact on whether one carried on drinking:

We didn't really care at the weekend, so, if you're going to drink and if you're going to be sick, there's a toilet there. [f, 24, Int29]

I've been sick times when, I've been sick and then thought oh, I'm fine now, I'm all right, and I have been all right. But then there's been times when I've been sick, I think oh, I'm all right. And then I'm not, I'm back again, being sick. [f, 25, Int21]

The phrase 'tactical chunder' describes just such an instance of vomiting which allows one to get back to drinking again, and which may or may not be deliberate:

I mean obviously if you feel like you need it, it's still a tactical one because you're doing it rather than going home, you're doing it there and then carrying on but, yes, obviously some people will deliberately make themselves, because they'll feel like if I don't do it now I'm going to end up either getting too drunk or vomiting in the club or something like that, you know, but, no, it doesn't have to be intentional to be a tactical one as long as it is tactical rather than all over the place. The idea is you go to the toilet, be sick and then you come back and carry on. [m, 21, Int44]

m1 *Tactical spew, isn't it?*
m2 *Yes, plan your tactical spews. [m, 21–24, WSB]*

We describe this practice as strange because, on closer inspection, it does not actually make much sense – at least not from the rational, instrumental perspective we are adopting in this chapter. If the only reason for drinking is to get drunk, and one seeks to do so at minimum cost, then it is hard to understand the value of expelling the alcohol already in one's stomach so that one can replace it with more.

9.4 Why do people get drunk?

The purpose of drinking during a drunken night out, we have argued, is to get drunk. This, however, invites a further question: why get drunk?

For many of our participants, the answer to this question lay in a perceived connection between the effects of alcohol and the benefits of a drunken night out – escape, bonding and belonging, social adventures and stories. Being drunk, they argued gives you the confidence to engage in the behaviours that bring these benefits – and dampens the self-consciousness that might otherwise hold you back. In particular, the effects of alcohol make you willing and able to:

- ***Dance***

  I wouldn't even dream of dancing at anything if I wasn't… if I hadn't had a drink. […] You're

more conscious of your actions, aren't you, when you haven't had a drink? [f, 28, Int24]

It's just that it gives you a confidence boost, you feel like you can probably dance stupidly, like you wouldn't do if you didn't have a drink. [m, 21–24, WSI]

- ***Bond as a group***

If we weren't getting on originally, everyone is drinking and you have a good time. All we have to is get drinking, and we're having a laugh. [m, 18–20, WSC]

When you are with a group of friends having a drink, I think it loosens you up a bit, and especially if you go out with work friends, you tend to find before it's over, like if we go out for lunch or whatever, we're just moaning about work. Again with uni, if we go for lunch we're moaning about uni, and if we go out and have a drink, we just sort of have a nice night. [m, 25, Int31]

I don't think it would work as well without the whole drinking thing because people are at first… I mean now like I said now I can just walk across I could walk around in front of the boys naked I wouldn't give a fuck and it wouldn't be an issue, but at first I think the freshers need the whole getting really drunk to do the silly shit that they then learn to love and at the time you think, oh God I'm so embarrassed. [m, 21, Int44]

- ***Approach strangers***

You wouldn't just go to a bar sober and go over and speak to people we don't know. [f, 20, Int04]

I don't know why, but I think I can think of stuff to talk about easier with people, especially people who I don't know very well, than people… when I'm sober, I find it very hard to talk to people like, you know, acquaintances, people that you don't know very well; to strike up a conversation with them when you're sober. But when you've had a couple of drinks, you seem to talk about everything under the sun. Which is funny. [m, 24, Int11]

I wouldn't just walk up to random girl in a club and speak to her. But when they're drunk you just speak to anyone. Then you wake up the next day with some random girl's number in your phone. Like, who's she? But she was a lesbian. Not just girls, boys as well. Like, I'd never just randomly dance with a boy when you're sober. But when you're drunk, you just… [f, 18–20, WSA]

You lose your inhibitions. So where you would have, sort of before, been like, no, it's not worth having a fight to the blokes, or I don't want to talk to her, she's, I'm a bit shy to talk to her, once you've had a drink, it's just not shy anymore. No-one's shy when they're drunk. [m, 24, Int07]

- ***Respond positively to approaches from strangers***

  When you're drunk it's the best time to meet new people – they tell you things about themselves they wouldn't otherwise. [WSE. f]

  It's easier to pull the girls when you… when they're drinking, as well. [m, 21, Int10]

  I think when I've had a drink I get more confident as in dancing and if someone spoke to me I'd speak to them and I tend to have more of a good night when I've had a drink. [f, 20, Int05]

In summary, being drunk was presented by our participants as the essential ingredient that enables you to escape into your drunken night out identity and do things that you would not otherwise do:

People open up more, don't they, and they're more willing to come out of their comfort zone when they've had a drink. I think if everyone was… didn't… if everyone was out and didn't fit in their comfort zone, everyone would just sort of be sat around. Because people, a lot of people are shy without having a drink, aren't they? So, sometimes you don't really see the real person unless they've had a drink. [m, 24, Int07]

A lot of things I do drunk I wouldn't do sober. […] Like I would never just go on a dance floor and start dancing, or speak to people I don't know. [f, 18–20, WSA]

I personally have such a great time when I'm on that… on that drunk stage. I'm an actually quite happy person but when I drink alcohol it seems to bring out the confidence in me and that excitement of being… kind of like, being a child again, like… and I don't really care… sometimes don't really care when I get to that drinking stage. I can go out with my friends, I can look silly, or I can look as nice… think I look as nice as I am. Probably not as nice as I am actually but… I think, give me that confidence, and I like having that confidence. [f, 20, Int47]

When they were not drunk, by contrast, participants described how self-consciousness and a lack of confidence prevented them from accessing the benefits of a drunken night out:

I could never have a good time out in town if I wasn't drunk because I would feel really self-conscious and I wouldn't want to dance or anything like that and I just used to have a rubbish time unless I'd had enough to drink that I felt confident. [f, 23, Int25]

It was just awful. I felt like I wasn't fun, I wasn't this, I wasn't, because it had always been about getting drunk and everybody having a giggle because you do something stupid. [m, 29, Int35]

When I'm completely sober, and I get really like anxious and paranoid then. I'm like, oh God, loads of people are looking at me, when I'm sober. But then, when I, when I'm actually drunk then, it's kind of just like I'm in my own little world. [f, 18–20, WSA]

I think you let your inhibitions down, sort of thing, when you're drunk so you can have more of a

laugh, whereas if you're not drinking you're sort of conscious about what you're doing so it's not as fun to be in the pub then. [m, 25, Int32]

This analysis of the value of drunkenness is also supported by research with 18 to 24 year olds undertaken for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013). Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**) were more likely than Occasional Intentionals, and Occasional Intentionals more likely than Never Intentionals, to agree that 'Drinking gives me the confidence I need to meet people and make friends',[34] and that 'Spending time with my friends is more fun when I'm drunk than when I'm sober'.[35] Women were also more likely than men to agree with the first of these statements.[36]

9.5 The downsides of drunkenness

The value of drunkenness lies in a perceived connection between the effects of alcohol and the benefits of a drunken night out – escape, bonding and belonging, social adventures and stories. When drunk, you do things you might not otherwise do.

Drunkenness, however, is a two-edged sword. The things you might not otherwise do include things that, even in the context of a drunken night out, you really ought not to do. Alcohol makes you less likely to think twice, and less likely to stop yourself doing stupid things:

I will just do and say anything I want when I'm drunk. […] I just have a don't give a monkey's attitude when I'm out. It's a bit bad, really. [f, 22, Int28]

Because when you're drinking you're like, yes, this is so fun, and you don't think about the consequences. That's another thing about being drunk that's really bad, you do things and don't think about the consequences. [f, 25, Int20]

Things that shouldn't be said, wouldn't be said if people weren't drunk. I think things come out more when you're drunk. [f, 19, Int03]

I think some people don't know they are making the choice. It sounds silly but I think you go into autopilot and your brain – nice, normal people turn crazy when they've had a drink. When I've had too much I'm a different person completely so I don't think they are consciously thinking about their choices. I think their brains are making choices for them or the alcohol is. [f, 21–24, WSD]

Not surprisingly, there was some ambivalence in attitudes here. The risk of overstepping the mark is in tension with the desire, in the context of a drunken night out, to do things you wouldn't normally do:

I think that people drink so that they don't act sober. So… I don't know. I mean, there are still limits, but I just think, like, it doesn't really matter because when you're drunk, you're drunk; you don't want to be acting sober. Do you know what I mean? […] You don't want to be all over the place, do you, and things are still inappropriate and things, but I just think sometimes it is an excuse; you would do things because you're drunk that you wouldn't do when you're sober; and then the next day when you

34 62% of RIs agreed, vs 45% of OIs and 19% of NIs (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).
35 42% of RIs agreed, vs 28% of OIs and 7% of NIs (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).
36 44% of women agreed, vs 31% of men (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).

talk about things, you are a bit like, oh, yes, god, I did that, but it's not always so bad. [f, 18–20, WSJ]

It's part of it. The banter you have with girls maybe you wouldn't say it when you're sober. But as you've both been drinking, maybe some of the stuff you'd do or say, you wouldn't say it. [m, 18–20, WSC]

Given the inherent ambivalence in terms like 'embarrassing' (see **§7.3**), and the power of stories to turn bad experiences into good ones (**§7.2**), it was sometimes hard to know whether expressed negatives were actually negatives at all:

When you drink you get paranoid. Shit, what did I say last night? What did I do last night? [m, 18–20, WSC]

I always do something embarrassing, always, coz my inhibitions just disappear and it, it's usually sexual. I mean, if you said to me now, go and have sex in that doorway I'd just say no you're absolutely mad, but when I'm drunk I'm just like yeah alright then, that's fine. That's a bit embarrassing isn't it? It is really interesting though for me to think about it. [f, 22, Int28]

Overstepping the mark was more likely to be presented as an unambivalent negative when it was done by someone else – for instance, another member of one's group of friends. Note, for example, how the following quotations shift to the third person as more negative behaviour is considered:

My friends laugh at me when I'm extremely drunk and I don't mind then. But it's when something happens, like, somebody gets upset, or somebody's really ill or we have to take somebody home and you're worried that they're not going to be okay. […] People argue, or, like, we see some of our friends getting into fights, more boys than girls. That turns it into not such a good night out. [f, 19, Int03]

You do stupid things when you're drunk, arguing, like someone cheats on their boyfriend or whatever. Some people can turn nasty and say horrible things when they're drunk. [f, 20, Int04]

Fighting

In **§6.2**, we presented an explanation of fighting in terms of people who want to fight, independently of the effects of alcohol. This, however, was only one of two distinct types of explanation of fighting offered by participants. A second type of explanation focuses on the way in which alcohol makes you less likely to think twice, and less likely to stop yourself doing stupid things.

For example, an incident may begin with saying something that they ought not to say, or to someone you ought not say it to:

Just… it's just being so drunk and not caring that you just… saying, like… saying… obviously, when you're with your mates, you can say some diabolical stuff to them, and because it's your mate, it's just banter. But then you kind of… after a few drinks, I think we forget they're not actually our mates, we shouldn't really actually say these things to them. It never tends to cause trouble or anything, but there is a bit of a who you talking to kind of… and then we just laugh and disappear. [m, 24, Int07]

Sometimes you say stuff that you don't really mean, like if you're in town and you accidentally call someone a name and you end up having an argument. That's something, to be fair, if you were sober would never happen. And a lot of the time if you're just having a good night and someone's really, really drunk and they start, you know, having a go at you for no reason. I mean, to be fair, they're probably a lovely person if they hadn't had a drink, but some people they go a bit loopy at times. [m, 20, Int17]

Or it may start with an over-reaction to something accidental – like a spilled drink or stepped-on foot – with effects of alcohol making a person less likely regulate their response:[37]

You may say things that you might not say when you're sober, like even if it's things like say someone stepped on your foot, you come across like you shouldn't. [f, 18–20, WSA]

I think it was a bit of a tussle at the bar for position, drinks get spilled, someone gets pushed, you know, invariably it's because everyone is drunk. If they weren't drunk they probably could have dealt with it a lot more civilly. [m, 29, Int33]

Fighting is a scary thing but when you've had a few drinks it's a lot easier to, and it's a lot easier to flip as well. [m, 21, Int45]

By contrast, when sober, one is more likely to think twice and react in a more measured way:

I went out quite late, so I was sober when I went out because I went out at the last minute, and I was in a place five minutes and somebody had spilled a full drink all down me, like, from here right down to the bottom of my legs. And if I was drunk, I'd have probably caused a big drama about that, like shouting and bawling at them, and I was just, ah, the place is mobbed, she can't help it like, and just ignored it. She said sorry and that was it, but I know if I was drunk it would never be the end of it. [f, 21–24, WSH]

The combination of these two factors – a tendency for one party to say things they should not, and a tendency for the other party to fail to regulate their responses – can lead to rapid escalation. This can sometimes happen within the group, but is particularly problematic with strangers, with whom the boundaries of banter are less defined:

Oh, just the, kind of, mouths on them, some of them, so they would be cheeky, and one of them has got a right temper, so he would usually… he'd cause more damage to himself, usually, than he would anybody else. […] Put his friend through a window, once. [f, 25, Int19]

It's sort of you know your boundaries with your friends as well, isn't it, you know how far to push them, like with a complete stranger then the littlest thing can set them off. [m, 21–24, WSB]

Once an altercation has started, friends may also get involved. If they are sober enough, this may be

37 Some participants, however, noted that alcohol can also make you less likely to react to such stimuli: 'it's just how you notice it, people, you know, when you're drunk, if someone stands on your foot once or twice, you know, you can, kind of, brush it off, but when you haven't had a drink, you know'. [f, 25, Int19] Over-reaction may in reality be a result not only of poor regulation of behaviour, but also alcohol expectancies: see **§1.6**.

to try to defuse the situation (see **§6.3**). If they fail to regulate their own responses, it may be to join the fray:

If I saw one of my friends get hit, I'd probably hit someone back. [f, 19, Int03]

You defend your friends as well when you're out. If someone's in trouble or they're getting arrested I think you sort of become… like try and be the bigger person like and you like try and get him away, like, and you can sort of hinder yourself as well. [m, 21–24, WSB]

The upshot of this process of escalation can be a bar-room brawl – or, in many cases, a brawl outside the bar.

People get into fights outside a club at university, they've been a bit of a… they have problems inside the club, because of drink directly, which turned into a brawl outside with like 17 people or something like that. [m, 29, Int33]

Escalation of this kind was explicitly contrasted with situations in which people are actively looking for a fight – the kind of explanation reviewed in **§6.2**:

It'll be something stupid, like you'll be on the dance floor and someone, because it's all rammed in the club, someone will push you and then people turn round and push you and then, you know, it escalates. Or spilling a drink – one of the girls is too drunk and spilt a drink on another girl so then she starts and then we all get involved, sort of thing. It's just a lot of things like that. […] I just always stick up for my friends. […] Obviously there's been times when I've been stupid and turned round and pushed someone because they've bumped into me, but, like, I wouldn't say it's really violent fights. It'd just be pushing each other back and forth and then the bouncers will come over and split everyone and throw one of you out anyway. You don't, like, go out battering people or anything. You don't really go out looking for fights, whereas some people do. […] Like, some people will literally just start on you for no reason, like, people will go out and be, I fancy a fight tonight. [f, 20, Int04]

Alcohol and bad behaviour

The existence of different accounts of fighting reflects a deeper pattern in the explanations offered by participants of non-consensual interactions more widely – situations in which people go further in interactions than the other participant wishes. As noted in **§6.3**, three broad classes of explanation for this kind of bad behaviour can be identified in the accounts of participants. These explain the behaviour of the perpetrator in terms of:

- The perpetrator him/herself
- Lack of clear boundaries
- Alcohol

The escalation model of fighting provides an example of the third of these types of explanation. The issue is not that the perpetrator is a bad person with bad intentions. Nor is there a lack of boundaries: the perpetrator may subsequently recognise that, even in the context of a drunken night out, they really ought not to have done what they did. The issue is that, under the influence of alcohol, the perpetrator fails to think twice and recognise the boundary they are about to cross. They fail to self-regulate their own behaviour.

In practice, explanations in terms of alcohol were often combined with explanations in terms of a lack of clear boundaries:

I would just be walking through a shopping centre, shopping, and a boy pinched my bum. Why did he do it? Because he's got alcohol. [f, 18–20, WSA]

A hybrid explanation linking perpetrators to alcohol also exists: the so-called bad drunk, who becomes a bad person under the influence of alcohol:

It's not when they've just had a drink, it's like when they get really drunk, they just act completely different to when they're sober, you know what I mean. […] I know a few people who are like when they get really, really drunk, like, they get aggressive and just, you know, try to start trouble. [m, 20, Int17]

Alcohol, I think there's either good drunks or bad drunks. Like some of my mates are so bad when they're drunk, like they will just… they're just nobs, basically. And then there are others that are all right no matter how drunk they are. So I just think, plain and simple, there are what I call good drunks and bad drunks. […] Well, maybe not good drunks because no-one is really good, but there're people that are really bad when they're drunk. [m, 21–24, WSI]

In some cases, participants were uncertain which of the three kinds of explanation (perpetrator, lack of clear boundaries, alcohol) accounted for the bad behaviour they saw in other people:

I think there was a phase I remember of always worrying there's going to be a punch up in the pubs because they were getting more and more violent and there was always some sort of confrontation. […] It may have been us, it may have been that we were just drunk and obnoxious, but I think largely everybody is drunk and obnoxious and anything is going to spark a fight really. […] Whether that's bravado, you know, drink is bringing on the bravado, or whether they're out of control or they don't know what they're saying, I don't know what element it is, but yes, I suppose it's the drinking probably yes. [m, 29, Int33]

As this last quotation illustrates, however, such uncertainty usually resolved into a conclusion that 'I suppose it's the drinking'. While all three types of explanation exist in parallel, alcohol provides a sort of default explanation for all but the most serious kinds of bad behaviour (these, as noted in **§6.3**, are more likely to be explained in terms of bad people).

There was a clear tendency to see the risk of bad behaviour associated with alcohol as something one just had to accept, an *unavoidable downside* of – in this case – the use of alcohol to gain access to the benefits of a drunken night out:

That's the risk you take when you drink […] Well, you're going to do silly things sometimes when you drink; it just happens. [f, 18–20, WSJ]

When you get drunk you're much more likely to cry, you're much more likely to make friends with someone who you didn't like before but it was all a misunderstanding. All those sort of things

happen because people lose their inhibitions and just get a bit more raw and open and it does have really negative consequences, okay, kids fighting but obviously, it has positive ones as well like, you know, people declaring their love for each other and all that sort of thing but, yes, I think alcohol was key to it. I don't think it was in any way an aside for it. [m, 21, Int44]

Obviously we'd have worse off nights, like, because we'd get into fights and stuff in town because everyone's drunk and, you know, stuff just happens. [f, 20, Int04]

Explanation or excuse?

There was one crucial difference in the way the three explanations of bad behaviour were used in practice. Explanations in terms of the perpetrator or a lack of clear boundaries were invariably used to explain the bad behaviour of other people. None of our participants described themselves as being either intentionally seeking non-consensual interactions, or mistaken about where the boundaries of behaviour lay.

Alcohol, by contrast, could be invoked in the explanation both of other people's bad behaviour and of one's own:

I've never been… I think I might have been put in handcuffs and stuff but it's only… it's not me personally fighting, just people fighting and me having to get involved. [m, 21–24, WSI]

I'm not, obviously I'm not into that at all, I didn't, you know, I've never been involved in a fight or anything, but, you know, I saw, kind of, things happen, and stuff, and you look back at it, and you think, you know, God, that was a bit wrong. Don't get me wrong, we would never, ever… you know, our group, we never started any trouble, and they didn't… these were really good lads, they didn't. Then equally they didn't shy away from that either. If they saw something happening, or if somebody did say something to them, or something, then they were, kind of, more than happy to get involved. You know, I'd always, you know, take a back seat and fight… I wouldn't, I was nothing compared to them, but, you know, they… yes, so, you know, looking back at it, you think, you know, that's not, you know, some of those nights were quite messy. [m, 29, Int36]

The following excerpt provides an interesting example of a group working together to position their own sexual transgressions as the effects of alcohol, still conducted within boundaries, while clearly positioning sexual assault as the bad behaviour of bad people:

m1 Blanking out, and you get drunk and then obviously you get… I wouldn't say more sexually aggressive but, if you know what I mean…
m2 A bit more on it, like.
m1 Yes. But then you get… I've been drunk and I remember, as I said, you black out, I can remember just being pushed by a girl and thinking, well, I'm off out of here.
m2 Yes, that's it, if a girl's not interested it's just…
m1 I'm out, yes.
m3 Move on to someone else.
m1 Especially if you're in a club situation it's quite hard to rape a girl, to be honest. If you're in a

massive club and it's like, oh, I'm going to rape that girl over there, I think the act of rape is… you've got to like follow someone into a secluded dark place where no-one else will be.
m2 It would be hard to do that drunk. It would be hard sober let alone…
m1 So, I think the sober ones wait for the drunk ones. [m, 21–24, WSB]

The quotations above are clearly moving in the direction of not only explaining behaviour in terms of alcohol, but also excusing it:

I put drinking lots and lots [as what makes a good night out]. I put drinking and I thought that wouldn't be enough so I put 'lots and lots' on the end. To the point where you don't know what's going on. To the point when you can't remember. Ignorance is bliss isn't it? If you don't know what has gone on, you're not responsible for it. [m, 18–20, WSC]

The above comment was at least partly tongue in cheek; but the pattern of people excusing their behaviour on the grounds that they were drunk was noted – and resented – by a number of participants:

A lot of people will say 'oh well, it doesn't matter because I was drunk'. Like, they blame being drunk for their actions. [f, 18–20, WSA]

I think we're all familiar with the fact of waking up and regretting something, but it's the people who just use everything they do, like violence, drugs, sex, everything that's just out of order… they blame drink when it's not really… you might not know what you were doing at the time, but… [f, 21–24, WSH]

Attitudes to the use of alcohol as an excuse were varied, and often ambivalent. As noted above, alcohol is prized precisely because it is linked to doing things one would not do otherwise. It provides the excuse for the things you really want to do, as well as the things you later regret – or the things other people do that you wish they had not.

There were two key points of debate here: a causal and a moral question. First, the causal question: does drinking alcohol ever make one so drunk that one really could not have thought twice and regulated one's behaviour? If one believes that it does, then there is a sense in which bad behaviour can be excused:

Say people who cheat, I would honest to God, I would still like fall out with my boyfriend whatever, or hate him, but I could believe him when he said I was that drunk that I didn't know what I was doing, because I think people do get that drunk and they don't know what they're doing. They still need to take responsibility for their actions because they've done it, but I think you can get into a state where you don't know why you've done it, what you did, that kind of thing. [f, 21–24, WSH]

One participant distinguished instances of violence where opportunities to regulate one's behaviour clearly do exist from others which involved what he described as 'flipping':

If you're going to fight someone, nine times out of ten within about like a split second before you've

even thought about it you've already swung. […] You don't, there's no way you can, like you can't like, I don't know, you can hold yourself back from at least throwing the first punch because you don't think about doing it. It just happens before you've even thought about it. [m, 21, Int44]

Other participants argued that, on the contrary, one can always think twice and regulate one's own behaviour, even when drunk:

I don't have a boyfriend any more…but I used to like…it'd be all fun and games, I'd be like, yes, let's go back to parties and I'd get to the party and I'd be like, what am I doing here? And I'd go home, because I wouldn't want to like…I just didn't agree with being in a house full of guys when I've got a boyfriend sitting at home, but… so it would be like yes, yes, that's a great idea and then it would come to a point where I'm like, no, no, I'm making a choice to not do this. So I think even though you are really, really drunk, there comes to a point where you're like, no, you could have made the decision no matter what it's about. I think does it come to a point where yes, you're responsible and you need to make that decision. And if something really, really bad happens, like if a big, massive fight breaks out and you're involved or it's near you, you do instantly sober up because it's just fear and shock and you do start becoming more aware of what's happening. [f, 21–24, WSH]

f1 We've all been in situations where someone's barged into to you and you just want to turn round and smack them.
f2 I've done it before but you do have moments of clarity where you think don't be an idiot, just enjoy your night, forget about it, don't rise to it because if someone bumps into you in Asda I'd …just say I'm sorry. But you do still have that moment in your head when you think I could go either way. [f, 21–24, WSD]

Moreover, some participants argued that one ought to learn from any mistakes one does make, and ensure one's behaviour is regulated more effectively in future – implying again that, even when drunk, such regulation is possible:

I'm not excusing people for making decisions and saying that being drunk is to blame, but I think everybody can make a mistake once, which might happen when you're drunk, but say if you do make that mistake once, then the next time you do it, the next time the alcohol isn't to blame, the next time you are to blame because you had the chance to learn from it and you didn't. [f, 21–24, WSH]

One participant even argued that there were different levels of culpability involved in reactively hitting someone and drink driving, not only because the latter has more serious consequences, but also because reactive violence takes place in confused scenarios, potentially making it harder to think twice:

I think there's a bit of difference with violence and drink driving as well, partially because drink driving's like, the adverts make it much more hard hitting, but also because like when you get in a fight… there's always other factors involved. Even if it is just someone elbowing you in a club it's reaction-based violence. Violence in pubs and clubs is if someone says something to someone's bird or

something. But drink driving is getting into a large piece of metal that can… it's more likely to kill. [m, 18–21, WSE]

The second point of debate about alcohol as excuse concerned a *moral* question: regardless of whether a person could have thought twice, are they still morally responsible for what they do? For example, in the quotation above, where a participant argues, 'I think you can get into a state where you don't know why you've done it', she nevertheless holds that, 'they need to take responsibility'. On this question, there seemed to be a much greater degree of consensus: the fact that one is drunk does not give one some sort of ethical free pass:

At the end of the day you are still responsible. You can't say 'ah I was drunk so it's all right'. If you're going to do something stupid you still face the consequences. If you like break into a shop or something you couldn't say in court 'oh it's because I was drunk'. It's still you who did it, you're still responsible. [f, 21–24, WSD]

The above comments were made during discussion of one of the most warmly-received propositions presented in our workshops:

There are still limits, even when you're drunk. If behaviour is inappropriate when you're sober, it's inappropriate when you're drunk.

Popular as it was, however, there is an obvious problem with this proposition. The limits of behaviour in the context of a drunken night out are not the same as everyday limits. This fact is central to the attraction of the drunken night out – as is apparent in the following (positive) response to the proposition. Note how it slips from bad behaviour (harassment) to the kind of silly thing that was, for this participant, the stuff of a good drunken night out:

It links two obvious things that you might otherwise not link which is: drunk behaviour and sober behaviour should be the same. Even like harassing a girl when drunk and harassing a girl when sober, it's just like the obvious link that you might not make because you see drunk behaviour as something completely separate. And a lot of the things I would do drunk I wouldn't do sober, like running around naked and stuff… I think a lot of people don't really make that link. [m, 18–21, WSE]

As we saw in **§6.3**, individual participants in the drunken night out do still have their own personal boundaries – limits of behaviour or interaction beyond which they do not wish to pass, and do not think others should pass. But a diversity of personal boundaries does not easily translate into mutually agreed boundaries.

9.6 Drunkenness and disinhibition

The above accounts of both the value (**§9.4**) and downsides (**§9.5**) of drunkenness may be seen as expressions of an underlying naïve theory regarding the effects of alcohol. According to this naïve theory, the effect of alcohol is to remove those inhibitions which prevent a sober person from doing certain things. The theory can be expressed by means of a simple equation:

Drunkenness = disinhibition

Belief in this equation underpins explanations of bad behaviour in terms of alcohol. It also underpins the rational choice of drunkenness in the context of a drunken night out – a point that has been noted in a number of previous qualitative studies. In their study of underage drinkers, for example, Percy et al. (2011) found that:

When intoxicated they lose inhibitions, can act the 'eejit', gain the courage to chat up other young people, have a laugh, take risks and do things they normally wouldn't do. […] It is the mood-altering effects of intoxication, and the ways in which these effects alter social interactions (increased social confidence, relaxation, reduced inhibitions, etc.) that young people seek when drinking.

In a similar vein, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) highlight 'alcohol's highly valued ability to act as a social lubricant':

Young adults sought the effects of alcohol – particularly openness and the breaking down of barriers – on group interactions and individuals. This was perceived as improving group function.

People believe in the equation between drunkenness and disinhibition, and this belief shapes both their behaviour and the ways that they explain that behaviour.

However, this does not mean they are necessarily right in their belief.[38] Alcohol may not in fact have the effects that it is believed to have – which are used both to rationalise its status as the essential ingredient in a drunken night out and to account for bad behaviour.

Two key criticisms may be made of the purported equation between drunkenness and disinhibition.

- First, disinhibition is at best only a partial description of drunkenness, one that misses the crucial role played by expectancies.
- Secondly, drunkenness is at best only a partial explanation of disinhibition in the context of a drunken night out, one that misses the crucial role played by social permissions.

Poor regulation and expectancies

The simplistic equation between drunkenness and disinhibition has been widely questioned in the literature. Moss & Albery (2009), for example, argue that, 'the existing evidence relating to the alcohol-behaviour link points farther than ever away from notions of simple disinhibition'. Their own account of the alcohol-behaviour link draws attention to evidence of the operation of at least two parallel processes in intoxication. The first of these processes, which Moss & Albery call 'impairment', bears a clear resemblance to the idea of disinhibition outlined above:

The psychopharmacological effects of alcohol consumption are such that regulatory control functions are weakened and conscious control processes (relating to, for example, evaluative and problem-solving skills) are gradually taken 'off-line' as intoxication levels increase. This effect may also be conceptualised as a reduction in explicit, deliberative, conscious processing capacity when drinking.

38 By way of analogy, many people believe in a range of alternative therapies, and this belief shapes their behaviour – independently of whether or not the therapies in question are in fact effective.

To put the point another way, there is indeed evidence that someone who has drunk alcohol will be less likely than someone sober to think twice before, say, talking to a stranger or throwing a punch.

Running in parallel, however, is a second process, which Moss & Albery call 'intoxication' (and which is often described using the concept of 'alcohol expectancies').

When one consumes alcohol, the context in which drinking occurs leads to the activation of cognitive representations relating to alcohol consumption in long-term memory.

To put the point another way, someone on a drunken night out may be positively primed to do things like talking to a stranger, owing to a strong association between that behaviour and alcohol consumption (or, indeed, alcohol consumption in this specific social context). As a result, this individual will be more likely to engage in the behaviour independently of any impairment to regulation of that behaviour.

Unlike the first process, which can only occur when one has drunk, Moss & Albery point out that this second process can be begin prior to alcohol consumption, triggered by the mere expectation of doing so. The following quotation appears to describe something like this phenomenon:

I love the fact that everyone's got… I don't know what it is. It's, kind of, like a high off everyone else's high. Do you know what I mean, like? I just get easily excited. When people… I hear stories about people going out; it just gets me in the frame of mind, then. [f, 20, Int47]

Alcohol consumption does indeed lead to poor cognitive regulation of behaviour – which could be seen as a form of disinhibition – but this is only part of the overall picture. As Martinic & Measham (2008) point out, it is 'the combination of intoxication and cultural mores and expectancies about alcohol-related behaviour that makes up the complete picture of 'drunkenness''. Or to express the point once more in the form of a simple equation:

Drunkenness = poor self-regulation (disinhibition) + expectancies

Poor regulation and social permissions

The role played by expectancies in drunken behaviour serves as a reminder that, even in the absence of cognitive regulation, behaviour may be influenced, or indeed regulated, by other factors.

A good example of this phenomenon is provided by some observations from participants regarding differences in behaviour in different cities. The idea of a poorly-regulated response is central to the model of fighting as escalation presented in §9.5. In the following quotations, however, participants offer evidence that these supposedly unregulated responses are in fact governed by local social norms – norms which it is important to know:

m1 I've been in [City A] and I've got to say I thought [City A] was like… I was amazed that I bumped into someone and they were like, oh sorry, mate, and I was like, sorry, and I was just like, I thought [City A] was a lot less aggro than [City B].

m2 I think that [City B] does have a bad reputation, a really bad reputation, but it's not as bad, I don't know if that's maybe because we're from here so we know where it's safe and like we know our limits in town. [m, 18–20, WSG] Obviously we're always thinking, when we go away to new places, you're always a bit worried – like I said about […] but even just in England, because you don't know people you don't know how people are going to react. [m, 25, Int32]

Social norms, one might say, can inhibit certain kinds of behaviour. By the same token, social permissions might therefore be seen as a form of disinhibition.

It is never simply the individual's regulation of their own behaviour which is impaired in the context of a drunken night out. As we have argued throughout **Part B** of this report, the drunken night out provides an arena within which more intense and extreme social interactions are socially permitted, both within one's group of friends and more widely. To put the point another way, social regulation of these behaviours is also relaxed or removed within the special context of a drunken night out. This feature of the social context is surely as important as the effects of alcohol on the individual in explaining increased confidence and reduced self-consciousness.

In practice, it may be hard, even impossible, to disentangle the operation of these two elements of disinhibition. Take for example the following quotation:

Like if I was on holiday with my mam and dad, you know where they try and get you up to dance, me and my sisters think don't you dare come near me. But if I was with my friends, we'd be the first ones up, do you know what I mean? But that's with a drink. I wouldn't, I would feel a bit nervous just dancing without a drink. [f, 25, Int21]

In the final section, the participant links a willingness to dance to the disinhibitory effects of alcohol. But the social context is clearly playing an important role here as well: being 'with my friends' as opposed to 'with my mam and dad'.

Disinhibition, we would suggest, comprises both an individual and a social element, inextricably woven together. To express the point once more in the form of a simple equation:

Disinhibition = poor self-regulation (drunkenness) + social permissions

Drunkenness contributes to disinhibition, but it does not appear to be essential. For instance, those who used to go to dance halls – like the grandmother of the participant already quoted at the beginning of the **Part B** – availed themselves of social permissions to dance, bond, and interact with strangers without needing to drink alcohol:

My Nan said that they used to go to dance halls when they were young. And they didn't drink. My Nan has never really drunk. She said that they just used to go out and dance. [f, 19, Int03]

To understand why this is not an option for participants in the modern drunken night out, we need to look at the role played by norms in the drunken night out.

10 Norms of drinking and getting drunk

Key points

- There is a powerful norm, enforced by significant social pressure, that one has to drink alcohol when on a drunken night out. The only consistent exception to this norm relates to drink driving.
- Within the group of friends, the norm of drinking can take on a competitive quality, which may be explicit or implicit. Some people pretend soft drinks are alcoholic as a way of preserving their drunken night out identity while in fact cutting their consumption.
- Over and above the norm of drinking alcohol, there is a strong social pressure to be as drunk as everyone else. Being sober in the night-time economy is experienced as abnormal and uncomfortable.
- Drunkenness is a *required condition* of participation in the drunken night out. This is strikingly different from many other social contexts in which alcohol is consumed, in which 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 this chapter we explore the extent to which drinking and getting drunk were explained by our participants as reflections of norms and rituals. The chapter should be read alongside **Chapter 9**, which sets out an alternative perspective on the same behaviours, as rational choices. As already noted at the beginning of that chapter, it is our view that these two types of explanation should be seen as complementary, rather than contradictory; and that a complete account of the place of alcohol in the drunken night out would draw on both.

10.1 Why do people drink?

A number of our participants pointed out the existence, within the context of a drunken night out, of a powerful norm of drinking alcohol. To some extent, this mirrors a wider cultural norm, apparent at many social events, of having a drink in one's hand. However, it was also clear that the drink in question could not be a soft drink:

I wouldn't go to a club and not drink. [f, 20, Int05]

Let me use the analogy, it's like, I would not go to a restaurant and not order a meal. I see it that way, like I wouldn't go to a restaurant and then like, order something that's not what the restaurant is there for, do you know what I mean? If I go to an Italian restaurant, I wouldn't order a curry, same as I wouldn't go to a bar and order a soft drink. [m, 20, Int16]

It's a social thing, as well, isn't it, you know, a social convention to go out and drink. When you're young that's, sort of, how people are socialising a lot of the time. [m, 29, Int34]

When breached, the norm is actively enforced by others – something which participants had either experienced themselves or noted in the experiences of friends or partners who preferred not to drink:

You can go out and not drink, but people will always try and pressure you to drink. You have to be stubborn. [f, 18, Int46]

It's just the thing that you do, isn't it. Like, it's weird because now, like, I've got a friend and he doesn't drink hardly at all and when I tell my friends that they're like, are you joking, why doesn't he drink, like, what's wrong with him? [f, 25, Int20]

I was asking for a mocktail, he was kind of like, but it doesn't… and I was like, I know it doesn't have alcohol in, and a few people asked if I was pregnant. [f, 25, Int22]

In a similar vein, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) note how abstainers in their sample 'reported having to find ways of dealing with, and handling, being set apart from the cultural mainstream in social situations':

Abstainers developed strategies to justify not drinking and handle the awkward situations other people's drinking occasions inevitably became. Such strategies included:

- *claiming to not like the taste of alcohol;*
- *being on medication; or*
- *casting themselves in the role of designated driver or another position of responsibility, where sobriety would be an advantage.*

There is reason to question how effective the first of these strategies, claiming not to like the taste of alcohol, would actually be. The norm of drinking can trump personal preferences, as the following quotation illustrates:

There's someone at work, he's 20 and he doesn't drink at all, just because he says he doesn't like it, which is fair enough but I don't necessarily… Well to me it's not necessarily about enjoying it, it's just part of it, it's just fun. Whereas he says he doesn't like the taste of alcohol, which not everyone does, but you still drink it. [m, 25, Int32]

Among our participants, indeed, the only consistent exception to the norm of drinking as part of a drunken night out appeared to turn on the operation of another norm – the social unacceptability of drink driving:

It's just like sometimes the only thing I think that stops us is driving. [f, 25, Int21]

Drink driving is way across the line. [m, 18–20, WSC]

I have this really serious issue with drink drivers. Its not because anyone's died that I know. I don't know if you remember that advert with the barman… does the police man's voice, and his boss… That really hit hard. One of my friends got done for drink driving and like I have to speak to her still …but I don't respect her any more but before that advert I don't think I really thought about it. [m, 18–21, WSE]

This is not to say that drink driving does not happen – clearly it does. But it is widely seen as 'way across the line', and provides an excuse for not drinking which personal choices do not:

If you show your car keys you get free drinks, and I think like, of everything, drink driving is probably the most frowned upon thing that you see like regularly. Where I know a lot of people do it, but it's really frowned upon, if you go out, like people try and hassle you to buy a drink and you say, no, I'm driving and they say, oh, all right, I'll leave you alone. There's not even any bother at all.
Mod What about if you say, people trying to hassle you to buy a drink and you say no, I'm training for a biathlon, or is it triathlon?
Triathlon. They say no, no, it's fine, you can have it, and I'm like, but I don't want to. It's my choice and I prefer not to. [m, 20, Int16]

The above quotation is an illustration of the norm of drinking running contrary to a personal choice. More often, norms and choices are aligned. As we argued in **§9.1**, from a rational choice perspective drinking is explained instrumentally as a way of getting drunk (which is in turn believed to unlock the benefits of a drunken night out). The co-existence of these two mechanisms, norms and choices, is apparent in the practice of buying two drinks at the same time, a shot and a long drink. The former serves the instrumental ends of getting drunk, while the latter satisfies the norm of having an alcoholic drink in one's hand:

Yes, if you know you're going to go out and it's like, everyone's out, and it's going to be a big night, then you will have a mixer in it and a shot at the same time, and then just have both. […] So, you'd order, you'd go to the bar and you'd say, can I have, like, a vodka lemonade, and like, a shot of vodka or a shot of, I don't know, whatever, I don't really know, I only ever have vodka, so… And then you'd have the shot straight away, and then you'd have your mixer to…
Mod Talk me through what's the logic behind that?
Because it's going to get you more drunk if you have more alcohol. […]
Mod So, why not just have two shots; why bother with the mixer?
You probably already ordered a double, so a double and a shot.
Mod So, you've got a double, so you could just have all of that; why bother with the mixer?
Because you get…it's the social aspect, you all stand around and you get to, like, cheers your glasses, and… [m, 21, Int39]

One participant described how recognition of this pattern had led to product innovation in a local bar, in the form of the 'Lazyboy':

It's in a pint glass, it's basically a double vodka and Red Bull, and then they give you another double vodka, then, with it. […] because they're not, by law, allowed to sell more than doubles at once they just give you the doubles with it and then they say you can do whatever you want and you normally pour it in with it. And it's basically because it's cheaper, it's called a Lazyboy because instead of going – when it's packed, instead of going to the bar and getting a small mixer with a short, you've just got a big pint glass so it will last longer, and also you'll just get drunk quicker then. [m, 23, Int09]

10.2 Drinking in the group of friends

The norm of drinking, apparent across the drunken night out, is particularly strongly enforced within some groups of friends. Specific rituals – such as

rounds of shots or drinking games – can create a clear social pressure to consume alcohol:

m1 And drinking games start as well I find. You try to keep up with everyone else.
m2 And like if someone orders a shot they get a round of shots.
m3 A habit with my and my friends as well is as soon as you get to the club, it's straight to the bar. [m, 21–24, WSB]

I wasn't keen on shots; never have been, but I still would have done them because others were and I think, you know, and another reason it was just… not peer pressure particularly, but it is really I suppose, you don't want to look bad in front of your mates. [m, 29, Int33]

When you're all out in a group, everybody's drinking, it was a bit of, like, a silent competition; as in, who could drink the most, sort of thing, you know. [m, 24, Int11]

This pressure appears to be experienced independently of one's intentions regarding getting drunk. For example, in research with 18 to 24 year olds conducted for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), respondents were asked how much they agreed with the statement 'I sometimes feel pressure from my friends to drink more alcohol than I would like to'. There were no significant differences between the numbers of Regular Intentionals, Occasional Intentionals and Never Intentionals (see **§3.4**) who agreed.[39] Never Intentionals may, however, be slightly better at resisting the pressure to drink.[40]

In some groups, the 'silent competition' referred to in the last quotation above can take on a more explicit form:

Like, I remember just before University in a bar and, like, my friends challenged us to have three Vodka shots in a row and, like, they burn your throat and I remember thinking, I don't know why I've just done that but you do anyway, like, it's a bit of fun. [f, 19, Int41]

Some of our participants felt that this kind of competitive behaviour was more characteristic of males – a view which is consistent with patterns of response in this research. If real, this difference may reflect differences in fears about what would happen if one became so drunk one passed out – a topic to which we will return in **§11.2**:

m1 It's different between boys and girls though, isn't it, because you find the girls tend to stop girls from drinking, whereas the boys would just egg them on, egg them on.
m2 You kind of do want to see your mate in a state though, let's be honest [m, 21–24, WSB]

Even in the absence of explicit competitive behaviour, however, small group norms can create a dynamic where some people are setting the pace of drinking while others are trying to keep up:

I think with more people there's always somebody who wants to carry on and there's probably a bit more momentum because there's a large group. [m, 29, Int33]

39 32% of RIs, 36% of OIs, and 30% of NIs agreed (base: all respondents).
40 83% of NIs stated that they drank at their own pace, rather than try to keep up with friends, every time or most of the time they drank, compared to 71% of RIs and 74% of OIs (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year).

It's just the atmosphere, isn't it? I mean, if everybody else around you is drinking and a lot of the conversation is all about, oh, drink a shot, or, oh, you know, he's lagging behind, or whatever. […] Everything is targeted based on the drink. [m, 29, Int36]

As we noted in **§4.1**, conforming to norms and rituals is not just about avoiding the negatives associated with non-conformity. There is pleasure to be derived merely from the experience of doing something together. Rituals around shots, for example, provide opportunities for bonding within the group through joint activity. Note how, in the second quotation, the competition is not around who can drink most, but who can be most generous:

Yes, that's why we liked Tequila because there's a strategy to it, isn't there? […] You get the lemon, you wipe it on your hand, put the salt on so it sticks, shot it and then bite the lemon. Do you know what, it's actually quite nice. […] Well, you'd have to be really drunk for it to taste nice, but there's the aftershock… [f, 22, Int28]

Obviously everyone wants to, kind of, outdo each other, so one of them would buy just vodka, and the other one then would go vodka, and go for some horrible shot, so he'd get a bit, like, oh, okay, and then he'd go and buy an equally, kind of, nasty shot. […] It's all friends, but equally, you know, you want to be seen as the more generous one, if you like, and so it's more of an issue like that. [m, 29, Int36]

Alongside these positive reasons, however, negative reasons to conform to norms and rituals of drinking clearly play an important role. In particular, a key concern for the individual in a group context such as the drunken night out is to maintain a desired identity within the group. This alone can be sufficient to explain conformity to group drinking norms:

You don't want to be the one to order the water, do you? If you want to get another drink, you won't go, 'oh can I have a water?' [m, WSE]

I didn't want to be seen as the one saying, 'oh, no, I'm drunk, I don't want the shot', and so by the end of the night, I'd always be drunk on those nights. [m, 29, Int36.rtf]

And it's basically, if you're out with friends and you know, you like feel intimidated because people are drinking maybe more than you and you go, oh, and you keep up like. [m, 18–20, WSG.rtf]

These anxieties about identity can be further exacerbated by the presence of outsiders on whom one wants to create a favourable impression:

To be fair, he [a friend] could have stopped drinking and we would have took the mick out of him a bit, but that would have been it – we wouldn't have forced him to do it, but obviously you've got an ego thing at that age and you want to show that you can keep up, and I suppose it didn't help that girls were there so we didn't want to, he didn't want to be taken the mick out of in front of all the girls. [m, 25, Int32]

In the midst of these strong group norms around drinking, some people find themselves resorting to pretence as a way of maintaining a desired identity without in fact consuming more alcohol:

Do you know what I do, I've got a good technique, you go to the bar and ask for lime cordial and soda water, and it looks like an alcoholic drink, but it's only lime cordial and soda water. That's honestly what I do, it's something like thirty pence. […] I don't tell anyone I've stopped drinking, I learnt my technique off one of my friends. […] It is [weird we have to do things like that], but especially when you're like twenty, you have to. They would try to, like my friends would try and peer pressure a little bit, I think, to an extent, that I wouldn't be able to cope with it, so I just avoid the question by buying that and then everyone thinks […] [m, 20, Int16]

I know one guy, you know, you ask him, oh what did you get, we're having bitter what… you know you got coke, oh no whiskey and coke – and he goes to the toilet and you smell it, and its coke and you think, well obviously he doesn't want to drink, but he couldn't say I don't want to drink, yes. [m, 29, Int33]

Very few of our participants felt that they were able to resist the norm of drinking on a drunken night out. The following quotation is from one of the rare exceptions:

I could go out on a night out and not really drink and I have done it a couple of times where I haven't drank at all, I've just gone out and had a good dance and it's been a good night. [f, 21, Int27]

The more common view was that, if one wanted not to drink, the safest option was not to go out at all – a choice which faces its own normative pressures, as noted in **§8.3**:

I tried to do that Sober for October, because I was sick of drinking every weekend, but I gave in last weekend. […] In my head I thought, I don't need to drink, I don't drink that much anyway, I thought. Like because I don't really drink much in the house, I have one glass of wine, I can go without that, and I just won't go out until the end of October. My first drink was going to be tomorrow. But then I was just, more than not drinking, I was sick of saying no to people, I'm not going out this weekend, we're going here, do you want to come, oh no, I'm not drinking, oh no, I'm not drinking. [f, 25, Int22]

While the small group often serves to reinforce the norm of drinking, it can also in some cases serve as a buffer against that norm. The group can provide a context in which not drinking is possible. In contrast to the groups described above, some go out of their way to support choices not to drink, even going so far as to institute what might be described as temporary counter-norms:

It's not like you have to pretend, you know there's no peer pressure amongst us. One of my friends will even do it with us. She'll say oh, well I'll have a pop with you. We'll have like a pop to go, do you know what I mean? We'll have like a coke. And then we'll have a drink. [f, 25, Int21]

This was not a common pattern, however: another participant had had to go to Mongolia to find a group which would get behind the idea of not drinking:

We all decided together right, we're just going to go, we're going to rebuild this school, we're going to do this and we're going to do that, and we're not going to have any nights where people are getting drunk and we're having to look after them. I think it was easy because it was a group effort, whereas I think if I was here, people would be trying to get me to go out with them. […] None of us drank that month, whereas here my uni friends would be like what the hell are you playing at? Of course you're coming for a drink. You sort of don't get much of a choice. They're like: no, you're coming for a drink. [m, 25, Int31]

10.3 Why do people get drunk?

The norm of drinking would be sufficient in itself to explain why people get drunk, since drunkenness is an inevitable consequence of drinking:

f1 I think there's a bigger influence of, like, shot drinking now that there wasn't eight years ago – like everything is about having some Jägerbombs and things like that.
f2 And two for a fiver.
f3 Yeah, you drink a lot more than what you normally would have done. [f, 21–24, WSD]

However, the role of norms in driving drunkenness actually goes much further than this. Not only is there a strong norm that one should drink during a drunken night out (and as a result get drunk); there are also strong social pressures to be drunk. More specifically, there are strong social pressures to be as drunk as everyone else. The norms in this area are comparative in nature:

You wouldn't want someone to, like, have, like, one drink and then you've had six or seven and you just look like an idiot, I think. That's what it'd be like. [f, 24, Int29]

It's just a bit awkward because everyone seems to be acting completely different and, if you're sober, it's just a bit of an awkward place to be. [m, 25, Int32]

Some of our participants provided a more rational explanation of this desire to be at the same level of drunkenness as others, based on the simple fact that, when you are sober, drunk people are annoying:

If I was going to town, I wouldn't not drink, because everybody else would get on my nerves if they were drunk. [f, 19, Int03.rtf]

I go out, I think I'm doing something the next morning so I'll just go totally sober and drive, maybe, and then I just find that it's just the worst night ever because once everybody else has had a couple of drinks you're just looking at them like they're wallies, all night. So it's either that or, when you do go out then you go out and kind of get really drunk. [m, 21–24, WSI]

This rationalisation was often entwined, however, with clear evidence of norms at work: being sober when everyone else is drunk leaves you feeling 'a bit like an outcast' or 'an outsider'. As a result you 'want to be the drunk person' because 'if I had a drink it would seem normal':

It was quite boring, sitting there. And it was hard to not feel like an outsider, and it was hard to, like, have a conversation with people that were drunk, because it was just, like, hard work, if you know

what I mean? You couldn't, like… you just thought, like, what are you on about, like? You're talking absolute crap. [m, 24, Int11]

[When you're sober] some people can get under your skin. You'll just, like, need to move away from me now because you're getting on my nerves. I don't like it. I want to be in… I want to be the drunk person. [f, 20, Int47]

In other instances, the rationalisation disappears altogether, leaving just the feelings of social separation:

It would just be horrible. Imagine that, going out with… like, it's horrible when you're going out on a night out and you can't drink anyway. Well I just don't go out in that situation because I get too jealous, but it would just be awful. Especially when you're… fair enough if you had a group of friends that, kind of, when you got together you didn't drink, but I feel like every time our big group of friends get together that's what we do, it's to drink. So then you'd be, kind of, the odd one out. [f, 25, Int20]

I'd feel a bit odd going in and having a dance around if I'd hadn't a drink, because I'd feel a bit … be the odd one out. Not just within our group, but within the club, but then like I'd say why is everybody else doing it, so … You know, if nobody drank then it wouldn't be the norm to go in and … you know … [m, 19, Int38]

Strikingly, at the level of the group of friends, this norm works in two directions. It is not just the sober person who feels uncomfortable as a result of his or her failure to conform to the norm of drunkenness. As we saw in **§7.3**, the presence of someone not playing by the same rules can break the spell of the drunken night out:

I know nights of mine have been ruined before because my friends weren't drunk. And it was actually a friend's birthday. […] And a couple of the other girls just decided they didn't want to have a good night, so they just sat on the floor, when it was one of our friend's birthdays. And I think, you know, you don't do that, do you? It's your friend's birthday. You try and have a good time for them. [f, 18–20, WSA]

A person who is too sober is a source of discomfort for the whole group. To remove this discomfort, the group ensures that the sober person is brought to the same level of drunkenness:

Because I think I turned up late they all gave me stick for that, they said we've done this now for three years, four years, why haven't you been here? I said I've got work and then because I was sober and they'd all been drinking it was catch-up time. So they were like you haven't been here, you've got to drink and then I'd have to get up and drink. I think I finished a 70cl bottle of Jack Daniels in no more than two hours and I was, well I remember I finished about four fifths of it and that's when I got up and ran out and been sick out the back. And then I came inside and I said oh boys, I can't do anymore, but then peer pressure and I ended up finishing the rest of the Jack Daniels after I'd been sick. [m, 23, Int09]

This quotation clearly shows that the norm of drunkenness dictates, not an absolute level of drunkenness, but a requirement to be as drunk as everyone else. A nice illustration of this point is also provided by the following quotation, in which a participant describes how his group of friends had chosen to turn this norm into a sort of game, by setting a target level of complete sobriety for a drunken night out. Note how much the participant says he enjoyed the evening – in stark contrast to the general consensus that being sober ruins a drunken night out. The clear difference between his experience and those cited above is that, in the context of this specific game, being sober means being at the same level as the rest of the group, whereas normally it would mean being at a very different level:

I've been out some nights and I've been sober because a few of my mates have done it, we've set a challenge to go out, there were thirteen of us, and none of us drink. And I tell you what – I had probably the most fun I'd had in a while, just watching, it sounds odd – but when you're sober and you're watching drunk people and you see the state that you're in, it sort of puts it into perspective and I think, out of the thirteen, I think nine of us lasted without a drink. It was quite fun like. [m, 24, Int08]

10.4 A required condition of participation

In **§10.1**, we argued that the norm of drinking co-exists with the instrumental drinking practices described in **§9.1**. The same is true of the norm of drunkenness, which co-exists with the rational choice of drunkenness as a means of accessing the benefits of a drunken night out. While some participants explained getting drunk in terms of confidence and loss of self-consciousness, others could see nothing but conformity to norms:

I don't know why you would want to get drunk quicker. Again, the only reason I can think of is because everybody else was doing it, so… not that I wanted to, but I felt like you just get carried along with it, sort of thing. And the motion of everybody doing it, sort of, I think… I don't know, and you start drinking it like water. [m, 24, Int11]

I don't know [why I got drunk]. I just… it's just what you do, isn't it, when you go out with the girls. What we used to do. It was just the accepted thing to do. [f, 27, Int23]

If everybody else wasn't drinking, I'd be fine. If I was in a place where that wasn't a factor, if I wasn't at a place where I would normally be drunk, if I was somewhere else I would have been fine. [f, 25, Int22]

The same basic principle, albeit at a more extreme level, is apparent in some descriptions of drinking holidays:

It's just… it's crazy [in Resort]. Nobody, it's like whoever you were back home doesn't matter anymore. You just, you go out and everyone's just fuelled – alcohol, drugs – everywhere you go is. No-one's getting judged for being absolutely off it because… you're more likely to get judged out there for being the sober one than being the one that's off their face. [m, 24, Int07]

So strong is the judgement of those who do not conform to the norm of drunkenness that the only real option for someone who does not want to get drunk may be not to go out at all:

I don't really want to go town where everybody's drunk and I'm just there not doing anything, really. [f, 19, Int02]

I wouldn't have opted into one of those nights if, say I was on medication and I couldn't drink, then I would have said, no, I'm not going out, I'm not going to go out, expose myself to, kind of, all of that without having some drinks in me. [m, 29, Int36]

To put the point another way, drunkenness is a required condition of participation in the drunken night out. This is one of the most striking differences between the phenomenon of the drunken night out and many other kinds of social context in which alcohol is consumed. There are many settings in our society in which alcohol consumption is socially permitted, and in which drunkenness is therefore an allowable consequence of participation. At a wedding, for example, people get drunk. Moreover, those who do not drink often experience (more or less subtle) pressure to do so from others; and later on, still sober, they may find the behaviour of the drunk people around them annoying. There are clear parallels between a wedding and a drunken night out. But it would be odd to think of turning down a wedding invitation because you did not want to get drunk, or being accused of spoiling the wedding if you stayed sober. Drunkenness is allowed at a wedding – and in many other social contexts – but it is not required. Required drunkenness is a defining feature of the drunken night out.

It is not hard to see how the combination of i) the role played by drunkenness as a kind of entry ticket to the drunken night out; and ii) the view, discussed in **§8.2**, that there are few if any alternatives which deliver the same benefits, might easily lead to the idea that one cannot have a good night out without getting drunk.

In research with 18 to 24 year olds conducted for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), 33% of Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**) disagreed with the statement 'I don't have to get drunk to have a good night out' – that is, they felt they did have to get drunk to have a good night out (base: all respondents). Only 7% of Occasional Intentionals and 4% of Never Intentionals disagreed with this statement.

Drunkenness and disinhibition revisited

The recognition that drunkenness is a required condition of participation in the drunken night out completes our account of the relationship between drunkenness and disinhibition. In **§9.6**, we argued that 'disinhibition' comprises both an individual and a social element:

Disinhibition = poor self-regulation (drunkenness) + social permissions

Drunkenness contributes directly to disinhibition by weakening cognitive regulation of behaviour, but it does not appear from the above formula to be essential.

The existence of a norm of drunkenness, however, creates a second pathway between drunkenness and 'disinhibition'. It is only by being drunk that one can gain entry to the special context of the drunken night out and avail oneself of the associated social permissions. As a result, neither component of the disinhibition equation is available to a sober person.

In practice, this complex relationship between drunkenness and disinhibition was invariably collapsed by our participants into a simple causal one: alcohol is believed to give you confidence and reduce self-consciousness by removing your inhibitions, independently of the social context. This belief – reinforced in many ways throughout our culture – helps to maintain the status of alcohol as the essential ingredient in a drunken night out. In reality, we would suggest, that status depends on powerful norms.

One might even go so far as to argue that the depiction of drunkenness as a rational choice is nothing but a rationalisation of behaviour that is in fact driven by norms. The norm of drunkenness can explain patterns of alcohol consumption in the drunken night out without reference to the purported benefits of drunkenness. In respect of instrumental drinking practices, for instance, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) note that:

Once the idea of intoxication is established as a peer group norm, simply having one or two drinks runs contrary to the intention of achieving intoxication at peer drinking occasions. So ideas of drinking moderately begin to make less sense.

While we cannot rule out the possibility that norms explain all, we would not ourselves take this position. It seems to us that the two explanations of drunkenness – one based on rational choice, one based on norms – overlap with and reinforce each other, and that retaining both models leads to a better and more nuanced understanding of the drunken night out.

11 'I know my limits'

Key points

- As one gets more drunk, one is less likely consciously to regulate one's own consumption, 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 one 'loses 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 (at least in theory) lead to a vicious circle in which higher intended limits led to more extreme cases of drunkenness, and more extreme cases of drunkenness led to higher intended limits.
- The group of friends plays a pivotal role in keeping the individual safe if they go past their intended limits and become vulnerable. 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.
- 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.

In **Chapters 9** and **10** we have presented parallel rational and social explanations of drinking and drunkenness in the context of a drunken night out. In this chapter, we turn to the concept of a limit: a level of drunkenness beyond which one tries not to pass. Rational, social and situational explanations were interwoven in participants' accounts of both how these limits get set and why they are then crossed.

11.1 Why do people carry on drinking?

Imagine an entirely rational drinker. Such a drinker might calculate an optimum level of drunkenness – a 'sweet spot' which delivers the benefits of drunkenness (see **§9.5**) while minimising the downside (see **§9.6**) – and then drink instrumentally in order to reach and remain at this level. Some continued alcohol consumption would be required simply to stay at this 'sweet spot', but much less than initially required to reach it.

A few of our participants at least claimed to take this very rational approach to drinking:

If I get too drunk I kind of slow down. If I feel like, oh, I feel like I'm sobering up, I'll maybe have a drink, or maybe, like, a shot with a friend, or something like that, just… And then, just kind of get back in again. [m, 20, Int14]

Claims such as these were, however, very much the exception. Far from maintaining a sweet spot, most participants – including those who set out with rational intentions – described how they would in fact keep on drinking well past the point when, rationally, they ought to stop:

You always start pacing, like, I find at the beginning of the night, you pace yourself, don't you? And when you get to a certain point then it goes out of the window. [m, 21–24, WSB]

Indeed, in research with 18 to 24 year olds undertaken for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), 44% of Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**) disagreed with the statement 'I tend to stop drinking before I get very drunk (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year). Only 14% of Occasional Intentionals and 4% of Never Intentionals disagreed with the statement.

From a purely rational perspective, this continued drinking only makes sense if one abandons the idea of an optimum level of drunkenness, and takes the view that, however drunk one is, it is always better to get more drunk. A few of our participants at least claimed to take this approach to drinking:

The aim of the night is to go out and get as drunk as possible, kind of thing. […] We're all trying to get as drunk as possible and stay up as long as possible, so the other night me and [Friend] stayed up until seven o'clock in the morning, drunk as a skunk. [f, 22, Int28]

Again, however, claims such as these were very much the exception. Indeed, many participants stated that getting as drunk as you possibly can was something they had done when younger, typically when an underage drinker (see **§17.3**), and explicitly contrasted this to the way they now drank.

Situational explanations

So why do people carry on drinking? Many of our participants pointed out that, far from being rational, continued drinking is a product of the way in which alcohol reduces one's ability to regulate one's behaviour rationally. As we saw in **Chapter 9**, being drunk makes you less likely to think twice, and less likely to stop yourself doing stupid things – including having another drink. The drunker one gets, the less likely one is to stick to one's

rational intentions – creating what one participant described as a 'snowball effect':

The more drunk I get, the more drink, so it just keeps going, just keeps going. [m, 21–24, WSB]

I was just like the drunker you get the more you pour in and you just don't care. [f, 19, Int01]

I suppose it's quite easy for us all to say stop like this now we're all sober, but give us all a few beers and it might all change. [m, 21–24, WSI]

Even some of those who claimed that they set out to get as drunk as they could would lapse into explanations based on this kind of breakdown in rationality. Note for instance how the following quotation slides from an explanation based on intentions ('I drink to get drunk') to one based on a failure of intention ('I don't know when to stop'):

I drink to get blotted. […] I drink to get out of my face. […] Yes, I go past it. […] I'm the guy that gets himself in the worst state. […] I make mistakes, I know I get myself too drunk, but I don't know when to stop when I'm drinking. I like to drink so I keep going. [m, 18–20, WSG]

As the influence of good intentions diminishes, so too the influence of situational cues increases – including cues to have another drink. In the context of a drunken night out, virtually any aspect of the environment may serve as such a cue – the music, the fact one is in a bar, even the mere fact that there is alcohol available:

Obviously when you're out with everyone and you're feeling the atmosphere and the music's there, it's just you enjoy yourself and you get carried away. [m, 24, Int08]

If you go into a bar and there's loads of drinks lined up behind the thing and you're trying not to drink them, you're going to want one. It's like the temptation of being in the place. If I wasn't going to drink, I would just not put myself in that scenario, where the temptation was there. [m, 20, Int16]

Social explanations

Some of the most important cues for drinking, of course, are social – for example, other people buying you a drink:

If someone buys you a drink, you don't want to say, no, thank you, I've had too much to drink. It's a free drink, so you down it or you carry on. [f, 20, Int47]

I'll be out and I'll be like, if I get another drink now, it's going to be bad news. And then somebody like, oh, do you want a drink? Yea, yes, I'll have a drink. [m, 24, Int07]

Reference to the social context of drinking also reminds us that drinking behaviour is never entirely rational. As we saw in **Chapter 10**, drinking behaviour is also driven by powerful norms in the drunken night out; and these can keep a person drinking well past any notional 'sweet spot':

It doesn't feel right to not have a drink in your hand at any point in the night so even if you… 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, 21–24, WSB]

If you're having a really good night, or you know, if you're in somewhere that's, like, maybe open until 3 and it's maybe midnight, you don't want to sit for three hours and not drink and you don't want to drink water, so you maybe will just continue drinking. [f, 21–24, WSH]

Competitive pressures within the group, not surprisingly, can also play a role:

I was hungover with a splitting headache and I just can't remember anything. I'm just thinking to myself why did you drink all that? I could easily have said no, but for some reason I just took the peer pressure and downed the drinks. [m, 23, Int09]

m1 I think it's for competition as well. Because you tend to drink against your friends as well.
m2 Especially when it's boys yes.
m1 They tend to sort of push you on as well, like.
Mod Okay, yes, in a good way?
m1 Yes, yes.
m2 Yes, neck it. What's in it? Neck it. [m, 21–24, WSB]

The tendency to accept a drink even when very drunk also appears to be linked to one's own intentions regarding getting drunk. In research with 18 to 24 year olds undertaken for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**) were more likely than Occasional or Never Intentionals to say that they could never see themselves turning down a drink from friends,[41] or avoiding being in a round of drinks,[42] in order to control their drinking and avoid getting too drunk.

The result of all this is an environment in which continued drinking barely needs explaining: the surprising thing would be if someone managed to stop.

11.2 Why do people stop drinking?

Despite the strength of social norms, situational cues and the weakness of good intentions when drunk, many of our participants did assert that they had a limit, beyond which they would not pass:

I think now, you know, when you hit that point, oh actually, I won't like push myself to go out to many more places, like it's kebab shop time. [f, 25, Int22]

There's always a barrier that I'll hit and then I won't cross it. […] I sort of know my limits even though I know how to have a good time. [m, 19, Int43]

There are certain situations where you think I've had enough but you just carry on due to peer pressure, but usually there's a point where you think: I might be in a bit of a state, I'd better stop. [m, 18–21, WSE]

Not all of our participants talked in terms of having a limit. The following workshop excerpt, for example, extends one of the quotations cited above:

41 29% if RIs selected 'I could never see myself doing this', compared to 18% of OIs, and 5% of NIs (base: all who drink).
42 32% if RIs selected 'I could never see myself doing this', compared to 20% of OIs, and 17% of NIs (base: all who drink).

m1 The more drunk I get, the more I drink, so it just keeps going, just keeps going.
m2 There's no wall is there? You just keep going till you pass out basically.
m1 Yes, exactly, until you black out. [m, 21–24, WSB]

While not universal, however, the concept of a limit was widespread: and the phrase 'I know my limits', or variations on that theme, was a common expression of what appears to be a genuine (if not always successful) attempt to avoid the most extreme states of drunkenness.

This limit should in no way be confused with a 'sweet spot'. As we shall see, it represents not an optimum level of drunkenness but a point well past any notional optimum, beyond which really bad things can happen. It represents a level of consumption orders of magnitude greater than any proponent of responsible drinking might advocate.

Moreover, the phrase 'I know my limits' in fact comprises two distinct claims:

- That one has an intended limit
- That one does not pass this intended limit

The second of these claims is almost certainly not true in most cases. The mere assertion of a limit in the context of an interview or workshop does not establish its enforcement in practice: stating a limit is not the same as sticking to it. The situational cues and social norms discussed above are as likely to take drinkers past their limit as they are to take them past their 'sweet spot'. A clear sense of realism pervaded much of the discussion of limits:

When you're wasted, you don't really want it to go bad, do you? You're still in the heat of the moment, you're still enjoying the club. Kind of. It's only when you get home that you realise that oh, I'm absolutely… [m, 21–24, WSl]

The first of the above claims, by contrast, is much more plausible. The fact that intended limits are sometimes exceeded does not mean that they do not exist. We are strongly inclined to take the accounts of our participants more or less at face value on this point, and to believe that people do have intended limits; that these intended limits do influence their drinking behaviour; and that nevertheless, they sometimes drink past these limits:

Knowing what my limits are and knowing not so much what my limits were, but knowing how I feel right now, am I going to be rough in the morning? Given that… you know, looking back at what I've drunk or when I drank, how long ago did I drink and how much worse am I going to get from now, that sort of thing. So, being able to gauge how drunk I would get from where I was and how hungover I'd be the next day, I suppose. […] Now and again of course I'd just be desperate to get in a taxi and show them an address or something and fall flat on my face on the front lawn, but I normally had enough about me to look after myself, yes. Very rarely did I let myself get completely out of control

where I didn't know where I was or what I was doing. [m, 29, Int33]

The intended limit, that is, represents a belated and precarious reassertion of rationality at the far extremes of the drunken night out.

Loss of memory and loss of control

Given the importance attached to memories and stories as a benefit of a drunken night out (see **§7.2**), one good reason for not wanting to drink past a certain limit of drunkenness is the fact that one may no longer be able to remember what one has done. For a number of our participants, this was a factor in setting a limit for drinking:

I like to make memories, but it's kind of cancelled out by the fact that when you get too drunk you can't remember anything. So you've just got to try and get it just right. [f, 25, Int22]

Well, what was the point? If I don't remember it, what was the point of doing it? […] I don't want to get like that again because… yes, it's pointless when you don't remember it. [m, 20, Int44]

One participant described how his group had consciously set about helping one of its members, who consistently drank to the point of forgetting, to establish a new, lower limit for his drunkenness:

You could tell, every time we were talking about it he would just, sort of, mope about and be like that, I don't remember that. […] We sort of… he used to drink, like, a lot of spirits all the time and we, sort of, said, look, why don't you drink, sort of, lager because that's not as heavy on you and you can drink a lot more without doing as much, sort of, damage. And once we put him on that, that was it; he just suddenly changed. And now, even when he drinks spirits he drinks them at such a level where he can get really drunk and everything, but not forget everything that happened. [m, 20, Int18]

Views on forgetting as a result of drunkenness were mixed, however. As we saw in **§7.2**, the recollection of the night before within the group can itself be a bonding experience – forgetting also has an upside:

I prefer nights when someone tells me the next day what I did, rather than me telling. [m, 21–24, WSB]

For some of our participants, memory loss was even seen as the sign of a good night out:

It's when you hear the word 'messy'. That's when you know it's on. 'Messy' means that you wake up the next morning and you won't have a clue what happened the night before. [m, 18–20, WSC]

Preferably one that I don't really remember that much, I imagine; that's when I seem to enjoy it the most. […] You know you had a good night. [f, 18–20, WSJ]

For other participants, the issue was less the loss of memory than the possibility that one had overstepped the mark in a serious way (see **§9.5**):

Occasionally I used to have blackouts where I couldn't remember maybe an hour or two, and that used to make us really anxious the next day because I'd worry in case I had upset anyone or had I said something that I shouldn't have. That was a

really horrible feeling that came with the hangover, it was like an anxious feeling, and I think it was just caused by the alcohol really. [f, 27, Int23]

It's embarrassing, you know, having to piece together the night and not know what you may have said to people, or saying horrible or mean or embarrassing or whatever things… that's horrible, I hate that. That's one of the worst bits about getting drunk to the point where you don't remember what you did or what you said. […] Because I want to be in control of what I'm doing with myself, what I'm saying and how I'm acting and if I realise that I…. there's a bit of my night missing and I hate that, who knows what I did or what I said to offend people, was I, you know, out of control? [m, 29, Int33]

In research with 18 to 24 year olds undertaken for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), 44% of Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**) agreed with the statement 'I often wake up feeling embarrassed or worried about things that I've said or done after drinking', compared to 27% of Occasional Intentionals and just 8% of Never Intentionals (base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year). While some of this embarrassment can perhaps be discounted as the kind associated with a good story (see **§7.3**), this suggests that anxiety about having overstepped the mark may nevertheless be a real phenomenon when people drink past their limits.

For some participants, loss of control was unpleasant in itself – although they also expressed the view that this made them different from their peers:

I don't like, you probably think I'm just saying it, but I just don't like not being in control of what I'm doing. […] I don't know many people my age that would actually say that. [m, 20, Int16]

I enjoy the sensation of feeling tipsy and a bit drunk because I get the giggles and I just forget about everything and it's good. But the feeling of not being in control of yourself I cannot stand. [f, 22, Int26]

Personal vulnerability

Among female participants in particular both loss of memory and loss of control were associated with a very specific set of concerns regarding personal vulnerability. The fear associated with going past one's intended limit was not just what you might say or do to others, but also what they might do to you:

f1 It was horrible when I woke the next morning, because I thought, I could have done anything last night.
f2 It's funny when you forget like a little bit. Little bits, yes.
f1 Anyone could have done anything to me, and I can't even remember it. [f, 18–20, WSA]

Gender differences on this point were directly raised in one of our all-female workshops:

I think it's more scary for the girl than it is for the boy, because obviously boys are stronger. And if I thought, loads of times, I thought if somebody decides to come up to one of us, and grab us, and just wanted to take off with us, then they could. Like, really, we like to think that we could do something about it, but we couldn't. If it was a big boy. [f, 18–20, WSA]

This difference was linked to different patterns of behaviour in males and females regarding how seriously intended limits were taken:

Boys just, like, sleep in bushes and puke on themselves. Girls are more like us, get actually home and sleep. [f, 18–20, WSA]

Consciousness of the extent of one's personal vulnerability when extremely drunk was often linked to reflection on one's own experiences – either of being extremely drunk oneself, or of seeing others in that state:[43]

I never ever want to be at that [point] again ever. I never ever want to lose control. [m, 20, Int16]

That's what scares me about being really drunk; because you see people that are really drunk and you don't know what you're doing; anything could happen. [f, 18–20, WSJ]

There was some girl underneath a bridge absolutely… she couldn't even get up, that's how bad she was. We had to go and help her. Someone had robbed her, basically, and just left her underneath there and she couldn't do anything about it. She had mud and blood all over her and so on, which they'd battered her for all her possessions and just left her there. And all she could do was sit there and scream. […] She was that scared she wouldn't let go of my mate all night, and she didn't know who he was. [m, 21–24, WSI]

As participants noted, however, the extent of one's vulnerability when extremely drunk may be something one only becomes aware of in retrospect – after one has put oneself at risk:

Lots of times, like if I went home to my house, just anywhere, I ended up sleeping on the gravel outside my house, on the neighbour's garden across the road, Martha's dad's back garden because you have to go round the back to get in, kitchens, toilets, bathtubs. […] I'd wake up and had stones embedded in my face, things like that. I slept on the driveway, mum found me driving home the next morning asleep on the driveway. [f, 22, Int28]

Perceived vulnerability and varying intended limits

The link between personal vulnerability and limits is further supported by the fact that many participants at least claimed to vary their intended limits depending on how safe they perceived the environment they were in to be. The more personally vulnerable they felt, the less drunk they would be prepared to get.

An interesting, and perhaps surprising, example of this phenomenon is provided by foreign holidays. A number of participants – male and female – noted that they were actually more cautious about drinking in an unfamiliar foreign location where the risks were unknown:

I don't think I ever got in such a mess on holiday just because I think I made a conscious, like, note that I wasn't in my own area where I knew where I was so I was… well, like, got… I had my wits about me. [f, 21, Int27]

43 None of our participants shared personal experiences of serious harm when very drunk, and for ethical reasons this is not something we asked about directly.

With it being in a different country and a different environment that, it's not something I'd want to drink as much at. […] Because obviously it's completely different. There are so many different factors out there, whereas here I know it's here, I know what the rules are, I know what's acceptable, what's not acceptable, whereas out there I don't know what's acceptable or not. And also, different country, if something bad happens it's a lot more difficult to get support you need, so there's obviously that factor as well. [m, 19, Int43]

By contrast, the safest place to drink is at a house party, or even in one's own home:

[The times I've been so drunk I can't walk have been] usually where someone would have a house party. I think that's awareness that I'm in my own home, so even if I do pass out I'm in my living room, rather than in somewhere strange, where someone could be there, and I didn't want to be. [f, 25, Int19]

Drunken nights out sit between these two extremes, more familiar than a foreign holiday but clearly much less so than a private house. One's precise level of perceived vulnerability – and the drinking limit one sets oneself – will depend on other factors:

I know in [small local town], if I get mortal, it's not the end of the world, because I'm safe. If I get mortal in town, it's dangerous. [f, 25, Int22]

I think depending on where you are or who you're with or anything, sometimes you know your limit but you don't care any more and you just, you do drink more. [f, 21–24, WSH]

The group is an important variable. For example, one factor that can make a person feel less vulnerable is the belief that the group they are with will take care of them. By contrast, if one is not sure of the group then one may lower one's intended limit accordingly:

[In Freshers' Week] you can't really relax because you don't know the people that you're with, and you don't know, if you get really drunk, if they're going to be looking out for you, or if they're just going to leave you, like. Because at home you know your friends will look after you, so I think… Like, I personally don't drink as much to relax and that, because I know I have to be on edge all the time just in case something happens. Like, I need to look out for myself, I can't rely on anyone else. [f, 18, Int40]

A belief that the behaviour of other group members may leave one more vulnerable – for example, by getting one involved in fights – can also influence intended limits:

There used to be like a little charmer, whenever we go out with him every couple of times we'll probably end up in a fight because he just gets drunk and then starts trying to start trouble with people, which I know is me at times, like, but… […] I don't try to avoid… I mean, they're my mates but it's like, I don't know, they are my pals, you know what I mean, I don't try to avoid them or anything, it's just whenever I go out with them I'm always, like, I've got my guard on, you know what I mean. […] I drink a lot less when we're out with people like that. I don't let people realise that because obviously that would put a downer on their night, you know what I mean,

but I drink less if we're out with people who are, you know, troublemakers. [m, 20, Int17]

We return to the relationship between intended limits and the group in **§11.4**.

Other factors in varying intended limits

A number of other factors were mentioned in relation to the level at which intended limits were set, all of which are consistent with the view of intended limits as reassertions of rationality at the extremes of a drunken night out. For instance:

- ***Whether or not one has to worry about getting home that night.***

  I think we don't [get as drunk in Town I as in main town centre]. I mean we have done on occasions, but we tend not to. Because you've got to think about getting home, like it's not like when you're in town, there's all the taxi ranks all over the place, so you've got to think about getting back, and it's a little bit out the way. [f, 25, Int22]

- ***How conscious one is of money.***

  If I haven't got enough money, I tend to be conscious of what I'm doing and I think, if the girls say, oh, do you want a drink, I'd be, like, oh, I'd better not really. And I'm thinking about that, whereas if you have got more money, you don't really think, oh, well, can I afford a taxi home? Can I afford to have food later? You just tend to, you know, go with it, rather than have to think about things all night, or whether you can afford them. [f, 19, Int03]

- ***Wanting particularly to remember an evening, because it was a special occasion.***

  If it's a night like that. If it's a night where it's an event, it's an occasion, someone's birthday, it's something that I want to remember, then I'll be good. [m, 25, Int31]

After personal vulnerability, the most commonly cited reason for varying one's intended limit was what might be described as 'identity vulnerability' – the desire to avoid damage to one's image with other people. This might be:

- ***One's image with the people one was drinking with – for example, if one had gone out with work colleagues.***

  I didn't want to get so, so drunk in front of people I was going to have to see, like, the next day. [f, 24, Int29]

  Nobody got particularly drunk, or drank excessively just because it was … you were worried about first impressions and not acting like too much of an idiot. [m, 19, Int38]

- ***One's image with the people one would return home to – for example, if one still lived with one's parents.***

  I wouldn't be as drunk as I know I was at university because I was aware of the fact that I was going home and if I woke anyone in my house then I'd hear about it so… Yes, I'd get drunk but I wouldn't get as drunk as then. [f, 23, Int30]

- ***One's image the next day when hungover – for example, at work.***

  I think mostly it was to do with what you had the next day. So, I mean, I did go out on occasion when I had a [work] placement the next day, so I knew I can't get overly drunk, I have to be like ready to go. [f, 23, Int25]

With all of these factors, it is important to remember that stating a limit is not the same as sticking to it. Intended limits set on the basis of any of the above considerations will still sometimes get passed. In some cases, the intended limit may have little or no effect on behaviour – leading one to question whether it is a serious intention at all:

I think if I've got something planned I'm not going to get as drunk, but that never happens when you actually get out. [f, 21–24, WSD]

The pattern of responses from our participants is consistent with the hypothesis that intended limits have more force when more is at stake. Simply having 'something planned' the next day, for example, was unlikely to be linked by participants with an effective lowering of the intended limit. By contrast, real (reported) changes in behaviour – drinking less – were more likely to be associated with concerns about personal vulnerability or 'identity vulnerability'.

Finally, it is worth noting that lowering one's intended limit is not always the only response available to someone who faces a source of potential concern. In **§7.1**, for example, we saw that another possible (and entirely rational) response to concerns about the impression one will create at work the next day is simply to take the day off. This allows one to go out without having to lower one's intended limits.

Another interesting example is the strategy developed by some of our participants to avoid having to worry about money for the taxi home:

We'll leave £20 at home and get the taxi, just run in and get it and then give it to him so we know we don't spend it then. That's what we mainly do, leave it at home, which is a good idea. [f, 20, Int05]

This strategy is a way of ensuring one can get home safely at the end of the night. But it is also a way of going out without having to lower one's intended limits. The safer people feel, the more drunk they may feel able to get.

11.3 How do you know you've reached your limit?

The weakening of rational self-regulation by alcohol, combined with the impact of situational cues and social norms, is more than enough to explain why people drink past their intended limits.

There is good reason, however, to suspect another kind of difficulty in the implementation of intended limits. An intended limit can only be effective if one has some way of knowing when one has reached it. None of our participants claimed to keep track of how much alcohol they were consuming. So how did they know when they had reached their intended limit of drunkenness?

Money

A small number of our participants claimed to use money as a proxy for how much alcohol they

consumed. A fixed amount of cash can serve as an effective limit on drinking – although, as was noted, this depends on resisting the temptation to get more cash out:

When we go out, there have been times when I haven't, I've got it wrong. And I've made the mistake and I've had too many. But I think, we go out and if you've run out of cash in your wallet, you think 'right I can't get my card out'. Like, 'that's it, I'm not spending any more'. [m, 20, Int44]

I think the thing, the good thing about it is, you kind of, you make a decision when you're sober about how much money you're going to be down by the end of the night. […] I think an easy way to get too drunk is to spend all your money and then think 'oh, I'll get some more money out'. And then, by that time you're too drunk to really, you don't want to think about it too much. [m, 18–21, WSE]

Whether or not setting a budget is really a way of limiting how much one drinks is, however, open to question. The strategy could also be motivated by a straightforward desire to save money, and post-rationalised (in the presence of older interviewers) as moderating behaviour. It is striking that, in research conducted with 18 to 24 year olds for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), 18 to 20 year olds were more likely than 21 to 24 year olds to say that they leave their cash cards at home or set themselves a spending limit as a way to 'control their drinking and avoid getting too drunk'.[44] Given the excitement that typically accompanies the first years of legal drinking (see **§17.4**), one might expect the reverse to be true. It is more credible that the younger cohort worry more about money than that they worry more about drinking too much.

Feelings

Far more common in knowing one's limits, however, were experiential measures. These included the loss of feeling in or control of specific parts of the body:

I know my limits. […] The limit I should have maybe stopped at it is when my eye starts going a bit lazy. [m, 24, Int07]

I used to like, I used to think, well that's it, my lips are a bit funny. I've had enough. Whether it made sense or not, but that was me. And it seemed to work, because I, like I say, I never got caught as such. You knew when to stop. [f, 25, Int21]

They also include more vaguely defined feelings or experiences:

I don't measure it drink by drink, I measure it by how I feel. [m, 20, Int16]

I guess just something in the back of your head that sort of, takes everything in, maybe you stop being able to talk to people, can't really dance anymore, can't really stand up, so something just triggers and you're thinking like, 'this isn't what I'm used to, I'm used to like, sort of, being active and fun, so it's not fun anymore – you should go home'. Maybe that's it. [m, 21, Int39]

44 50% of 18 to 20 year olds currently leave their cash cards at home, vs 35% of 21 to 24 year olds; 69% of 18 to 20 year olds currently set themselves a spending limit, vs 61% of 21 to 24 year olds. Base: all who drink (18–20, 274; 21–24, 399).

You just, you feel it. I don't know about anyone else but I can feel it inside me and I just, I feel like I know if I have another drink, I'm going to be…maybe I won't remember my night or I'll just be messy. [f, 21–24, WSH]

In many cases, it was hard to avoid suspecting that the claimed way of knowing when one had reached one's limit was little more than a mixture of post-rationalisation and wishful thinking:

I do understand… like, I do drink a lot still now but I suppose if I did get to the point where I was getting too drunk, I'd know my limits and I'd know if something bad could happen round me, say if there was a situation going on, I'd know how to deal with it, do you know what I mean? I think that's just part of growing up, isn't it, you understand things more. [f, 20, Int06]

A few participants admitted that they had no idea how they assessed when they had reached their intended limits:

I don't know, I don't know how I've not done it again, because I get really drunk, but I just don't happen to throw up. I don't even get that bad hangovers anymore, I just don't understand really. There must be a limit that I know, I must just stop at that limit without realising. [f, 18, Int46]

Comparison

An entirely different approach to assessing limits is suggested by the following quotation – one that is based, not on an absolute level of drunkenness, but on comparison with other people:

Just don't be the most drunk, maybe, just don't be the guy who's drinking more than anybody else, if there's someone else there who's drinking more than you then you're maybe not doing it too bad. [m, 18–20, WSG]

While this is the only instance of comparison being explicitly suggested as a way of measuring limits, a strong element of comparison was also apparent in a number of participants' arguments that, though they got very drunk, they still knew their limits:

I know when to, like I said, I know when to stop drinking. Like I never go out and get paralytic drunk. I get on a nice level drunk. Like when you see most people in town and they just can't walk. I've never been like that. [f, 20, Int05]

I've been very, very, very drunk before, but I've never been to the point where I can't walk, like. I've never done it, I don't understand how people get that drunk, to be honest. I mean, obviously I've been drunk enough where I've been walking, like swaying around and stuff, but I've never ever been drunk to the point where I can't walk. [m, 20, Int17]

One of the interesting features of comparison of this kind is that it links individual intended limits to the most extreme cases of drunkenness seen in the context of a drunken night out. It is not hard to see how a widespread use of comparison, together with the fact that all intended limits sometimes get exceeded, might perhaps lead to a steady increase over time in the average intended limits within a community. A vicious circle could easily result, in

which higher intended limits led to more extreme cases of drunkenness, and more extreme cases of drunkenness led to higher intended limits.

Moreover, as a result of the generational segregation apparent in drunken nights out, any such vicious circle would occur in a social vacuum, unchecked by other standards or norms. By way of contrast, Ruth Cherrington has drawn our attention to the role once played by Working Men's Clubs in introducing young men to a different set of drinking limits: 'with the demise of such clubs, this informal learning has also declined' (private communication in response to Drinkaware call for evidence). Measham (2007) makes a similar point, noting that 'licensed premises were previously places where young people learnt sensible consumption under the watchful eye of elders'. This is in stark contrast to the contemporary, generationally segregated night-time economy, in which young adults may actively avoid going to places where older drinkers will be present (see for example **§7.3**). Hence Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) express concern that 'the separation of young adults' drinking sites from those of other generations means that multiple standards and different ways of drinking are witnessed less in drinking places'. Percy et al. (2011) note that this kind of segregation is also apparent in the underage precursors of the drunken night out (see **§17.1**), which are 'usually undertaken by small groups of close friends, well away from the oversight of parents or other significant adults' (our emphasis).

On the basis of this research, we cannot say whether such a mechanism is actually operating in the context of a drunken night out. We do believe, however, that the hypothesis warrants further investigation.

11.4 Limits and the group

One reason to take the idea of comparison seriously is the fact that we have already seen something similar operating at the level of the group, where, as we saw in **§10.3**, the norm of drunkenness is comparative, and dictates not an absolute level of drunkenness, but a requirement to be as drunk as everyone else. Like every aspect of the drunken night out, individual limits need to be understood in the context of a deeply social activity.
We have already seen in **§10.2** how norms and rituals within the small group can drive continued drinking, even when a person is very drunk:

I just wouldn't stop, I'd just keep going over my limit even though I knew I was really drunk or, you know… […] Just because everyone else was I think. […] I think if they all were, like, oh we're going to switch to orange juice I'd, like, go, oh yes, me too, but because they were all doing shots and stuff, I thought 'oh, I'll do this as well', yes. [f, 23, Int30]

You get competitive and you're like, who can drink the first 20 cans and stuff like that, and it's like, it was more competitions between us, and obviously lads being lads, you want to try and be better than everyone else, and it just got to the point where I'd drink just to – not enjoy myself, just to get absolutely abysmal, in a sense, and it's not nice getting like that,

in that state because I've been in some states where I've got home and I don't know how I got home. I've ended up in places, I woke up on bus stops, I woke up in a bush around the corner from my house, and it's just being really bad, like. [m, 24, Int08]

However, the relationship between norms, rituals and limits within the group of friends is significantly more complex than this.

Intervention and identity

One question we were interested to explore in workshops was whether the group could play a role in helping individuals to maintain their limits – for instance by suggesting to people that they stop drinking when they are clearly too drunk. This was not a pattern of behaviour which had been mentioned in interviews, and discussion was therefore prompted in workshops with the following proposition:

There's drunk and there's too drunk. Protect your friends by challenging them if they go too far. Don't be the one that makes them drink one too many.

Responses indicated that groups may ease off on competitive pressure to drink more, when a person has clearly drunk too much:

It depends on the time of the night. If you're just about to go out then you get them to down a few shots or pints. But not if they're already absolutely mortal. [m, 18–20, WSC]

I think there's some, as we said earlier, social occasions where you're trying to get your mate drunk. I think, again, once you realise that they're too drunk, you normally do step in. [m, 21–24, WSB]

But making a positive intervention – for instance, suggesting the person stop drinking – was seen by many as a step too far. Participants in one workshop did claim that they would suggest to friends who were too drunk that they might want to stop drinking:

Mod Would you ever intervene in what this girl's drinking?
f1 Yes. Only to say though, 'do you really think you should have any more now, you've probably had enough, haven't you?' If they want to carry on, then that's up to them.
f2 We just say, do you want water or something, just to sort yourself out like.
f1 Normally like, your closer friends will listen to you, like we'd say to [Friend], wouldn't we, 'oh I think you've had enough now'. Should we have some water, and she'd just be like, yes, okay. Or 'give me your bag, don't drink any more, you can't buy any more drinks'. [f, 18–20, WSA]

Even in this workshop, however, there was a strong sense that responsibility for maintaining a limit rested with the individual. The following is a typical reaction, from the same group:

I think it would be a better point to, say, be aware of your own drink, rather than cutting off your friend's drink. Your friend should be aware themselves, if they're drinking too much. [f, 18–20, WSA]

This pattern was repeated in other workshops: the maintenance of limits was seen as a matter of individual choice and responsibility:

It's not your friend's fault if you haven't drunk responsibly, and you're completely out of it. [f, 18–20, WSA]

They've paid for it. It's their drink. I might watch out for them. But I wouldn't take drinks off them. [m, 18–20, WSC]

It was thought unlikely that interventions, even if made, would achieve anything – and quite likely they would actually cause offence. If made, an intervention needs to be phrased very carefully:

If you really are that drunk and someone says, 'no don't have that drink', you sort of think 'well why not? I want this drink, I've paid for it', and sometimes we just don't listen. [f, 18–21, WSE]

If you try and stop them that could anger them. I've done it with [Friend] and I've told him to slow down and he's just got worse. [m, 18–20, WSC]

Why would someone 'get their back up' at the suggestion they stop drinking? This may be because the suggestion can be seen as questioning one's competence as a participant in a drunken night out – a desired identity within the group. It might even be seen as implying one is a 'lightweight':

People don't want to be a lightweight because then… because everyone's, sort of, a bit, kind of, sort of, treats you a bit differently then, because they don't want to drink with you as much, because you get too drunk too quickly and you say embarrassing things. [m, 19, Int43]

By way of contrast, consider the following quotation from a member of a (non-university) sports club. Intervening in the drinking of younger and obviously inexperienced members of the club is unproblematic, as they are still learning how to be a competent drinker:

If I'm around with my mates from school and we're all the same age and we've all gone out together so I feel that they're responsible enough that if it does happen to get… they're on their own they'd be all right. But because I play football as well, the range varies from like 16 up to like 30 odd so I've been out when there's been like a 16 or 17 year old with us and it's like four o'clock in the afternoon and he's had like five pints and he's spewing, we wouldn't go, oh, like here's another three pints, you're not going to, we say, 'all right some water now, cool down'. I think it's just at different times you have to take different measures. [m, 21–24, WSB]

While people do not openly suggest to friends that they stop drinking, they are also happy to use a variant of the trick cited in **§10.2** as a way of maintaining the impression of still drinking when in fact one has stopped:

And some water, because I've seen people who are wrecked and just go, well, that's a double vodka and lemonade and they don't really know when they're that drunk. [m, 21–24, WSB]

I've been out with friends before and they've asked for a double vodka and I've got lemonade and that's fine, they didn't notice. So there are ways to get around it. [f, 21–24, WSD]

Just as using this trick oneself is a way of protecting one's own desired identity in the group, so using it for a friend can be a way of protecting their desired identity. The voiced suggestion that they stop drinking, by contrast, might be interpreted as undermining that desired identity.

It is worth reflecting on the potential impact of responsible drinking messages in light of the above comments. If suggestions that one stop drinking are unwelcome from a member of one's group of friends, how much less welcome will they be from a third party? Indeed, since such suggestions call into question a desired identity (as a competent participant in the drunken night out), the most likely reaction may be to decide that the message is intended for other people. To see oneself as the audience for a responsible drinking message would be to question one's own desired identity.

The norm of care

Suggesting that a friend who is clearly too drunk might need to stop drinking was off limits for most of our participants. By contrast, caring for a friend who is clearly too drunk was described again and again as a kind of moral duty.[45] Deciding how much to drink is an individual responsibility; dealing with the potential consequences, a group one:

It's their choice to get into that state. You've just got to support them. [m, 18–20, WSC]

The idea of looking after a friend who is too drunk is closely associated with drinking past a limit. It is only when people start to lose control and become vulnerable that care is called for:

People are not idiots, they can cope, they can do simple tasks. I think there are occasions when you have to take into account when someone's really, really drunk and they're in the gutter, but then you do not normally step in, but if they're just normal drunk and they can walk about and talk, people wouldn't generally do stuff, that's how they're still alive. [m, 21–24, WSB]

When people do reach this extreme stage of drunkenness, however, the norm of care is so strong that a typical reaction is to drink less oneself, so that one can look after them. This willingness to cut back on one's own drinking is particularly striking in light of the reluctance actually to suggest the friend stops drinking:

Because of how bad he gets drunk, he puts a lot of people off drinking, so we all, kind of, stop and think… because it takes about two or three of us to make sure he gets back all right, and stop him from carrying on drinking and getting really, really, really bad. [m, 19, Int43]

f1 If one of my friends is really drunk to the point where she's drunker than anyone else, I'll stop drinking so I can sort of control myself.
f2 I think it's just – if they're worse than you, you're always going to be aware of them. [f, 21–24, WSD]

The existence of the norm of care has important implications for intended limits. In **§11.2**, we argued that intended limits are varied to reflect one's sense of personal vulnerability. One factor that can make a person feel less vulnerable is the belief that the group they are with will take care

45 The same applies if a friend's drink is spiked. Spiking was mentioned by many of our participants, with a number citing instances when their own drinks or a friend's drink 'must have been spiked'

of them. The norm of care underpins exactly that belief. Indeed, it effectively enables a kind of limit transfer between group members: one person can raise their intended limit (the person who gets too drunk), thanks to another person lowering theirs (the person who looks after them).

The norm of care essentially provides a structure which enables one member of the group to raise their intended limit. Put simply, the person in a group who gets most drunk can rely on others to curtail their drunken nights out to look after them – even to the point of going home early:

There's always a night when someone gets a wee bit too drunk. […] We just make sure he's okay, that kind of thing. So you don't just leave him – 'look after yourself', 'get lost', 'go home yourself' and stuff like that. You just keep him with you, make sure he's okay and usually nothing goes wrong. […] There's like an unwritten rule between all of us. [m, 18–20, WSG]

Take one for the team; like, if someone's really, really drunk, go and leave with them, like, even if it's ten o'clock at night, go home. […] And just miss out on that night. [f, 21–24, WSH]

Taking your turn

The fact that members of the group will sometimes drink too much and need looking after is an accepted feature of the drunken night out. Indeed, in many groups it is expected that, on any given night out, someone will get extremely drunk:

Normally when you go out, say someone got really drunk, not everyone gets really drunk at the same time, so someone is always more responsible. [f, 20, Int42]

I think everybody has their turn, but most groups will have one person that's absolutely off their face. [f, 21–24, WSH]

The idea of 'having your turn' is a fascinating one. It suggests a mechanism of reciprocity and exchange at the heart of the norm of care. The limit transfers that allow one member of the group to raise their intended limit one night, and get 'absolutely off their face', are balanced by reciprocal limit transfers on other nights:

I'd like to think, if I was that drunk, that my mates would get me home, because they're my friends, and that's what you should also do as a friend. I'd do the same for them so I'd expect… well, not expect, but I'd like to think that they'd get me home. [m, 21–24, WSI]

The importance of reciprocity is particularly apparent in those instances when it is absent. For example, this can happen with people who are not part of the core group – and will not therefore have an opportunity to repay the care they are given:

He got really slaughtered. That sort of put a little bit of a downer on it. […] I think it was just because we were all progressively getting the same way. So even if we were getting drunk, we weren't getting smashed. We were just getting quite, you know, having a nice time, and then he came and he got slaughtered and we all just felt like we were looking after him. It just felt like we were taking it in turns to babysit him. [m, 25, Int31]

The same is true for people who regularly need to be cared for. Over time, people who make a habit of getting too drunk may be dropped from the group altogether for 'abusing the system':

[You need to] take a bit of responsibility for yourself at the start of the night so you're not always leaning on your mates and sort of ruining their night because I do know people who do things, I mean obviously most of the things are good, but I know people who like abuse that system and think, 'ah, but there's always going to be someone looking out for me, so I can get a strong support', which kind of ruins all people's nights. [m, 18–20, WSG.]

The 'system' only works if everyone gets a turn at raising their intended limits of getting extremely drunk.

This invites an obvious question: how are turns shared fairly? What mechanisms exist to prevent limit transfers always being made in the same directions, from the same people to the same people?

On birthdays, the answer is simple. Everyone knows who is going to get most drunk: and limit transfers constitute a kind of birthday present from the rest of the group:

Whenever it's a mate's birthday now, we always buy him a dirty pint, just, like, we always just make a drink up; like, we have a Lazyboy, which is four shots of vodka and Red Bull and then we chuck Baileys and Sambuca in it. […] And we just make them drink it. But that's on their birthday all the time, that is; whenever it's their birthday, we do it. They do it to me as well. [m, 21, Int10]

In the highly structured context of sports clubs, other formal mechanisms exist for assigning a recipient of everyone's limit transfers on a given night:

As the end of the day, we do a Dick of the Day – so the person who, they might of like fallen over stupidly or done something stupid during the match, they would then have to, well, not have to, but they would then owe the club a dirty pint. […] It will end up being a 30 quid dirty pint and you'll have a shot of gin, a shot of vodka, a shot of tequila, a shot of all these and then it will be filled up with a bit of ale so that will happily knock someone, not knock them out but, you know, it will put them horrendously drunk straightaway. [m, 21, Int44]

Outside the formal structures of sports societies, the obvious candidate for a similar role is the drinking game. None of our participants made this connection, and the point is therefore somewhat speculative. But it is clear that many popular drinking games, such as Ring of Fire, could serve as mechanisms to randomise turns at being the most drunk person in the group:

That's lethal [the cup in the middle of the Ring of Fire]. It's awful. Whoever drinks it I know is going to be the worst that night. I've had to do it a few times and my friend didn't make it out the other week, because she had to do it twice, so she was in a terrible state, so she just had to go to bed. [f, 19, Int03]

Others – for example games involving a measure of co-ordination – create a feedback loop which ensures that small differences in early consumption are rapidly magnified, and at least one person gets really drunk:

You play word association games and obviously as you get more drunk, you mess up more, you drink more. [f, 19, Int03]

Obviously the more drunk you get, the slower peoples' reactions were, the harder it gets so it just sort of gets worse. [m, 25, Int32]

We discuss drinking games further in **Chapter 12**, as part of the wider phenomenon of pre-drinking.

11.5 Limits vs moderation

The strategy of setting intended limits should not be confused with approaches, such as moderation or responsible drinking, that are often promoted to participants in drunken nights out.

A genuine moderation strategy would involve behaviour similar to that of the entirely rational drinker imagined at the beginning of this chapter (**§11.1**). Such a person would weigh the incremental benefits and drawbacks of each additional drink, each increment in drinking. It would be possible to influence the behaviour of such a person by, for instance, making them aware of additional and previously unrecognised negatives associated with each increment.

We may, if we wish, imagine such a rational drinker, but there is no evidence to suggest any actually exist in the context of a drunken night out:

When you're drunk, you don't think… when you're not drunk, you don't think 'this drink is going to tip me over the edge', it just happens. It's like you are then drunk, and then you don't think, 'oh, I'll have… another drink will make me pass out', it just happens, so you drink loads of drink and then it takes effect.[…] It's not like 'this little shot will tip me over the edge'. [m, 21–24, WSB]

There are four key differences between the strategy of setting intended limits and the ideal of moderation.

The first key difference is that there is no concept of incremental gains and losses involved in the limits approach. A drinker merely sets a (vague) threshold beyond which they do not wish to pass, and gives the matter no further thought until they reach or pass that threshold – and they may never think about the limit again.

Quality vs quantity

The second key difference is that the ideal of 'moderation' is typically couched in terms of *consumption* – most obviously, in terms of the number of units that one is consuming. This is not generally the case with limits (although the use of money as a limiting strategy is an obvious exception here). 'Limits' usually relate to assessments of how drunk one is – based either on feelings or comparisons (see **§11.3**) – not of how much one has consumed.

Of interest here is a pattern where some participants went out of their way to explain incidents of getting extremely drunk, not in terms of the quantity of alcohol drunk, but its quality. The

idea of drinks that one cannot tolerate was given widespread credence:

I've had two occasions where I've been so drunk that it's not even been a pleasurable experience at the end of it. So I'd just say that, you know, if you've had one of those experiences, just try and learn from it and pace yourself and know when to stop, basically. If you know that something you're going to drink isn't going to agree with you then try and stay away from it. [m, 21–24, WSI]

Yes. I, like, whacked my head off the corner of the kerb and, kind of, knocked myself out and then some girl found us on the street and took us into the house and I've never drank vodka since then. [f, 25, Int20]

A similar strategy was apparent in explanations of bad behaviour, such as aggression. As we have seen (**§9.5**), there was a general recognition among participants that one is more likely to overstep the mark when drunk – with many arguing that, although alcohol explains such behaviour, it does not excuse it. The logical implication of this would be appear to be that, if one does not want to overstep the mark, it would make sense to moderate one's consumption.

Something like this argument was advanced on a few occasions, but only in respect of bad drunks – those who are seen to become, effectively, a different person when drunk (see **§9.5**):

[Bad drunks should] stop drinking so much. I think the bad drunks are the ones who drink too much when they're out. They overdo it, maybe like the pre-session. [m, 21–24, WSI]

You should know, if it makes you aggressive, don't drink. I wouldn't drink, if I knew alcohol made me aggressive, I wouldn't drink. If I knew I was going to go out, drink and want to fight the world, then I wouldn't drink. So it's just an excuse really, I think. [f, 18–20, WSA]

Strikingly, however, when people described instances of out-of-character behaviour on their own part, bad drunks were replaced by bad drinks. The possibility that they might simply have drunk too much alcohol was deflected:

Like I know now, I can't drink vodka, because I'm awful, just like dead aggro. […] We used to get in fights all the time. I would more likely be stopped getting in it and like, tell everyone to back off, like I wouldn't actually be getting into like fisticuffs, but I'd be like stopping it, but I was still always like, I was a bitch, my boyfriend used to just hate us then, he used to just tell when I'd been on vodka and I'd come in and start arguing with him. […] It was just vodka. […] We used to shot vodka and stuff. I didn't realise at the time that that's what it was. That turned us into like a total bitch, I had to stop it. [f, 25, Int22]

Obviously we are not in a position to establish exactly what happened in any of these cases. Certain drinks may in fact become associated with certain behaviours, albeit not causally – if for instance a drink is drunk only with a certain group of friends who have particular norms of behaviour. Expectancies may also play a part (see **§9.6**).

However, it also seems reasonable to hypothesise that the strategy of blaming the quality of drinks serves a very specific function here.[46] By effectively detaching the level of drunkenness (the thing that is limited) from the quantity of alcohol consumed, the bad drinks theory helps to release the individual from any responsibility for monitoring how much they drink.

On which note, we may note a third and rather obvious difference: that the intended limits set are well beyond any level of consumption that might be considered moderate.

Social vs individual

The fourth and final key difference is that intended limits are set, observed and broken in a social context, whereas moderation is an individual strategy. The importance of this point is readily apparent in the following quotation. Responsibility is defined in terms not of calculations about how much to drink, but of staying with one's friends (see **§15.2** for further discussion of the importance of staying with friends as a risk management strategy):

I think you get more sort of, it doesn't really make sense when you still get wasted, you become more responsible with it when you get older, I think. Like the walking home and stuff like that, you become more responsible with things like that. You probably still get more drunk but you come back with friends. [f, 20, Int48]

Anyone wishing to influence how much alcohol participants in drunken nights out consume through education and communications needs first to understand how the target audience are already managing their own behaviour. They do so, not by counting units, but by assessing whether or not they have reached a vaguely defined intended limit of drunkenness. This limit is varied in response to different factors, but in particular in response to how vulnerable the individual feels. The group provides a supporting structure within which people feel safe, especially when it is their turn to get extremely drunk.

46 Conceivably, some stories about spiking may have a similar origin.

12 Pre-drinking

Key points

- For many people, pre-drinking is not an optional precursor to a drunken night out, but part of the overall package of behaviour. 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.

In this part of the report, we have offered an account of the roles played by alcohol, drinking and drunkenness in the context of a drunken night out. In this chapter, we apply elements of that account to the specific phenomenon of pre-drinking.

12.1 What happens in pre-drinking?

Pre-drinking is a key phase of the drunken night out. It is not an optional precursor, but part of the overall package of behaviours. In research with 18 to 24 year olds conducted for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), 17% of respondents who drank alcohol outside the home stated that they always had a drink at home or at a friend's home before going out, with a further 25% stating that they usually did so.[47] In light of this, it is not surprising that other studies have found that a significant number of participants in the night-time economy have consumed alcohol before they go out. For example, Hughes et al. (2007) found that 58% of nightlife users in their field study in the North West drank at home before a night out. In Quigg et al.'s (2011) study of participants in commercial pub crawls, 87% of participants had pre-drunk.

Data from Ipsos MORI (2013) also suggests that pre-drinking is associated with the intention to get drunk: 49% of Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**) stated

47 Women were more likely to give this response: 22% of women stated they always pre-drank, vs 12% of men.

that they always pre-drank, compared to 17% of Occasional Intentionals and 3% of Never Intentionals (base: all who drink outside the home [48]).

Pre-drinking occurs against a backdrop of changing alcohol consumption patterns, with declines in out-of-home consumption in particular. It is not possible to establish how much of this trend, if any, is accounted for by increased pre-drinking before drunken nights out. It seems plausible, however, that pre-drinking has at least contributed. In Hughes et al.'s (2007) study, 'over a quarter (26.5%) of female and 15.4% of male alcohol consumption over a night out occurred prior to attending nightlife', while 'among those drinking before going out, pre-nightlife alcohol use accounted for 38.1% of females' and 24.9% of males' total consumption'. Whatever the precise role of pre-drinking in declining sales, on-licensed premises 'face a customer base which is increasingly intoxicated before arriving at the premises' (Bellis & Hughes, 2011).

Responses from our own participants confirmed that pre-drinking is a phase during which large quantities of alcohol may be consumed:

If I'm pre-drinking around someone's house, that's when everyone tends to get really, really, really drunk. […] Pre-drinking is, kind of, what does it for everyone. [m, 19, Int43]

The amounts consumed vary widely, and we did not seek in this study to assess intake in a formal way. Nevertheless, some of the accounts given by participants suggest that some pre-drinkers may be approaching or exceeding weekly limits for alcohol consumption on a drunken night out, before they even leave home. Note the words that the participants below use to describe the resulting state of intoxication: not 'drunk', but 'tipsy' and 'happy', clear indications of an intention to drink more once out:

Getting to the stage where I'm happy… oh, I drink quite a bit to get to that stage. Like, if […] A two litre bottle of cider, that'll all be gone. Probably had a few shots as well. […] About 5.5% [cider]. It's quite a low percentage. […] It's nice and cheap. If my friends go with me… if I'm travelling with my friends and they've got alcohol, we'll share. There's usually a spare bottle of wine lying around, so we'll all have a glass of that, as well. Yes, and that's probably getting to that limit. [f, 20, Int47]

I'm used to that now, so not that drunk. Tipsy, I'd say. […] I start drinking about seven o'clock, and then we go out about ten, and I've had, in that space of time, I've had something like ten cans [440ml cans of Fosters]. [m, 21, Int10]

In fact, it was not uncommon for participants to have stories of a night out ending after pre-drinks, either because one was too drunk to continue, or because one was too drunk to be admitted to any clubs:

So you're just drinking, and you think you're fine, and then a bit of fresh air, I was in the taxi, and I just got out of the taxi, and I was just sick, straightaway.

48 Note small base size for RIs of 97, Regular Intentionals also appear to pre-drink greater quantities: 54% reported consuming 5 or more units when pre-drinking on their most recent night out, compared to 33% of Occasional Intentionals and 14% of Never Intentionals (base: all who pre-loaded on last night out). However, as the base sizes for those who pre-loaded on their last night out are very small (43 RIs, 91 OIs and only 37 NIs) this pattern must be seen as indicative only.

I didn't even make, when I got to town, I just went home. [f, 25, Int21]

Myself and [Friend1] knew when to stop, [Friend2] and [Friend3] would keep going and going and then sometimes we wouldn't be able to get into a club so we'd be going into town straight to the taxi home because two of them couldn't get in. [f, 20, Int05]

In fact, door policies appear to be one of the few effective constraints on the level of drunkenness sought during pre-drinking:

I think before the clubs, you don't get too drunk otherwise you… they won't let you in if you're too drunk. [m, 19, Int37]

It is commonly argued that pre-drinking is associated with other important changes in the night-time economy – though it is an matter of debate which changes have been causes and which effects. In interview, Adrian Lee (Chief Constable of Northamptonshire Police and ACPO lead for the alcohol licensing and harm reduction working group) linked the rise of pre-drinking, alongside changes in licensing laws in 2005 allowing premises to stay open later, to qualitative changes in issues faced by police. He noted that it is now not unusual for a high street to be quiet until around midnight, when those who have been pre-drinking arrive, often already drunk, at clubs and bars, where they then stay until the early hours. The outcome is that the period of time during which people are intoxicated in public places, and consequently the amount of time the police are required to keep order on high streets, is greatly extended compared to the past.[49] Moreover, people are getting intoxicated to the point of not being able to look after themselves, which exposes them to dangers and means that others have to care for them and keep them safe. This picture was confirmed by other interviewees with a front-line perspective on drunken nights out.

Drinking games

One of the most striking features of pre-drinking is the drinking game. Not everyone plays drinking games; and drinking games can sometimes be played outside the context of pre-drinking. Nevertheless, the association appears to be strong, with most of our participants playing drinking games as an integral part of pre-drinking.

Like other, less explicitly stated norms and rituals, some drinking games are widely shared while others are unique to specific groups:

Ring of Fire's the most common one, just to get everybody … yeah I mean everybody gets plenty of drink down when we play that, and it's a bit of a laugh, and there's a few daft things going on … and yeah, that happens most pre-drinks to be honest, yeah. [m, 19, Int38]

We play, like, you heard that one where you go, if you say someone's name they have to drink, like, two fingers? And if you ask a question you've got to drink two fingers; we play that one all the time. [m, 20, Int17]

49 Hughes et al. (2007) suggest that longer periods spent intoxicated may also account for the fact that, in their study, pre-drinkers were '2.5 times more likely to have been involved in a fight in the city's nightlife during the previous 12 months',even though there was no such association between total alcohol consumption and fighting.

Every time he sings 'Roxanne' you take a drink, that's it. But it gets mortal, you'd be mortal by the time you've listened to the song twice. […] If it's a large group, you play girls drink on 'Roxanne' and boys drink on 'red light', or if there's just a few, you just use 'Roxanne'. It's just every time the word in the song is said, so you're just literally like… [f, 25, Int22]

The amount of alcohol consumed during pre-drinking can be attributed in large part to the popularity of drinking games:

If you're playing drinking games you're going to get completely drunk. […] If you go along to pre-drinks, then you know what's going to go on. It's silly to go and then not expect to get drunk, really. [f, 18, Int46]

Essentially, the games provide a structured way of replacing individual decision-making about how much to consume, with group drinking norms of the kind discussed in **§10.2**. The social pressure to conform to the rules of the game is strong – although participants insisted that they still had the option of not drinking if they chose to:

We play games before we go out, and we'll make each other down drinks and things like that. So that would be… but, if I really didn't want to, I'd just say no, I'm not going to. So whereas when I was 15 I don't think I would have said that. I probably would have tried to keep up with everyone else. [f, 19, Int03]

At least one participant admitted that, rather than avail herself of the option of not drinking, she preferred to cheat (compare the similar examples of pretence in **§10.2**):

I've got this new tactic now where I put the drink to my mouth and I'll have a big swig, then I'll just pretend to swallow. And then I'll have another big swig, but I think they… I used to have a straw as well, and I just used to pretend, really. […] Just keep the straw full and yeah, but I don't think it works anymore: I think they've realised what I was doing. [f, 19, Int01]

12.2 Why pre-drink?

There is no single explanation of either pre-drinking as a whole or specific phenomena such as drinking games – a point already noted by previous researchers such as Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010). The pre-drinking phase of the drunken night out fulfils a number of different functions: and the precise role it plays most probably varies from group to group, or even from individual to individual.

Explanation 1: Cost

Pre-drinking has often been linked to cost; and responses from some of our participants supported the idea that people pre-drink because doing so enables them to consume the same amount of alcohol for less money than if they were out:

Basically, it saves a lot of money; because in supermarkets you can buy a pack of, I don't know, like… I normally just have about ten [500/450ml] cans before going out. I know it's quite a lot, like. But you can pick them up for, like, six, seven quid. [m, 21, Int10]

We would do that as a pre-drinking so when we went out it wouldn't be as expensive because we already would have been drinking and been on the ay. [m, 25, Int32]

I'd prefer to drink a lot before I go out and think, oh, I only spent a fiver last night. […] It's a really good deal. You've had a good night and you've only spent £5 plus your, like, alcohol for pre-drinks. [f, 19, Int41]

As we saw in **§9.3**, cost was often cited not just as an explanation of pre-drinking, but also in the decision about what to drink.

This economic argument for pre-drinking only makes sense if the extra alcohol consumed before going out is balanced out by reduced consumption once out. Some of our participants did at least claim to apply this logic, drinking less when out, to reflect the fact they had drunk more before going out:

We know it's expensive in town for drinks so we know it's cheaper just to get, put money in and get a bottle of vodka between us all and then by the time we get to town we don't drink that much then because we've drunk more at home than we do in town. We just go into town for a dance and the music, which works out much cheaper. [f, 20, Int05]

A few participants claimed to vary the amount they drank during pre-drinking – up or down – according to how able they felt to afford drinks when out:

When we were younger I can remember just thinking oh, I've got to drink as much as I can now and get as drunk as I can now to last me all night because I haven't got as much money. But now I think instead of, if I buy a pack of ten cans of Strongbow, I'll just say I might have four before going out because I realise I've got enough money in my pocket not to get ridiculously drunk before going out so it will last all night. I can gradually do it. [m, 23, Int09]

Many other participants, by contrast, admitted that they failed to follow through on the economic rationale for pre-drinking, and drank as much when out as they would have done anyway. In fact, one can even end up drinking more:

In my head, I think 'I won't spend as much money', but then get to town, I still spend the same amount of money and then I get more, like, too drunk, so maybe I just shouldn't drink before I go out. But then if someone says, 'we'll go around mine for pre-drinks', then you say, okay, I'll take some wine. [f, 25, Int20]

The thing is, when you think about it, if you go out later you should be spending less, shouldn't you? I mean, it doesn't always happen that way, like, because if you drink more you're quite drunk by the time you get in town and then you're spending more money on, like, because you'll go up and you'll go, 'oh I'll have Jägerbombs' and stuff like that. Whereas I wouldn't do it unless I was quite drunk, you know what I mean. [m, 20, Int17]

These qualitative observations chime with other sources of evidence which suggest that pre-drinking is in fact associated with *increased* total consumption over the course of a night out.

In the research conducted for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), for example, 51% of those who had pre-drunk on their last night out had, over the course of the whole night out, drunk 11 or more units, compared to 28% of the base (all who drink alcohol outside the home). Strikingly, the mean number of units drunk by those who pre-drank when in night-time economy venues was, at 6.37 units, not significantly different from the average

for the whole base (5.68 units) – in line with the view that pre-drinking does not, in fact, lead people to drink less when they are out.

This pattern is consistent with the findings of Hughes et al. (2007), who found that pre-drinking is not necessarily a substitute for consumption when out. They also found that those who drank before a night out drank similar amounts once out to those who did not drink before a night out. As a result, pre-drinkers 'reported significantly higher total alcohol consumption over a night out than those not drinking until reaching bars and nightclubs' – and were four times more likely to report drinking more than 20 units on a usual night out. Foster & Ferguson (2013), in a review of international literature on pre-drinking, report that, 'a consistent finding was that [pre-drinking] is associated with greater alcohol consumption [and] intoxication'.

Of course, the practice of pre-drinking may itself have evolved over time. It is possible that economic considerations played an important part in the historical development of the practice – a history which might well continue to be reflected in rationalisations of the practice. Once established, however, the practice might easily have developed other roles in the drunken night out, meaning that people continue to pre-drink even in the absence of an economic rationale. The failure of cheap drinks in the night-time economy to lure people away from pre-drinking, noted by one participant, may support this hypothesis:

We always pre-drink because it makes it a lot cheaper. […] But drinks are really cheap here anyway. I mean they're only like £1 for a shot or something, you know, so it's not expensive really, but, I think pre-drinking is just the thing that you do. [f, 18, Int40]

Cost clearly plays an important role in pre-drinking behaviour. It cannot, however, be a complete explanation of the phenomenon. As Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) argue, other factors need to be addressed: 'alongside the fact that off-sales alcohol consumed at home is cheaper than on-sales purchases, it is not solely an economic decision'.

Explanation 2: Bonding and belonging

As noted in **§5.1**, pre-drinking at home provides a much more conducive environment for interaction with one's friends than a noisy club, where it is hard to keep the group together, let alone hear them. As Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) put it, pre-drinking allows 'forms of peer interaction that are hard to achieve in commercial spaces'. A number of our participants described pre-drinking as a time set aside for bonding with the group – prior to the social adventures of the later evening:

Pre-drinks is the time where all the jokes happen and all like the inside jokes, and when you get to know people, and then you just go out and meet new people. . […] Yes, pre-drinks is like you're with like your friends or your flatmates who you're still getting to know. And then when you actually go out is when you just meet people that you probably won't see again, unless you actually like talk to them. [f, 18, Int46]

At the simplest level, pre-drinking provides an opportunity to catch up with people – especially for groups for which the drunken night out is the main opportunity to socialise:

To be honest, it's quite loud in town, so I think also the pre-drinks, if you want to call it that, is a good place where you can have a chat and you can reminisce before you go out and it's really loud and you're not going to have so much of a chance to talk. So, I think that's also a benefit. [f, 23, Int25]

It's a meeting place for everybody, because obviously we don't all live together. It sort of kicks the night off, everyone's sort of … obviously drinking and chatting. [m, 19, Int38]

However, the desire for quiet does not in and of itself explain why people pre-drink at home. There is no obvious reason why people should not catch up at a quiet venue instead. Indeed, this can happen if no other venue is available for pre-drinking:

Obviously, I was at my parent's house, so we didn't really pre-drink at home. So, we went into town and just started off like that… Again, not at places where it was loud but places where we could talk to each other. [f, 23, Int25]

Why does this not happen more often? The cost arguments already reviewed may provide part of an answer. Saving money and bonding with friends were often intertwined in accounts of pre-drinking:

Obviously we haven't all got lots of money because we're students so, the cheaper way to do it is to pre-drink, so we'll go around, normally [Friend's] house because she's got her own house, and we'll just… […]. So that's why because we can all just sit around and have a little chat before we go out because obviously when you go out, it's quite loud so you don't really get to talk, so when you pre-drink, you can have a little chat while drinking. Yes. [f, 21, Int27]

Another explanation, however, may lie in the fact that it would be much harder to play drinking games in a public space than at home. These drinking games themselves provide an important mechanism for group bonding through synchronised activity. The following quotation describes the use of shots to achieve this kind of group feeling – albeit in this instance at an underage drinking party, not at pre-drinks:

Every now and then if there was a lull in the conversation, or a crap song came on, we'd just be like oh, we know how to make this better. […] Because like we live in town so we generally have a lot of people to ours still, and finally people are starting to tail off into little groups or whatever, we've got about 20 shot glasses, then we'd pass it round, and then it would bring everyone together again. […] Just a little thing that everyone can do together and you catch out people that have started drinking before you're meant to. Yes, it's just nice. [m, 25, Int31]

The role that drinking games can play in group bonding was most obvious in accounts of student life, where pre-drinking is less about catching up, and more about creating a sense of group belonging where none previously existed:

Especially when you don't know, when you've met people for the first time, playing a game is quite a good way to get to know them. It breaks the ice so it's good for that. [m, 20, Int44]

If you've got the quiet people, who are maybe… who are used to being in the background and not really making much noise, you're encouraging them to get out of their shell, and maybe someone who's, like… who's a bit like me; who's a bit loud and out there; I'm probably one of the people who probably overshadows someone who may be in the background. So, it's good for them to get their voices out and they can join in and they can shout out answers, and then you, kind of, see that excitement in them, as well. I get such a buzz from that; when you see this small, shy person come into a room and then, half an hour later, they're joining in that game and they're being as confident as they can be at the time. I think it's… I genuinely get a buzz from that, as well. [f, 20, Int47]

Explanation 3: Getting to the right level of drunkenness

A number of participants described pre-drinking in terms of already being at the right level of drunkenness and in the right mood by the time they went out:

It's nice to be on the level before you go to town. [f, 18–20, WSA]

We'll probably still have a decent night without the pre-drinking, but it is pretty integral to us I suppose. […] So by the time you're actually in town, you want to be out. You don't have to sort of get in the mood. [m, 25, Int31]

It breaks that ice and it just gets us all mellowed out and ready, let's get ready for the night and get out there. [m, 29, Int35]

This invites an obvious question: what is the right level? For some, this was a matter of having the level of confidence they would need to engage in social adventures when out (see **§9.4**):

It's confidence… confidence-wise as well, if you're going to a club with, like, loads of people you don't know when you're sober it can, sort of, be a little bit intimidating. So when you've had a drink and you, sort of, relax after especially if you're with the right group… right group of people as well, which can make it easier as well. [m, 21–24, WSB]

In some cases, pre-drinking was even linked to building up one's motivation to go out:

If you do get drunk, you know, it's making you want to go out more. I don't know. It's just, like, when one of you starts drinking, you have one and then you keep going and keep going and then you do shots and stuff and you play games – drinking games and stuff. [f, 20, Int04]

In the following quotation, this logic of getting to the right level is combined with the idea of pre-drinking as a time for friends, to create a clear division of the evening into two halves. The purpose of the first half is to socialise with the group and get oneself drunk enough to engage in the second, which is all about dancing and adventures:

If I'm drunk already when I go there, I mean, I'll still go straight to the bar and get a drink, but I won't drink it as quick, and I'm enjoying myself like straightaway, I'm dancing straightaway, whereas if

you went out and you hadn't had a drink, it takes a while to get into it, and you sit with your wine and you catch up with the girls and get all the formalities out the way, like how's work been, da da da, and then you get on the dance floor or you start like, doing stupid things. But whereas if you get in drunk already, like you've sat in the house, you've had like one bottle of wine which can cost, a really cheap bottle, like three quid or whatever, like you've spent three pounds but you've had like two hours in the house, like you've got all of that out the way, you get there and you're just sort of ready to start dancing and having fun. [f, 25, Int22]

All these quotations connect the right level of drunkenness to one's personal level of confidence and lack of self-consciousness. However, drunkenness is not just an instrumental feature of a drunken night out, valued for its benefits. It is also, as we argued in **§10.4**, a required condition of participation in the drunken night out. When one goes out, there are strong social pressures to be as drunk as everyone else. Conformity to this norm of drunkenness also requires a period of pre-drinking to reach the required level of drinking:

But you can't go out and not pre-drink because when you get there and you're sober it's like, oh right. [f, 18–20, WSJ]

I don't think I've ever been in a club sober, I'm normally, like, on my way before getting there. [m, 21–24, WSB]

You don't want to be the sober one in the club, it's not really…you stick out like a sore thumb, really. […] Because everyone is stumbling around and like, laughing at you, or just things aren't really as entertaining as when you're drunk, so… [m, 21, Int39]

Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) report similar findings, concluding that pre-drinking among their participants 'stemmed, in no small part, from the expected norm of exuberant intoxication in the venues that people would be visiting later in the evening. A brief period of sobriety when first entering such venues was considered intolerable, with a prior level of drunkenness required'.

Both rational choice and social norms align to create a strong motivation to reach the right level of drunkenness before going out. Drinking games during pre-drinking play an important role in delivering this outcome for the individual – ensuring that they consume alcohol at the required speed and do not get distracted by other activities, such as socialising:

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. So we'll play a drinking game…
Mod Wouldn't it be quicker to drink without the game?
I know because then you won't do it because if you just stand and… but if there's a rule and they're, like, you've got to have three fingers of your drink and then you've got to do it. [f, 25, Int20]

The thing with pre-drinking is that you get so much drunker at pre-drinking as opposed to going out to a bar or something. That's what I'd say. […] Because

obviously you've got drink and then everyone else is drinking. It's, sort of… It's not direct peer pressure; it's indirect peer pressure, that you see everyone drinking around and you just think, I've got to carry on drinking and keep up with them. So then you just gradually gets drunker and drunker as the night goes on. [m, 19, Int43]

As argued in **§11.4**, drinking games may also play an additional role within the group, not only getting everyone drunk but also randomly allocating turns at being the most drunk person in the group.

Explanation 4: A ritual passage

In **Chapter 4**, we noted that norms and rituals play an important role in marking out a special context distinct from the rest of life. The consumption of alcohol – a substance which is not consumed in most other contexts – can also play a role in creating this distinct context. Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) note that, for their participants, 'alcohol had a symbolic importance too, with its presence indicating a change of pace and intentions. It signified time aside from everyday concerns, such as work or study'. Rituals involving the drinking of alcohol during pre-drinking may therefore play a role in defining the moment of entry into the special context of the drunken night out, with its distinct social norms and permissions:

It was just one of things where you would start the night with everyone having a Jägermeister because you would just tap our glasses and that's it; you would all drink at the same time. And it's like, sort of, saying, right, let's go; that's it, the night's started; let's go. […] You'd have your, you know, what's been happening recently, how's work, all of that; you'd have your mature conversations; you'd get them out of the way: just, you know, how's life? You haven't got anything, sort of, bugging you or anything like that; and you'd make sure everyone was all right first; and then as soon as you were at that point where you just thought, right, everyone's in the situation where they're happy and stuff like that, nothing to talk about, like, in that, nothing to worry, or anything, that's it: you would just go, right, let's get started; let's have a good time together. If there was any issues you'd talk about it, and then the Jägermeister would be the point where you'd just say, right, we'll stop talking about it, forget about it, have a good night; move on. [m, 20, Int18]

Explanation 5: Filling the time

The final reason given for pre-drinking by participants was the simple fact that one had to do something with the time before one went out:

It just sort of added to the fun. And the time would fly past with it because you're actually doing something that's a laugh. It just entertained us, really. [m, 25, Int32]

It just adds another element to the night. So I guess if you weren't doing that, I don't know, it would be a bit boring. I don't know what you would do. What are lads going to talk about for two hours before we go out? […] You know, I'm a confident guy, I can speak without drinking, that's not a problem, but that's just the way it is. Just the way it is. [m, 29, Int36]

Going out earlier is not an option, because no-one else is going out earlier: everyone else is pre-drinking.

The thing is because nothing really happens in town, nothing really kicks off until about 10pm anyway, so if you're not drinking in a house, a flat or whatever, you've got to, realistically, go into town and drink somewhere else before 10pm, otherwise you're not doing anything until 10pm. [f, 20, Int06]

As the last quotation above notes, one could fill in the time by drinking out, rather than at home. Cost can again be a consideration here – although note that, in this case, it is drinking one might otherwise do at licensed premises *during the pre-drinking phase* that is being replaced by pre-drinking at home, and not drinking later in the evening:

The prices of drinks in town, it was always a lot more expensive to get drunk if you just went straight there. I mean, we'd do it sometimes after work, but we wouldn't at those times be able to get drunk, because it would just cost you a fortune. [f, 22, Int28]

Pubs and bars earlier in the evening were also described by some participants as providing the wrong kind of atmosphere, being too quiet and full of 'middle-aged people'. As noted in **§7.3**, the mere presence of 'older people' not playing by the same rules can be enough to break the spell of the drunken night out:

But in town, like, this weekend, now, we'd go over my mate's house, drink, and then go out. Even though, like, [Pub] you can get really cheap drinks, you get all the old men, wheezy old men, and stuff like that, so… […] Sometimes we do that [go to the pub], but more times you get all the, like, down-and-outs and that. […] I just don't want to be… don't want to be around, like, middle-aged people. If it was a pub full of youngsters and all youngsters go there before going out, I'd enjoy there a lot. [m, 21, Int10]

12.3 Does pre-drinking need an explanation?

There is no single explanation of either pre-drinking as a whole or specific phenomena such as drinking games. Spending time drinking and playing drinking games at home before going out provides an opportunity to mark the beginning of the drunken night out, bond with the group and get to the right level of drunkenness, all in the most appropriate atmosphere, at a reasonable cost, and at a time when no-one else is out anyway. Even this does not exhaust the reasons which people come up with for pre-drinking:

Sometimes I hate going to town when it's cold if you haven't had enough to drink to take the chill off. [m, 20, Int18]

One further possibility should be borne in mind: that pre-drinking has itself become a habit, something that one always does for no other reason than the fact that one always does it:

It, kind of, just comes with going out to be fair. [f, 21, Int27]

It's what we do. You know, it's nothing to do with, like, nowadays you hear about how people say, oh, drinks are so expensive now, so you try and get drunk before you go out. It's not like that, it's not like that. It's just that, that's just what we do, really. [m, 29, Int36]

When asked to explain an activity, people will always do their utmost to answer the question. In

some instances, it was clear that participants were doing their best to explain an activity which, prior to our asking the question, had never seemed to them in need of an explanation:

I think that [pre-drinking] was just the fact of thinking oh, I just want to drink as much as I can. I don't really know to be honest. I think it was just like… because it kind of got the norm for me… if I was going out, I would drink a lot. I just found it fun I suppose. [f, 20, Int06]

In this part of the report we have offered an account of the role of alcohol, drinking and drunkenness in the context of a drunken night out, and seen how that account can be used to make sense of phenomena such as pre-drinking and drinking games. Let us not forget, however, that these phenomena only need making sense of if one has approached them, as we have, from the outside. Our perspective – and the perspective of our implied reader – is comparable to that of the parents in the following quotation:

I've been at parties at my house where like my mom and dad and everyone's been like, no, it will be fine, and we've decided to play a drinking game and my mom and dad are like, why are you doing this, I don't understand it. [f, 25, Int22]

For the people playing the game – the drinking game, or the greater game of the drunken night out – the 'why' question does not even arise. Or, as our participants put it, 'it's what we do'.

PART D
RISK AND RISK MANAGEMENT

In this part of our report, we turn our focus to the risks of harm associated with a drunken night out, and the ways in which participants in drunken nights out manage (or fail to manage) these risks.

One way to approach the question of harm in the drunken night out is from an external, objective perspective. For instance, one may seek to quantify the scale of harm in terms of the number of people affected, the outcomes for health, or the cost to the economy.

Our primary aim in this chapter, however, is to provide an analysis of the risks of harm from the perspective of participants in a drunken night out. This includes the steps taken to manage those risks, and the arguments used to discount them.

Of course, people differ in the kinds of risks which they take account of and the ways in which they manage these risks:

Mod What is the worst thing that could happen? So, if you… in your imagination, what is the worst case scenario?
f1 I always panic about losing my house keys.
f2 The worst thing that I would say would be getting raped. [f, 18–20, WSA]

Nevertheless, clear patterns were apparent across interviews and workshops. On the basis of an initial discussion of whether risks are considered at all in the context of a drunken night out, we introduce at the end of **Chapter 13** a classification of risks from the perspective of participants in drunken nights out.

- Managed risks – which are considered and managed during a drunken night out. This class comprises the risks associated with non-consensual interactions – in particular risks of violence and sexual assault. These risks are discussed in **Chapter 14**, and the strategies used to manage them in **Chapter 15**.
- Unconsidered risks – which are not considered or managed during a drunken night out, but which are acknowledged as real when raised. This class comprises other single-instance risks. These risks are discussed in **§16.1**.
- Discounted risks – which are not acknowledged as real even when raised. This class comprises cumulative risks. These risks are discussed in **§16.2**.

13 Risk stances

Key points

- There are a number of possible reasons why participants on a drunken night out do not give consideration to associated 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.
- In fact, however, certain risks clearly are considered and managed – in particular the risks associated with non-consensual interactions (such as sexual assault and violence).

Participation in a drunken night out brings with it risks of harm. In this chapter, we consider whether and how these risks are addressed by those participating. Two broad stances towards risk can be identified:

- Temporary invincibility – a failure to consider a given risk of harm during the course of a drunken night out (**§13.1**)
- Risk management – consideration of a given risk of harm, accompanied by behaviour which aims to reduce that risk (**§13.2**)

With these two stances in mind, it is possible to identify, from the perspective of a participant in a drunken night out, three broad classes of risk. These are discussed in **§13.3**.

13.1 Temporary invincibility

How much consideration is given to risks of harm during a typical drunken night out? Some of the responses by participants suggest the short answer is: none.

You feel invincible when you're on a night out. […] I feel like nothing's going to happen to me, and I can do anything. [f, 18–20, WSJ]

This is not to say that people are not aware that risks exist. Indeed, they may reflect on the risks they have taken during a drunken night out as early as the next morning: feelings of invincibility are temporary. During the night out itself, however, risks are not top of mind:

To be honest, no-one goes out on a night out and thinks they're going to get in an accident, death, any pregnancies, any arrests or fights or rape, they don't really think about, ah, shit, that's going to happen tonight. [m, 21–24, WSB]

F1 I think you can know it but you forget about it on a night out, like, you don't actually think… although you kind of know deep down in the back of your brain oh, this is going to be… could be bad for me… you get caught up in the excitement of going out, you don't really actually think about the kind of serious problem.
f2 It's the next day yet again, what could have happened to me, kind of thing. [f, 21–24, WSH]

You feel a bit invincible when you're out, but the next day I sit and think to myself, oh my God, what did I do? [f, 22, Int28]

Why do risks not get considered during the night out itself? Our participants offered four distinct explanations for this tendency.

Youth and experience

The first of these linked temporary feelings of invincibility on a drunken night out to a more generalised feeling of invincibility associated with being young:

As a young person, you don't really think of anything as… you think of yourself as invincible. [m, 21–24, WSB]

Paradoxically, a second explanation saw the tendency not to consider risks as a type of complacency, reinforced by the experience of nothing bad having happened in the past:

You just think you've been doing it so long, and nothing has ever happened to you. [f, 18–20, WSA]

There's never been any downside to drinking. It's always, I don't know, perhaps we've just been lucky, I imagine, because obviously it can be really bad, but I don't know anyone that suffers from alcohol. We always see it as a nice thing. [m, 25, Int31]

This complacency may be reinforced by the sheer normality of drinking alcohol – and, for participants in drunken nights out, drinking it in extreme quantities. A number of participants drew attention to the contrast between the drinking alcohol and taking illegal drugs:

If somebody said something about drugs, you're a bit… I think it's just because it [drinking] is so normal, you don't actually take something like that so seriously. [f, 18–20, WSA]

Extending this line of thinking, some participants argued that the only way of raising consideration of risks would be to talk to people *before* they started drinking – although the first explanation would suggest that, being even younger, these people would feel even more invincible:

You're wanting to make an impact on younger generations, but it wouldn't on us. […] Because we're used to it. We've been drinking for so long. [f, 18–20, WSA]

f If you did like go round secondary schools or something, maybe when people are like 14/15. Sort of when they're maybe starting drinking, just make them aware that this could happen in the long run. Instead of like to people that already drink. Because people that already drink would just say, 'oh I've drunk before and nothing's happened'. Whereas if they're aware of it right from the beginning, it might have more of an impact.
m Telling people before they start drinking that this is what could happen, as opposed to telling people who all ready do it and actually know or they think they know that it won't happen. [18–21, WSE]

Drunkenness and denial

The first and second explanations focus on qualities (youth and experience), which the individual brings to a drunken night out. The third explanation focuses on the drunken night out itself – and, in particular, the effects of alcohol:

I remember one bad night at uni when we all went out and it was the same formula but I remember we lived near the [River] and then people, three of us jumped in the river and if I think about that now, we found out a couple of weeks later that someone had drowned there, he died on the way home from a night out. […] We thought we were really funny and whatever but if you're… when I woke up the next day I thought about it and I thought I could have been sucked away or just caught in something and died; it's so silly. [f, 23, Int30]

Female participants focused particularly on the tendency, when drunk, to put themselves at risk by, for example, walking alone along dark streets:

In town I put myself at more risk. Like if you're mortal in town and get separated from your friends, like it's dangerous, like I'd just wander around. Like, shoes off, because heels too high, it's not good. [f, 25, Int22]

f1 But see, I don't think, like I wouldn't think that. I wouldn't fancy wandering off down a side street by myself, but then I wouldn't think, if I went on a little wander, I wouldn't think, 'I shouldn't do that, because that [sexual assault] is going to happen to me'.
f2 At the time you don't, do you? [f, 18–20, WSA]

The idea that one does not consider risks when drunk fits well with the association between alcohol consumption and poor cognitive regulation of behaviour (see **§9.6**). Alongside this, however, some participants offered a final explanation of the tendency not to consider risks as a positively motivated behaviour: one simply does not want to be thinking about such things while on a night out:

m1 If you planned your life around worrying about things like that, I don't know whether you'd want to go out. If you sat down, 'well, tonight I could die, I could get in a fight', you wouldn't want to go out, would you?
m2 You can't be worrying; it's your time when it's your time, that's the way I go. [m, 21–24, WSB]

f1 But I don't know, if you're thinking of that every time you're going out, you wouldn't go out, would you?
f2 Because it's extreme, isn't it? That's like an extreme bad. That would happen. So I think you just bypass it, because you enjoy a night out. [f, 18–20, WSA]

This response – a kind of wilful denial of the risks of harm associated with a drunken night out – may be particularly likely if the only alternative to running the risk is believed to be not going out at all:

I think like if your friends are all going to go out, you're going to go out anyway. So it doesn't really affect anything because you won't think about if your friends are all going, 'oh we're going to go out and have a drink', you're going to go probably, unless you just want to sit at home on your own. So I think it sort of counteracts, I think people are aware of it but people might not listen. [18–21, WSE]

Worrying about something one can do nothing about is not a sustainable stance on risk – especially in a context which is supposed to be about having fun:

m1 You don't really think about it when you're out and about, like… I mean, you just… because you're out with your friends and you're enjoying a night, you don't think about that side of things.
m2 Even if it was the case, I'd rather have a good time while I was here. [m, 21–24, WSB]

13.2 Risk management

The factors discussed above, and the temporary feelings of invincibility they might serve to promote, suggest that little or no consideration is given to risks of harm during a typical night out.

In fact, however, this is not the case. For example, as we argued in **Chapter 11**, people set intended limits for their own drinking, which appear to be varied according to how vulnerable they feel. The assessments of risk which underpin these intended limits may be faulty, and the limits themselves may not always be observed. Nevertheless, even with these shortcomings, intended limits provide clear (reported) evidence that:

- Risks are considered in the context of a drunken night out.
- The consideration of risks has some influence on behaviour.

Another example of risk management behaviour is provided by responses to the threat of spiking. Assessing the actual prevalence of spiking in the night-time economy is extremely difficult (see for example European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2008); but the *perceived* risk was very real for our participants, many of whom reported instances when their own or friends drinks 'must have been spiked'. Keeping an eye on one's own and one's friends drinks was cited in a number of workshops as a basic principle of a night out:

If you're putting your drink down, and you go away from it, don't pick it back up, because… You shouldn't, because you don't know how, if someone's put something in it. [f, 18–20, WSA]

As with intended limits, this risk management strategy is one that may not be implemented as rigorously as intended:

If someone gives you a drink you go, 'ah cheers', and down it and you don't know what's in it. [m, 18–20, WSG]

There is always a potential gap between reported principles of behaviour and actual behaviour – and a possibility that the principle is mere wishful thinking. Nevertheless, it is certainly plausible that people do sometimes remember to keep an eye on drinks, manage to stick to their intended limits, or abide by one of the other risk management strategies we will discuss in **Chapter 15.**

13.3 Classes of risk

With these different stances on risk in mind, it is possible to identify, from the perspective of a participant in a drunken night out, three broad classes of risk.

Managed risks

The first class of risk comprises those risks which are, at least to some extent, managed during the course of a drunken night out. In practice, the risks may be underestimated, overlooked on occasions, or entirely neglected by some individuals; and the management strategies themselves are far from perfect. But the evidence suggests that they are considered at least sometimes, and that some steps are taken to address them.

It is striking that all the risks in this category are examples of non-consensual interactions – i.e. instances where one participant – the perpetrator – goes further than the other participant – the victim – wishes. As we saw in **§6.3** and **§9.5**, the behaviour of the perpetrator in non-consensual interactions was explained in one of three ways, in terms of:

- The perpetrator him/herself
- Lack of clear boundaries
- Alcohol

To some extent, therefore, risks of this kind were also seen as inevitable consequences of the structure of a drunken night out, the downsides of highly valued features (the presence of diverse other people, the social permissions afforded by a drunken night out, and the effects of alcohol).

Risks of this kind were more likely than other risks to be raised spontaneously by participants in interviews. The most important examples – and the ones on which we shall focus our attention – are violent attack and sexual assault. It also makes sense to include in this category such risks as spiking and robbery.

Managed risks are discussed in **Chapter 14**, and the strategies used to manage them in **Chapter 15**.

Unconsidered risks

Unlike the risks of non-consensual interactions, the risks in the second class were spontaneously raised only rarely, and no risk management strategies were identified. However, unlike discounted risks (below), when prompted with information in workshops, participants did acknowledge the reality of these risks – even though they did not think this would be likely to make any difference to their behaviour on drunken nights out. These are areas of risk in which feelings of temporary invincibility hold sway.

The risks in this category comprised a range of other single-instance risks – risks that can occur as a result of a single drunken night out. They included the 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).

Unconsidered risks are discussed in **§16.1**.

Discounted risks

The last class or risk comprises risks which are neither considered during a drunken night out, nor recognised as real when raised in discussion. This class comprises long-term health harms. These are cumulative risks – risks that arise only after many drunken nights out. Discounted risks are discussed in **§16.2**.

14 Non-consensual interactions

Key points

- The evidence is consistent with the view that there is a significant problem of violence – skewed towards more serious incidents such as wounding – associated with drunken nights out. 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.

The first class of risk identified in **§13.3** comprises those risks which are, at least to some extent, managed during the course of a drunken night out. All the risks in this category are examples of non-consensual interactions – i.e. instances where one participant – the perpetrator – goes further than the other participant – the victim – wishes. The most important examples are violent attack (**§14.1**) and sexual assault (**§14.2**). The strategies used to manage these risks are discussed in **Chapter 15**.

14.1 Fighting and violence

Fights are not necessarily non-consensual: if it is true that some people 'go out looking for fights' (see **§6.2**), then a fight between two such people is better understood as (from the perspective of the combatants) analogous to consensual sex. Often, however, people find themselves caught up in interactions in which they do not wish to participate – most obviously when they are attacked.

Participants' accounts of non-consensual interactions, and fights in particular, have already been discussed in detail in **§6.2, §6.33** and **§9.5**. In general, participants explained the behaviour of the perpetrator in non-consensual interactions in one of three ways, in terms of:

- The perpetrator him/herself
- Lack of clear boundaries
- Alcohol

To some extent, therefore, the risk of violence was seen as an inevitable consequence of the structure of a drunken night out. The matter-of-fact reactions of one participant who arrived at interview with a broken nose from his last night out are telling in this respect:

I was… it was in the street; so basically I went back to my friend's house, stupid, and I got changed, I wiped my nose, because there was all blood everywhere, and I went back out. […] It could have been a lot worse, you've got to think of things like that; because people have, like, got knocked to the floor and then they hit their head, and that's it, like. [m, 21, Int10]

Participant experiences

Many of our participants had witnessed serious incidents of violence on a drunken night out. In some cases, this was a result of arguments within their own group of friends:

Obviously when people get too drunk and argue and stuff like that. We've had one night, I think it was New Year's, where one of my friends and their boyfriend started to fight and they ended up punching her and knocking her out. [f, 21, Int27]

More often, however, violence – or its consequences – were witnessed among third parties:

I have. I've seen some horrible things, yes, when I've been out. Yes, I've seen, like, a girl glass another one, and things like that, yes. […] You know, sadly, we are one of the, like, only countries where glass is a verb. It's always happening. [m, 29, Int34]

There was a man, not even a man – a boy, like 20, 21, something like that, laid up against a wall and the police were bandaging his head up, blood everywhere and one of the police were being sick because of the sight of it. Like, he'd got really bad, and there was, like, no reason. [f, 20, Int04]

One of the boys got stabbed. […] Like, ambulances had to come up and get him, like, his best friend was there crying his eyes out. He thought he was going to die. He got stabbed by one of the other boys, not that we know, like, you know. They fight and stuff. He's fine now, but it was horrible. So I'd just say that was the worst, just fighting and violence, just seeing it all. [f, 20, Int04]

There's always a fight and you just see the bouncers and they just stand and watch. It's, like, don't you think somebody should be trying to break this up? Like, there's girls trying to take off their shoes and what's most horrible to say is that it's generally girls. And it's just, like, so… Guys tend to have the fights in the clubs, I reckon, whereas the girls it seems to be most of them and it's just, like, why do you do this? [f, 22, Int26]

As the first and last quotations above illustrate, a number of participants expressed the view that fighting and violence are common, providing a sort of backdrop to a typical drunken night out:

Every single night, guaranteed, yeah. […] You'll see a fight when you go out. [f, 20, Int04]

Every time you go out, you see something. [m, 24, Int07]

I've seen women being hit a lot more by men when they're drunk. [f, 21–24, WSH]

I think it's just normal: wherever you go there's always going to be someone causing a fight. [m, 18–20, WSG]

Inevitably, bystanders can sometimes get caught up in these fights as well:

Like she was dancing around and then some people started fighting behind her, and then one of them like… I don't know whether they punched her intentionally, or just were flinging their arms around or something, but she got knocked out and then she had to… They had to take her to, like, a separate room and like she said that she can't remember anything after that point, so that's quite scary. [f, 18, Int40]

A greater concern for many participants, however, was that they or a member of their group might be directly targeted in a violent attack. A number participants had experiences of this kind, including the participant already mentioned, whose nose had been broken on his last night out:

I broke my nose last weekend, like. […] I was walking from one of the local bars, and obviously someone was having an argument and me and my friend just walked past, and obviously looked over, and this guy was, obviously, either on drugs or drink, and, like, tapped me on the back and hit me, and broke my nose, like. [m, 21, Int10]

A housemate of mine went out – I'm in third year – and he went out at the Christmas of the first year and he was very, very drunk but got sent home by his friends. But he got like taken advantage of by a gang who weren't drunk and so badly beaten up that he like can't taste and smell and stuff, so. [m, 18–21, WSE]

One of my friends was involved in an incident where this drunk guy, never seen him before in his life, came over and bottled my friend and hurt him pretty nasty. That was simply because this other chap was really drunk. [m, 21–24, WSI]

We were walking out of McDonald's and they decided to kick off; for no reason they started kicking up, but it was the girls that were jumping on him and started kicking him in, sort of thing. So then his girlfriend, who was with us at the time, started pulling marks, or they started playing into her and tried pinching her bags or… I jumped in trying to get the girls off, and that's when the lads turned on me. […]We were leaving McDonald's. They were in there as well, but the staff had kicked them out for causing a riot in there, sort of thing. Then as we were trying to leave they were blocking the entrance and that's how it started, just trying to get through. [m, 21–24, WSI]

Well, last year I actually got punched by one of the guys in the town, and the police actually had to get involved because he wouldn't get off me. Like, he was, like, holding round my neck, and stuff. […] One of my friends got jumped and we were walking to the taxi, and it was six guys on this one… on my friend, who was just… we were just literally walking. […] Six of them, and they weren't small; they were… you could tell they were squaddies by their attitudes. And I was, like, come on guys, you've roughed him up enough now, like, trying… because there was people just standing there watching. And I'm, like, come on guys, just leave him alone now. One of them turned round and grabbed me on my neck and punched me, and, like, he wouldn't get off my neck, like. He was just pushing me against the bus stop. The policeman saw this and ran over, so it got stopped straight away but… it's amazing how many people around you don't come in a step in when they see these situations. Even security guards were there, and bouncers off nightclubs. They just didn't want to get involved. It's crazy. It shocked me a little bit. [f, 20, Int47]

While these stories provide a graphic illustration of the kinds of violence that occur in the context of a drunken night out, some care is called for. People tended naturally to tell us about the *worst* things that they had seen or experienced. While this kind of evidence can tell us something about the sorts of things that can happen, it tells us nothing about how often or where those things occur.

While most of our participants had at least witnessed violence during drunken nights out, not all had been personally involved:

I've never been in town when one of my mates or boyfriends have had a fight. I've seen people out who I know who have been fighting due to things, but I haven't been out with them. No, it's never really got into a fight. I've never had an argument or a fight in town with anyone or been with someone who has, no. [f, 20, Int05]

Some indication of levels of personal involvement is provided by Ipsos MORI (2013). They found that 16% of 18 to 24 year olds who drank alcohol at least once a year reported that they had got into a fight or argument as a result of drinking alcohol. 4% reported that they had done so in the previous three months. However, this rises to 40% of Regular Intentionals (see **§2.4**) who had ever got into a fight or argument, and 12% who had done so in the previous three months.

The framing of the question suggests that some of these incidents may only be verbal, and even physical fights will not always lead to significant harm:

Nothing really to worry… where everyone's so drunk, no-one can really do anything. It's just, it's more of an argument and then a bit of a scuffle. [m, 24, Int07]

There is good reason to believe that violence is not distributed evenly in drunken nights out. For example, some participants argued that levels of violence differ from one city to another – a claim that seems inherently plausible (especially given the observation in **§9.6** that the escalation of fights may be regulated by local social norms), but which we cannot confirm:

I was saying to a friend, we all go into the kebab shop or something afterwards and it'll be packed. And there'll be, like in [City 1], the bouncers get you in a queue in McDonalds and you've all got to go in single file. We'll all go into the kebab house in [City 2], be full up and everyone's joking and laughing and there's no, there's been no trouble. Not when I've been out anyway. And then we've come to [City 1] and it just seems that everyone wants to have a fight. [m, 20, Int44]

I've never been out in [City], because I'm always back here for work on the weekends. And he said, it's, like, he thinks it seems, like, people go out to look for trouble, so there'd be, like, rough boys will go out and they'll, like, do horrible things to girls. Like, they'll give a girl a slap or something like that and I just, like, if a boy hit me, I'd be really shocked. And I'm not posh or anything, but I wouldn't expect that. Not even in [City] and I know [City] can be rough. [f, 19, Int03]

People make out that [City 1] is terrible and it's nowhere near that. I was in [City 2] and it was so intimidating there. I was very intimidated. [m, 18–20, WSG]

Levels of violence may also vary from one venue to another, or indeed from one night of the week to another. Student nights in particular were identified as less violent:

I remember it quite fondly, yes. It was probably less 'stabby'. […] You know, like, Saturday nights you can have a mix of people. And you're always going to get, sort of, trouble when there's drink involved, I think, but less so on student nights, I think. […] I just think, [students are] young and all, sort of, there for the same reason. No-one's going out if they've had a bad week at work, or a row with the missus. [m, 29, Int34]

I prefer university. Going out in uni. Because we've gone out in town and there's just people looking for a fight. It's horrible. [m, 20, Int44]

Violence, being spiked and some horrible things happened in [City], but not so much student nights. [f, 19, Int03]

Data from Ipsos MORI (2013) provides some support for this view. Among 18 to 24 year olds who had drunk alcohol in the last year, 23% of those who were employed had at some point got involved in a fight or argument as a result of drinking alcohol, significantly more than the 12% of students who had done so. However, this difference may also reflect the fact that those who are employed will, on average, be older than those who are students and have more experience of drunken nights out: the difference, that is, may be one of exposure, not risk.[50]

Statistical evidence of harm

There is a body of statistical evidence which supports an association between alcohol and violence. According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), the offender was perceived to be under the influence of alcohol in 47% of violent incidents in 2011/12.[51] This figure rises to 60% for incidents of wounding (and in 49% of incidents of assault with minor injury, 46% of assault without injury cases, and 24% of robbery cases). Alcohol was particularly associated with violence by strangers, with the victim perceiving the offender to be under the influence of alcohol in 65% of such incidents (alcohol was reportedly present in 39% of domestic violence incidents, and 41% of incidents of violence by acquaintances).[52]

In England in 2011/12, an estimated 7,400 people were admitted to hospital following violent assaults (data tables supplied with ONS, 2013d) – and it is worth remembering that this statistic does not include people who attend A&E departments without being admitted. This figure represents a decline back to 2002/03 levels, following a peak of 9,800 admissions in 2006/07. However, the ONS (2013c) notes that the perceived involvement of alcohol in violence has remained steady over the decade: 'the proportions of violent crimes where offenders were under the influence of alcohol or drugs increased between 1995 and 2001/02, but

50 The difference in the numbers of employed people and students who had got involved in a fight or argument as a result of drinking alcohol in the previous three months is not statistically significant.

51 IAS (2013b) notes that, according to the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey for 2010/11, '63% of [violent] incidents [in Scotland] were said to have occurred under the influence of alcohol, a higher proportion than in England'. They also present recorded crime figures from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (for 1 April-19 November 2012) showing 54.4% of 'non-domestic violence with injury' as alcohol-related; 36.4% of violence without injury; and 12.4% of criminal damage.

52 The reliance of the CSEW on the victim's perceptions of whether or not the offender was under the influence of alcohol is obviously a limitation. Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that the CSEW may paint a fairer picture of alcohol-related violence than, say, police statistics. For example, Hadfield (2010) notes, 'well-documented difficulties in drawing direct links between police crime statistics and alcohol consumption', citing Home Office estimates that 65% of assaults without injury and 67% of vandalism cases go unreported. In the same vein, Florence et al. (2011) cite studies from the UK and Scandinavia which show that, 'only a quarter to one third of violent incidents that result in treatment in an emergency department appear in police records'.

stayed at broadly similar levels thereafter'.

Figures such as these tell a compelling story about the association between alcohol and violence. For example, the Government's *Alcohol Strategy* estimates that, in a community of 100,000 people, '1,000 people will be a victim of alcohol-related violent crime' each year. The Government's *Healthy Lives, Healthy People* strategy (2010) notes that, 'drunkenness is associated with almost half of assaults and more than a quarter of domestic violence incidents'.

However, these figures for alcohol-related violence document the consequences of drinking and drunkenness in many different contexts, and not just in the context of drunken nights out. As Budd (2003) points out, 'incidents that occur in the night-time economy present the most visible form of alcohol-related assault. However, it should also be noted that almost a half of incidents of domestic assault involve perpetrators under the influence of alcohol'. Drunken nights are not the only kind of drunkenness, and they do not exhaust alcohol-related harms.

What proportion of alcohol-related violence is specifically associated with drunken nights out? A useful indicator is provided by data from the CSEW on when and where violent crimes occur. Some ten years ago, Finney (2004a) found that, 'research consistently shows the peak time for violent offending is weekend nights and the peak location is in and around pubs and clubs'. More recent ONS data (2013c) show little change since then: **Table 14** below shows the proportion of violent incidents occurring at relevant times and places in 2011/12 – as well as an apparent skew towards more serious incidents involving wounding. In respect of the last point, Sivarajasingam et al. (2013) cite evidence from a WHO multi-centre study that 'violence-related injury following alcohol consumption has been found to be five times greater than any other type of injury'.

As ever, caution is needed when interpreting this data. For instance, we do not know for sure how much overlap there is between the 32% of woundings occurring near pubs and clubs, and the 60% of woundings where the offender is perceived to be under the influence of alcohol. Nor, to the extent that they do overlap, can we say with certainty that those committing woundings near pubs and clubs and under the influence of alcohol are doing so as part of the pattern of behaviour we describe as a drunken night out.

Caveats aside, however, the statistics are highly

Table 14: Timing and location of violent incidents

	6pm - Midnight	Midnight – 6am	Weekend	Pub or club*
All violent incidents	44%	17%	50%	20%
Wounding	49%	25%	59%	32%
Assault with minor injury	39%	24%	53%	25%
Assault with no injury	43%	11%	48%	15%

Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales 2011/12.
* 'Pub or club' includes pub/club premises, whether inside or nearby street/car parks.

consistent with the view that there is a significant problem of violence – skewed towards more serious incidents such as wounding – associated with drunken nights out. Indeed, the prevalence of the phenomenon of pre-drinking suggests that focusing on incidents in pubs or clubs may well underestimate the problem. As Bellis & Hughes (2011) note, 'there is little information available to understand how preloading contributes to alcohol-related harms in homes, suburban areas and on public transport as individuals travel into night-life areas'.

The view that there is a significant problem of violence associated with drunken nights out gains further support from three studies conducted by the Home Office around a decade ago.

First, Budd (2003) conducted an analysis of British Crime Survey data for 1996, 1998 and 2000, and concluded that, 'the BCS confirms that the many alcohol-related assaults between strangers and between acquaintances happen in the context of the night-time economy. Around a half of the alcohol-related assaults took place in or around pubs, clubs or discos, with 70 per cent of these on weekend evenings. Most of the remaining incidents occurred in other public places, including around entertainment venues and on transport facilities'. She also notes that, 'the majority of incidents of alcohol-related violence between strangers and between acquaintances did not come to the attention of the police (61% and 63%)'.

Secondly, Richardson & Budd (2003) analysed the Youth Lifestyles Survey for 1998/1999, using an intoxication-based definition of binge drinking. They defined 'those who said they had felt very drunk 'once or twice a month', 'several times a month', or 'at least once a week' as binge drinkers'.[53] They found 'a statistical association between binge drinking and involvement in disorderly and criminal behaviour'. For example, while a third of all 18 to 24 year olds reported at least one incident of disorder during or after drinking, this figure rose to 60% among binge drinkers. The authors also state that their analysis 'confirms that violent crime, while not necessarily widespread, is the offence most strongly associated with binge drinking. Around a quarter of binge drinkers had committed a violent offence during or after drinking alcohol'.

Thirdly, Matthews & Richardson (2005) analysed the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey for 2003, using a similar intoxication-based definition of binge drinkers as: 'those who drink at least once a month and reported feeling very drunk at least once a month in the past 12 months'. People who 'drink at least once a month but report feeling drunk less than once a month (or not at all)' were described as 'other regular drinkers'.[54] Their analysis showed a strong association between binge drinking, so defined, and offending, especially among young adults: 'young adult binge drinkers committed a disproportionate amount of the total number of crimes. 18- to 24-year-old binge drinkers accounted for only 6% of the total adult sample, but they committed 30% of all crimes reported by adults in the past 12 months, and 24% of all violent incidents'.[55] Young male binge drinkers in particular were 'more than twice as likely to commit a violent offence (16%) than other young

53 Richardson & Budd (2003) prefer this definition, on the grounds that the standard definition, based on behaviour in the seven days prior to interview, may record atypical behaviour. The figures provided suggest that this intoxication-based definition leads to up to twice as many individuals being classified as binge drinkers as the alternative unit-based definition.

54 Using this definition, 44% of young adults aged 18 to 24 were classified as binge drinkers.

55 Matthews & Richardson (2005) note that this figure, 30% of all crimes, is skewed by drug-dealing offences, 'of which a very high proportion (58%) were committed by 18- to 24-year-old binge drinkers'.

male regular drinkers (7%)'.

Further insight into the character of violence in the night-time economy is provided by Donkin & Birks (2007), who undertook a detailed analysis of licensed premise violent offences (LPVOs) in a single region of England, the North East, over a three-year period to 2006. They found that LPVOs are overwhelmingly (three quarters) accounted for by Section 20/47 wounding GBH and ABH. The more serious Section 18 ABH with intent accounted for just 4% of incidents, with robbery, public order and common assault each accounting for well under 10%.

Almost 80% of offenders in the Donkin & Birks study were male. Around two thirds of victims were also male. Budd (2003) found that, 'men have far higher rates of victimisation and are also almost invariably the perpetrators of alcohol-related assault'. In general, it is important to remember that those partaking in drunken nights out – and in particular men – are not just more likely to be violent; they also increase their risks of being victims of violence. Budd (2003), for example, notes that visiting a pub frequently, visiting a nightclub frequently and a high level of alcohol consumption are all 'consistently associated with a heightened risk' of being a victim of alcohol-related crime.

The relationship between alcohol and violence

The prevalence of victimisation among those participating in drunken nights out draws our attention to a more fundamental question. While there is strong evidence of an association between alcohol and violence, is that relationship a causal one? Does getting drunk make people more violent, or more likely to be victims of violence?

In the case of victims, there is reason to suspect that it is not drunkenness *per se* that increases risk, but the context in which people get drunk. As Budd (2003) argues in relation to the risk factors noted above, 'these factors are largely accounted for by exposure to risk. People who most regularly expose themselves to social situations where they are in contact with a large number of people who have consumed relatively large amounts of alcohol are more likely to become victims of an alcohol-related assault'.

Even in relation to victims, however, the situation is not entirely clear-cut. For instance, the WHO (2005) note a possible causal role for alcohol if 'reduced ability to recognise warning signs in potentially violent situations makes [drinkers] appear to be easy targets for perpetrators'. This pattern is especially relevant to sexual violence, which is discussed in **§14.2**.

When it comes to offenders, there is ongoing debate regarding the precise nature of the relationship between alcohol and violence. This debate, we would argue, is reflected in the sophisticated analysis of this relationship offered by our participants. As noted at the beginning of this section, participants explained the behaviour of the perpetrator in non-consensual interactions in one of three ways, with alcohol being cited as a factor in only one. To put the point another way, our participants understood only too well that:

Any behaviour committed in the context of alcohol consumption, violent or otherwise, results from interaction between factors relating to the individual, to the immediate environment, and to the alcohol consumed. (Finney, 2004b)

The problem facing anyone seeking to establish the relationship between alcohol and violence is that, as the WHO (2005) state, 'numerous mechanisms link alcohol and interpersonal violence'. These mechanisms include (our list adapted from the WHO list):

- The direct impacts of alcohol on cognitive and physical functioning, leading to reduced regulation of behaviour (see for example Moss & Albery, 2009).
- The influence of alcohol expectancies on behaviour (see for example Moss & Albery, 2009), with some studies finding a higher rate of alcohol-related aggression among people who expect alcohol to make them more aggressive (WHO, 2005).
- The use of alcohol as an excuse for violence, thanks to widespread belief that it causes violence (see for example Fox, 2008).
- Environmental factors, such as 'inconvenient access routes, poor ventilation, overcrowding, and permissive social environments, communicated through pub/club policies and staff behaviour' (Finney, 2004a).
- Common risk factors, for example an 'antisocial personality disorder that contributes to the risk of both heavy drinking and violent behaviour' (WHO, 2005).

The divergence of opinion on the alcohol-violence relationship is well illustrated by the following quotations from two different chapters of the same publication:

Anthropological evidence suggests that human beings, on the whole, can be a violent lot. The problem is that we do not want to believe this. […] We would far rather believe that a certain malleable element of our culture – drinking – is the root cause of most violence, and that, if it were eliminated, we would all return to our peaceful, noble state. […] Alcohol is a convenient scapegoat that allows us to deny and ignore the impulses and drives of which we are capable, and the influence of the cultures that glorify violence. […] The problem of young male violence (with or without alcohol) will not be 'solved' until realistic and practical measures for channelling such impulses are found. (Fox, 2008)

Growing evidence suggests that the association between chronic drinking patterns and violence may reflect an acute causal process, when the consumption of alcohol increases the likelihood and severity of a violent event. This acute process appears to be stronger among individuals with pre-existing propensities to aggress and, possibly, among subjects with lower levels of cognitive control. While individuals who have behaved aggressively when drinking may use alcohol as an 'excuse', there is no evidence that such people behave aggressively because they expect to be excused for their behaviour. In contrast, there is considerable evidence supporting the hypothesis that the cognitive disruption occurring with intoxication is responsible for the association between acute consumption and aggression. (Leonard, 2008)

The existence of multiple mechanisms, and differing opinions about their relative importance, makes it hard to determine the exact nature of the relationship between alcohol and violence, or the significance of individual findings. Take, for example, Donkin & Birks's (2007) finding, that

offenders in LPVOs are very unlikely to be repeat offenders: the 10% who committed repeat offences were responsible for only a little over 20% of the detected crime. This is an atypical pattern for offending, and one that might well be taken as evidence for the common belief that alcohol-related violence is 'out of character'. However, the study also found that victims and offenders fell into mutually exclusive groups, with only 2% of victims also offenders – a finding which might be taken as evidence for the equally everyday belief that violent offences are perpetrated by 'violent types'. The reality is almost certainly more complex than either of these everyday beliefs would suggest.

Hughes et al. (2007) offer an example of this complexity in their interpretation of the finding, from their survey of 380 young people (aged 18 to 35) in bars and nightclubs, that pre-drinkers were, '2.5 times more likely to have been involved in a fight in the city's nightlife during the previous 12 months'. This is despite the fact that total alcohol consumption was not associated with fighting in their study. They conclude that their evidence:

[…] supports findings elsewhere that the way in which people drink is important in predicting violence. Several studies link intoxication to aggression and individuals who drink before going out may reach intoxication earlier, thus spending longer periods in nightlife drunk and at risk of aggression. Such drinkers may also have different expectancies regarding drinking and aggression, or be more attracted to venues that are permissive to drunkenness and consequently linked with higher levels of aggression.

In summary, while there is clear evidence of an association between alcohol and violence, the nature of the mechanisms which underpin that association remain to a large extent uncertain.

14.2 Sexual assault and rape

Unlike fighting and violence, the terms 'sexual assault' and 'rape' have the idea of non-consensuality built into their meaning. By definition, they describe interactions in which one participant does not wish to be involved.

Participant experiences

The evidence of interviews and workshops – much of it already presented in **§6.3** – suggests that practices such as groping are rife in the context of the drunken night out:

When you're walking through a club there are hands everywhere. [f, 21–24, WSD]

We've got a few mates like that, always grabbing girls' arses. It's childish really. [m, 21–24, WSB]

People who are too drunk, like boys tend to…. Like sometimes, they'll just grab you. And you know, people who are too drunk. And they'll fall on you, and grab you, and pull you. And you'll just think, 'ah, just leave me alone'. [f, 18–20, WSA]

As with violent interactions, participants explained the behaviour of the perpetrators of sexual assault and rape in one of three ways. In the case of groping, a lack of clear boundaries and the effects of alcohol were often cited as the explanations.

However, as we saw in **§6.3**, there was a strong tendency to describe more serious assaults, including rape, in terms of the *perpetrator*, with the view expressed that rape is committed by rapists. There was also clear evidence of anxiety on this point. The apparent ineffectiveness of the word 'no' in the context of the drunken night out, unless backed up by interventions from other people, raises serious questions about what may happen when other people are no longer around:

One of my friends has been sexually assaulted from something like that [going home with a stranger], and other people not necessarily been forced but, kind of, coerced into doing it when they don't really want to, but because they're in someone else's house, I think they felt like they should. [f, 22, Int28]

A disturbing theme in some of the stories relayed by participants was the extent to which assaults may take place when the victim is not in fact capable of either giving or withholding consent, owing to their state of intoxication:

I work with quite a few 18 and 19 year olds. When I go out sometimes and have a cigarette and they're out there, one of them showed me this girl in [Bar] in town, from last weekend, where she was on the floor and they all took pictures under her skirt where her knickers were round her ankles and took pictures of her bits. Now that could be sent anywhere to anything. I kind of like, when they were telling me, I was like, that isn't even funny, I was just like, you should be ashamed of yourselves, because you should have helped her, you shouldn't have taken advantage. It just scares me that something worse could have happened to her. Absolutely shocking, and the bouncers really didn't do much either in the club apparently. So that for me was a bit, you know, there's limits even for me, and that was scary, and him thinking it was funny. [m, 29, Int35]

And the girl… I'm being serious, the girl was like, she was passed out, and the man was fully aware of what he was doing, and I was like, I think I actually got a bouncer, from memory. And the bouncer was just kind of like let them get on with, just let them get on with it. […] Honest to God, she looked like she had no idea where she was. […] You see it on the dance-floor as well all the time; not like that far but slightly less than that, you know, they do that as well. [f, 21–24, WSH]

f1 It's not just about being raped, it's about just going home with somebody or even going with a friend or even your boyfriend kind of thing and being drunk and not realising.
f2 I know people who've had sex with other people and forgotten about it. And they've only found out from other people or because the other person has said…
f3 If you've forgotten what you did the night before…
f1 You can't deal with it…
f2 It's part of the risk. [f, 21–24, WSD]

A few of the participants expressed concern that perpetrators may take advantage of this state of affairs. It is worth placing these concerns alongside a tendency in some workshops to deflect discussion of rape to discussion of situations where the victim said 'no' only after the event:

Boys taking advantage of girls […] Not to the point of rape, as in like, when you see in a club, like a girl's really drunk, and you can see a boy hovering round, trying to be all over her. [f, 18–20, WSA]

My main one is, probably just because I'm a girl, sexual assault. Because you hear so much about it nowadays and it's got worse. And I think it is really easy to get away with. […] I think it's easy for them to do it because girls, when they're really drunk and they don't know what they're doing, they can't put up much of a fight. [f, 21–24, WSD, f]

The survey conducted for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013) does not include specific questions about sexual assault of any kind – an omission we would strongly recommend is addressed in future iterations of the survey. Respondents were instead asked if they had ever 'regretted a decision to engage in sexual activity' as a result of drinking alcohol – a phrasing which risks reinforcing the idea that the problem is not a lack of consent or indeed the capability of giving consent, but a person making a decision and then changing their minds. 18% of women aged 18 to 24 who drank alcohol at least once a year, and 10% of men, reported that they had at some point regretted a decision to engage in sexual activity as a result of drinking alcohol, with 3% of women and 2% of men reporting having done so in the last three months. Among Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**), 29% reported that they had ever regretted a decision to engage in sexual activity as a result of drinking alcohol, with 9% reporting that they had done so in the last three months.

Statistical evidence of harm

The idea that an association exists between alcohol consumption and sexual assault does not appear to be questioned.

- In a review of relevant literature, the RCP's Alcohol and Sexual Health Working Party (2011) find that, 'sexual assault is strongly correlated with alcohol use by both victim and perpetrator'. They note that 'the state of intoxication of the victim is more significant', but also that, 'where alcohol has been used by a perpetrator of sexual assault, there is likely to be a greater degree of sexual abuse and it is more likely to be associated with physical injury'.
- In an earlier review, Finney (2004b) reports a similar pattern, also citing US studies which suggest that, 'although most sexual assaults occur between people who know each other, alcohol-related sexual assaults are more likely to occur between people who do not know each other well'. (The definition of 'not knowing each other well' includes casual dates.)
- The ONS (2013c) finds that, '40% of those who had experienced serious sexual assault since the age of 16 thought the offender was under the influence of alcohol and 13% thought the offender was under the influence of drugs at the time of the incident. Around a third of victims (32%) said they themselves were under the influence of alcohol and 3% were under the influence of drugs at the time of the incident'.

Particularly striking, in light of the above qualitative accounts of incidents in which the victim is not capable of either giving or withholding consent, is

the further finding in ONS (2013c) that, 'around a third (31%) of victims who were under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the incident were seriously sexually assaulted while asleep or unconscious'. These numbers suggest that nearly one in ten victims of serious sexual assault may be so drunk (or, in a small number of cases, drugged) that they are not conscious during the attack. The RCP Alcohol and Sexual Health Working Party (2011) cite a UK study in which 'the measured blood alcohol level for 60% of cases raised questions as to whether the victim would be in a position to give informed consent'.

While the association between alcohol consumption and sexual assault is widely accepted, the precise nature of the relationship between alcohol and sexual violence is, like the relationship between alcohol and violence more widely, a complex one. As Finney (2004b) notes, the association 'may be a function of the situation in which sexual violence occurs, or the influence of alcohol-related pharmacological and expectancy effects on sexual behaviour'.

Moreover, any attempt to establish the scale of harm, specifically in the context of drunken nights out and sexual assault, face issues analogous to those considered in the discussion of violence:

- First, there are important questions about whether the statistics accurately reflect the scale of the problem. Over and above familiar issues regarding the under-reporting of rape, the fact that so many victims are not conscious raises the possibility that some victims do not know they have been assaulted. Meanwhile, what appear to be everyday experiences of groping and molestation are going completely unrecorded. On the flip side, Finney (2004b) notes that offenders may over-report drinking in an effort to minimise personal responsibility for their actions.

- Secondly, it is not clear what proportion of alcohol-related sexual assaults is associated with drunken nights out, as opposed to other forms of drinking – although in this respect it is noteworthy that Hughes et al.'s (2007) study of drinkers in the night-time economy found that those drinking more than 20 units were more than twice as likely to have been sexually molested.

15 Risk Management Strategies

Key points

- Participants actively seek to minimise the risk of non-consensual interactions (such as sexual assault and violence). For example, they set intended limits of drunkenness, and avoid trouble where possible.
- The group of friends plays a central role in the management of risks. 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.

Three broad strategies for managing the risk of non-consensual interactions in the context of a drunken night out were apparent in the accounts given by our participants:

- Avoiding the interaction (**§15.1**)
- Sticking to one's intended limits (**Chapter 11**)
- Staying with the group (**§15.2**)

The concept of intended limits, the connection between these limits and personal vulnerability, and the difference between intended limits and ideas such as moderation, have already been discussed in detail in **Chapter 11**. The strategy of sticking to an intended limit is not, therefore, discussed further in this chapter.

15.1 Avoiding

Avoiding was described by a number of participants as a viable strategy for dealing with the risks of fighting and violence on a drunken night out:

I haven't been in a fight. I try, even when I've had a drink, I try and stay clear of all those things. [f, 22, Int26]

In practice, the strategy can take a number of forms. The simplest of these is, if one sees a fight, not to go near it:

You want to avoid it, you see it in the distance and you think, 'yes, I should go round them' or just don't even get involved. [m, 21–24, WSI]

Avoiding venues with a reputation for fights is also an option in many cases. It is worth noting that, over time, this may tend to reinforce the concentration of fighting in those venues, as increasingly only those who are looking for a fight go to them:

Basically: avoid [Club]. [Club] is the epicentre of fighting. [m, 18–20, WSC]

It kind of just became our regular after we went there a couple of times, just because there was no hassle. No hassle. We were, we're a bit lively and a bit, a bit boisterous but not in a frightening way at all. [m, 24, Int07]

As we, sort of, got a bit more money, all got better jobs, we started moving to, sort of, the [Club 1], to, like, sort of, the [Club 2] line. And that's a bit more pricey but a bit more, sort of… a bit snobby. You get a lot of posh people there, but it's a bit more of a friendlier environment, you find a lot less, sort of, aggravation around there. [m, 20, Int18]

It appears that even alleyways may acquire a reputation:

[City] can be quite violent, so there is that, there is that element I suppose, and yes, you try and avoid certain alleyways, but if it was desperate and the queues were getting big you go down them anyway or whatever, you know, that sort of thing I suppose. [m, 29, Int33]

Even applying the above strategies, one may still be targeted at some point during a drunken night out – if not in a venue, then in the street. At this point, avoiding takes the form of walking away – though this approach too has its limitations:

You get some people who get a bit arsey with you, but it's more just walk away, walk away, because I'm not confrontational at all and I'd rather walk away than sort of get my head kicked in. [m, 24, Int08]

I'm the kind of person that, when somebody starts something like that, I try and steer clear from them from that point on, but I know of this happening, again it's always the same people. [f, 24, Int28]

Walking away can be understood in two ways. First, from the perspective of the escalation model of fighting presented in **§9.5**, walking away is a simple way of regulating one's own response and stopping the fight escalating further:

You can get idiots, but if you just take a drunk person too seriously, let's be honest, it's a wrecked person, you just dismiss them and get on with your night, to be honest. It's like you see fighting but you don't take it too serious. The only thing that happens is when you actually confront it and you make it your problem, that's when it hurts your night, otherwise if you just… it's all going to happen on a night out, but if you take everything personally it's just going to be fighting and you're going to be hitting people, you're going to be chucked out and basically arrested, everything's going to happen. [m, 21–24, WSB]

It's about not provoking people. You can see someone is angry, and they want to go at you. And it's about walking away from that. [m, 18–20, WSC]

If one takes seriously the idea that some fighting is a consensual social adventure, with certain behaviours serving as invitations to participate, in the same way that chat-up lines are invitations to participate in sexual social adventures (see **§6.2**), then walking away can also be interpreted as a way of signalling a lack of interest. A number of participants talked about the need to be streetwise – which is to say, to understand the norms of communication around fighting and avoid the behaviours that will be interpreted as indicating willingness to participate:

I just think you've got to be streetwise, like. Don't act scared. I think you've got to act confident and you know who not to mess with, like, don't look at

people or give people dirty looks because literally you'll just look at someone and they'll be, like, why are you looking at me like that and they'll come over to you. Just keep yourself to yourself, basically, that's what I'd say. [f, 20, Int04]

To be honest, the best thing I've found at the minute is just to completely ignore them and just pretend as if you're talking to someone else. Don't look at them because as soon as you give them eye contact, that's it. They're just hot-headed. [m, 20, Int18]

You just need to be streetwise. Like, if you look at someone, like don't try to get into fights, just keep your head down, if you see a massive group of girls, and you think they're going to start, like. That's the only other thing I'd say. You've got to be quite streetwise, going out in town, yes. Because girls are out there looking for fights. And boys are. They go off for a fight. [f, 18–20, WSA]

15.2 Staying with the group

As is the case with many other aspects of the drunken night out, the group of friends with whom one goes out plays a central role in the management of risks.

- In **§11.4**, for example, we discussed the role of the group in providing care if one goes past one's intended limit of drunkenness – and the ways in which this support structure may actually enable individuals to take turns at being the most drunk.
- In **§6.3**, we also noted the critical role played by the group in intervening when, for example, the word 'no' fails to establish boundaries in sexual behaviours.
- Members of the group may also intervene in conflict situations, either to defuse the situation (see **§6.3**) or to defend a friend (see **§9.5**) – although in practice, the latter kind of intervention probably will typically make things worse, not better.

In light of this, one of the fundamental risk management strategies adopted by our participants was to stay with the group:

I think as long as you all look after each other when you go out, that's the main thing, because you always hear tales of stories where people end up going off here and going off there, and as long as we all stay together as a group, it's alright like. You need to look after each other. [m, 24, Int08]

I think out of any of the rules, like the friend rules are the ones you stick to the most, rather than I'll pace myself or drink more water or anything like that. [f, 21–24, WSD]

Seen primarily as a way of managing the risks of sexual assault, the importance of staying with the group was emphasised by females in particular, and by males when in groups with females:

Somebody could be just in the club watching you, like dancing, and see you walk off by yourself. They just follow you wherever you went. [f, 18–20, WSA]

Larger groups were also seen by some participants as a way of reducing the risk of being targeted in a non-sexual attack:

If you're in large groups of people then people tend not to mess with you. If you're just a single person, they might try it on with you and take the mick out of you in front of their friends, so sticking together, really. [m, 21–24, WSI]

There is dangers in town and maybe going out in bigger groups is sometimes a better idea, because, if it's just two of you, it's less intimidating then. [f, 20, Int47]

The rule of staying with the group is matched by a requirement that the group should look after its members, neither leaving any individual member of the group behind nor letting them wander off:

I think with that, you think, if you go out as a group, us three went out as a group, I wouldn't just be looking out for those two, I'd expect them to be looking out for me as well. So it's like a mutual thing. [f, 18–20, WSA]

The norm of care, discussed in **§11.4**, can be seen as a specific instance of this general rule. Responsibility for the safety of other members of the group extends right up to the end of the night out – although there were differences of opinion as to whether the evening ended when one put someone in a taxi, or when they actually got home:

If I'm out with some of the girls, I make sure they get in a taxi. [m, 21–24, WSB]

I wouldn't let one of my friends get in a taxi and go home by herself. It's just not, I wouldn't let anybody wander off on their own. You know things, more safe, don't you? [f, 18–20, WSA]

In some sports clubs the norms of staying with the group and looking after group members are formally codified, in much the same way that, as we saw in **§5.3**, other norms and rituals may be formally codified in this setting:

I'm in a rugby club and we have rules, like we went on tour and we had rules out there, like, to look after each other. If you were too drunk and had to go home, you had like three people with you and […] so if you like pulled a guy he had to come home to your hotel you weren't allowed to go back to his. [f, 18–21, WSE]

A secure base for social adventures

The pursuit of social adventures, of course, can require a degree of separation from the group. Even then, however, the group provides a secure base to which the adventurer can return:

The best thing I like about on a night out, it's not just getting drunk like, it's just like meeting new people as well. […] I go out in a group and then sort of, like, wander off and I… And then meet new people. [m, 21–24, WSB]

All the girls will probably just dance together but when we're in the clubs… because, like, yes, we've all got… all our friends are around, we, kind of, mingle about and then we'll always meet up again and then we'll probably go off again and, like, mingle about again and then come back but we always go home together. [f, 21, Int27]

Even when talking to different people, members of the group may keep an eye on each other:

If she was speaking to like a boy in a club, or I am, like vice versa, or [Friend], like I'm always making sure I'm like watching her. Just to see if, you know what boys are like, and they try to grope you, take you outside, like persuade you to come home with them. So you always make sure. [f, 18–20, WSA]

It's always looking out for each other as well, which is what we've always done. [m, 24, Int08]

The potential tension between the imperative to stay with the group and social adventures can be particularly apparent when people pull. A number of participants commented that, even if one did pull, one never then went back home with the person:

If one of my friends did pull, they would like, they wouldn't, would never have gone back to anybody's house, do you know what I mean? Like, they would maybe like kiss or whatever, when they're out. But they would come back to us, do you know what I mean? And then we'd go home… [f, 25, Int21]

It was a little thing between me [and Friends] that we always used to say 'don't go to somebody else's house'. […] Even I could be steaming drunk, even then, I've been propositioned and I've just said 'no, I'm not going'. You hear all these horror stories, don't you? That's something my mum always used to say to me, 'do what you want, just keep yourself safe'. I still haven't, I don't think I ever will go back to someone's house, even now I could be 40 and I don't think I would, not until I knew them. [f, 22, Int28]

The insistence on staying with the group can accompany quite extreme tastes in consensual sexual adventures. The second participant quoted above, for example, described a phase during which she would regularly have sex with people in clubs. This happened, however, under the watchful eye of a friend:

We have a buddy-up thing, like we don't leave each other's side, we go to the toilet together, we go for a cigarette together, we go to the bar together. If we're dancing we go and dance together, if I'm doing… like this was before, when I was having sex in doorways and disgusting things, she'd be nearby, obviously not watching but yes, just keep an eye on me. [f, 22, Int28]

People leave groups

Despite the importance of staying with the group as a fundamental rule of risk management during a drunken night out, many participants were clear that the rule gets broken:

It is out there, a lot of people do it, but I think it still needs to be out there because there are still girls that are going home on their own and stuff like that and they're getting raped and stuff like that. [m, 21–24, WSI]

To some extent this can happen by accident when people who leave the group in search of social adventures get lost in large crowds:

I think they [the rules] get broken accidentally. If you go out on campus and you're in a massive group and say people are looking to pull and stuff

and you lose track of people. I mean if people go home with someone and stuff… [f, 18–21, WSE]

It's such a big place, it's so easy to lose people. [f, 19, Int02]

As a number of participants noted, however, the affects of alcohol can lead people to forget the risks and, in a state of temporary invincibility (see **§13.1**), wander off:

You can still just like walk off on your own, can't you, when you're drunk? Even if you're with a group of mates it can still happen to you. [m, 21–24, WSI]

You can wander off and… I've been out plenty of times. I've been out with friends and I've lost them all, like ended the night by myself. It's not a very nice feeling. And it's happened quite a few times and you just wonder how you got where you are. [m, 21–24, WSB]

In a particularly problematic pattern, people can acquire a reputation for wandering off which in turn leads to the group worrying less when they do so. Group protection is *de facto* withdrawn for these serial wanderers:

I know of groups that I've heard them talk amongst like other groups of friends, and they'll say, ah such and such, ah she often just does a wander. Do you know? [f, 25, Int21]

Say if you have a friend who always gets really drunk and they always like go off on their own, and if you always…and if it's one of your friends who doesn't normally do that, then you'd maybe make more of an effort to look, but then if it's somebody who always does that then you're like, oh, they're normally fine when they do that, like, I'll just leave them, but then something could actually happen to them. [f, 21–24, WSH]

There is clear evidence here of another factor in feelings of temporary invincibility: past experience. The fact that people have wandered off many times before without anything bad happening to them leads to the conclusion that nothing bad will happen to them this time. Note how, in the following quotation this (faulty) logic is used to explain an obvious breach of a rule which has just been presented as inviolable:

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 won't leave town unless we're together, so we all make sure… or if a few of us are leaving town, we'll make sure we tell the other girls so they know that we've gone, so they know not to wait around for us. So we all make sure we know where we are and… Sometimes one or two just disappear, but… […] We know that they're the ones who would tend to disappear, so. [f, 19, Int03]

Half an hour later, the same participant offered another example of the way in which experience and age can breed complacency:

When we were younger, we didn't really know our limits. So then we'd get extremely drunk, we wouldn't know what we were doing and it'd scare the rest of us. Now, if one of us wandered off, as much as you wouldn't leave each other even

now, we, sort of, wouldn't be as scared because we know that we're not going to be in a gutter somewhere. Whereas, I think when we were 17, we would think, oh my God, like, what's happened? We'd automatically assume that something had happened, or something, whereas now, when we're older, we don't really. [f, 19, Int03]

Groups leave people

Just as people can wander off and leave their group, so too sometimes groups may fail to provide the care and support they are supposed to. For example, this can happen in the case of those who 'abuse the system', repeatedly drinking beyond their limits and relying on the group to look after them (see **§11.4**):

Sometimes if people are getting fed up of always looking after the one person then there's maybe like certain people in the group who'll be like, oh, just leave her, she does it all the time…or else there's maybe like that one or two people who will always feel like, no, no matter what I won't leave her, and they always get kind of landed with the person. There's always that kind of one person that has to always put up with it, I'd say. [f, 21–24, WSH]

If it's happening all the time then I'd be, like, you're on your own now, dear, type of thing. Because then it ruins your night, because you've got to make sure they're all right. And they should know their own limits themselves, they shouldn't have other people to look after them: they should know themselves. [f, 18–20, WSJ]

Alongside this possibility, particular problems can arise for more peripheral members of groups. Within larger groups in particular, people may be more likely to identify a small number of their closest friends as the people they will stay with and look out for:

I think it depends on who it is as well, because, I mean, you may have big groups of friends, but within that group of friends you'll have the odd one or two that are really, really close with you and you're really close with them, and you tend to look out for them more. [m, 21–24, WSI]

There was always about 11 of us who went out, but it always used to just end up the four of us going home with each other, or in the club we'd all just split up, but us four made sure we stuck with each other all the time. [f, 20, Int05]

Focusing on smaller groups like this obviously makes sense in a context where keeping larger groups together would be entirely impractical. However, it creates the risk that individuals may be part of a group without being part of any of these smaller groups:

You sort of expect their closer friends to be there for them. [f, 18–20, WSA]

She'd just had too much to drink, and she was once being sick in the toilets. But, I wasn't her close friend as such, then. Like, I was out with her. And like I say, we'd all sit together, but you always had someone that might be a bit more closer. So she'd been in the toilets being sick for so long, and I think she'd rang her boyfriend. And we didn't know until we'd found her, and she was going to be getting picked up from her boyfriend. And we were like

oh, I remember saying, like oh, I can't believe it. If I knew you were ill, I would have been there, do you know what I mean? But I don't think, one of her friends said, oh she's just gone to the toilet, like, and nothing was wrong with her. [f, 25, Int21]

When an individual is left by a group in this way, strangers may also fail to help them – precisely because it is the responsibility of the group they went out with to help them. The support of the group can, perversely, become a barrier to their receiving help:

If I was with a group of boys and I knew someone was just out, as in the gutter, but I knew him but he was out with some other people, I'd just go to the people, I'd grab him and say, look, you've got a problem here, and then I'd just go on with my night then. [m, 21–24, WSB]

It is the possibility of situations like this which the formal buddy system operated by some sports clubs aims to avoid, by ensuring that everyone is a member of a small group within the larger group. Outside those settings, the protection afforded by the group can vary: and the faith placed by individuals in the support of their group may sometimes prove to be misplaced.

Such risks are likely to be magnified when people go out with groups they know less well – as friends of friends, for example. Indeed, on occasions, the group itself might be a source of risk. The following extended extract from an interview is from a participant's description of a holiday abroad. When the friends she had gone with did not want to go out on their second night, she decided to go out instead with a male group she had met on the beach the day before. Her confidence in this group turned out to be justified, but the incident provides a clear example of how such confidence could easily be misplaced. What is perhaps most striking is the fact that the participant had not previously considered the risk she was running, not even retrospectively:

As soon as I'm with the lads, I have that confident zone of knowing… I think, I know, because the lads will look after me if I ever do get in that ridiculous state.
Mod So, yes… these guys you'd met the day before on the beach… so, how did you know they were going to look after you?
Just, the way they were, like, they were really nice… like, it's just… you just know them, don't you, by how you know… I could've probably judged them completely wrong and got the wrong intentions but I didn't. Luckily, that time, I didn't get it wrong. And I'm very good at judging people, actually, like, I can understand who I can trust and who I can't trust, very quickly. I think that's because I socialise so much, I pick up on how people act.
Mod Right.
I think I was just lucky. Now you've asked that question, I think I'm a lucky person to meet the right people.
Mod I'm guessing that you hadn't thought of that question before I asked you?
No.
Mod I mean, I might not… maybe you're completely right. It's just, what occurs to me, so… I think, because they… it sounds really bad… Because some of them were from Glasgow, some of them were from Liverpool, and they've got that,

kind of…I've always heard they're quite friendly people, so, just because you've heard of that, it's, like, oh, it's fine, they're nice people. [f, 20, Int47]

Conscience and the limits of responsibility

In workshops, the potential for work to strengthen norms around staying with the group and looking after group members was explored using a simple proposition as stimulus:

Keep an eye on each other. If you leave someone drunk behind and something bad happens to them, it will be on your conscience.

This proposition was very popular with participants, in part because it builds so clearly on current norms within the drunken night out:

If something happened to your mate, like he got like hurt or something, when you left him you'd feel pretty bad for that I think. [m, 21–24, WSB]

Like, say with rape, or sexual assault. I think, if it happened to me, you probably would blame other people. If somebody, if my friend had left me, knowing that I was on my own, not that I would blame them, because obviously it's something that happened to me, it's not in their control, but I think there's less of a chance of that happening, if my friend had stayed with me, same as then I'd think, if I just left my friend and that happened to them, I know I would think forever, well if I was there, then something could have been done. [f, 18–20, WSA]

In particular, the proposition appeared to chime with the highly social nature of a drunken night out in a way that individualised 'responsible drinking' messages fail to do:

f1 It's not so much about telling people what they can't do, it's about looking after each other. It's more a solidarity thing. It's saying if you're going to do it be safe about it. Not bossy. [f1]
f2 It's the same thing we've been saying throughout, It's just about your friends, that's your main priority, that's what it relates to. [f, 21–24, WSD]

One important question which we also asked was whether such a point needs to be made, given that so many people already claim to apply these rules. Opinions on this question were mixed: but a number of participants argued that the point is worth making, not least because people do still wander off or get left behind. Research for Drinkaware by Ipsos Mori (2013) lends some credibility to this view, with 44% of Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**) saying that they had taken risks with their personal safety (such as walking home alone or through poorly lit streets), and 21% saying they had done so in the last three months.

The word 'conscience' in particular had a significant impact, forcing people to think not just about the immediate risks to a friend but also to a form of irreversible damage to their own identity:

f1 I think it is pretty true. Like, if I just left one of my friends and something happened, I'd feel terrible. I'd think why did I be selfish and not go home with her? And I'd always think, like, what I could have done to stop that.
f2 I think as well when I think of your conscience that's something that you live with until you die. It sounds stupid but you wouldn't think like, oh, brain damage, drinking alcohol… brain damage. But you would think about your conscience. [f, 21–24, WSH]

I think, because you can get over, you can forgive yourself, for things that have happened to you. If something happened to you, I'd never forgive myself. Because I'd think, if I had done something, then that never would have happened. [f, 18–20, WSA]

However, this word also sparked some discussion of the *limits* of responsibility, and the circumstances in which use of this word 'conscience' might be inappropriate. Reflecting the discussion in **§11.4** of the very limited extent to which one can challenge someone else's desire to carry on drinking when they are already very drunk, participants were keen to point out that sometimes it is not possible to stop people wandering off:

Of course I'd want my friends to look out for me, but how fair is it for my friend to get absolutely hammered and me try my best to get him home, and him totally refuse? Something bad happens and then that's advertising that that's on my conscience, you know, that that's my fault. How fair is that? [m, 21–24, WSI]

I think you do, if one of your friends was really going to embarrass themselves, then you would just, well it depends how bad it was, doesn't it? If, like, to a certain extent you just laugh and let them carry on. When it got too far, you'd stop them then. But then, if they wanted to break away and carry on, you think well, what can I do, I'm not their mother. [f, 18–20, WSA]

I actually see a line. You know with people who are serial offenders and they're doing it every week, at some point I do go, enough is enough. You want to walk home on your own, I've tried to stop you for the past hour, do it. On your head be it. [m, 21–24, WSI]

These limits on one's responsibility for others were, again, particularly keenly felt in respect of people who were not among one's closest friends:

I know it sounds nasty to say it, but I'm not going to stand there arguing with someone who's not a close mate of mine. [f, 18–20, WSA]

One participant also noted that responsibility rests with the group, not with the individual, and that the word 'conscience' sat uneasily with this.

16 Other risks

Key points

- Alongside the risks associated with non-consensual interactions (such as sexual assault and violence), participants in a drunken night out face another of 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).
- Participants in drunken nights out do not give these other single-instance risks much thought, but recognise them as real when prompted. 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.

In this chapter, we consider the two further classes of risk identified in **§13.3**:

- Unconsidered risks – which are not considered or managed during a drunken night out, but which are acknowledged as real when raised. This class comprises other single-instance risks. (**§16.1**)
- Discounted risks – which are not acknowledged as real even when raised. This class comprises cumulative risks. (**§16.2**)

16.1 Other single-instance risks

Alongside the risks associated with non-consensual interactions, participants in a drunken night out face another single-instance risks – risks, that is, that can occur as a result of a single drunken night out.

These include the risks associated with consensual interactions. The RCP Alcohol and Sexual Health Working Party (2011), for example, report that, 'although a causal link has not been firmly established, there is strong evidence that excessive alcohol consumption is associated with poor sexual health outcomes such as unplanned pregnancies [and] sexually transmitted infections'. In research with 18 to 24 year olds undertaken for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), 27% of Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**) reported having had unprotected sex as a result of drinking alcohol, compared to 12% of Occasional Intentionals, and 3% of Never Intentionals. 11% of Regular Intentionals reported having unprotected sex as a result of drinking alcohol in the last three months.

There is also a broad class of single-instance risks which do not necessarily involve another person at all. These include:

- Short-term health impacts of excessive consumption, owing to the toxic effects of alcohol
- Accidents as a result of the impact of alcohol on:
  - ◊ co-ordination, response times, etc.
  - ◊ behaviour regulation and risk-taking[56]
- Self-harm, i.e. forms of violence in which the same person is both offender and victim

The importance of this class of alcohol-related harms should not be underestimated. For example, Jones et al. (2008) report that, 'among younger age groups (<34 years) the majority of deaths [in 2005] occurred from the acute consequences of alcohol consumption, in particular, intentional self-harm and road traffic accidents'. Citing Jones et al.'s work, the Government's *Healthy Lives, Healthy People* strategy (2010) states that, 'accidents due to alcohol (including drink-driving accidents) are the leading cause of death among 16 to 24 year olds'.

Data from MAST database operated by Road Safety Analysis (RSA) provides an illustrative snapshot of the role played by alcohol in just one kind of accident: pedestrian casualties. The data shows a clear peak in casualties involving alcohol-impaired pedestrians between midnight and 4am, with notable skews towards those involved being male and younger (below 34). The data also indicates that being impaired may increase the severity of casualties.[57]

Hospital admission statistics for England (but not for Scotland) also reveal an 'upward trend in [alcohol-related] admissions to hospitals in England from 2002 to 2010 among young adults. The number of admissions of 15- to 24-year-old male patients over the period increased by 57%, from 18,265 in 2002 to 28,747 in 2010. The number of admissions of 15- to 24-year-old female patients over the period increased at a faster rate [76%], from 15,233 in 2002 to 26,908 in 2010' (IAS, 2013a).

Once again, it is not possible to say what proportion of these harms specifically relate to drunken nights out, as opposed to other patterns of drinking and drunkenness. In particular, statistics for age bands which include young people under 18 presumably reflect the consequences of underage drinking practices alongside the drunken nights out of young adults.[58]

'It will never happen to me'

Unlike the risks of non-consensual interactions (see **Chapter 13**), single-instance risks were rarely raised spontaneously.

This probably does not reflect a lack of experience of the risk. For example, in research for Drinkaware conducted by Ipsos MORI (2013), 42% of Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**) reported having injured themselves as a result of drinking alcohol, about the same as the 40% who had got involved in a fight or argument as a result of drinking alcohol.

56 Accidents may in fact also have 'victims': in particular, a drunk driver may kill many other people.

57 The data relates to injured pedestrians who had the contributory factor 'impaired by alcohol' assigned to them by the visiting police officer. The data represents a sub-sample of all pedestrian casualties, namely those occurring in crashes which a police officer attended and where at least one contributory factor was recorded. We are extremely grateful to Tanya Fosdick at Road Safety Analysis (RSA) for this analysis.

58 A different kind of evidence might be provided, however, by the staffing patterns of front-line services dealing with these harms. In interview, an A&E nurse commented that his department has learned to increase staffing during events which involve significant alcohol consumption.

This equivalence between injury and fight statistics was not reflected in interviews. Not only were accounts of injuries quantitatively fewer in number, they were also qualitatively different, typically presenting even serious injuries as the stuff of drunken escapades:

I've fallen over – broken arms, I've broken my arms twice falling over. […] Oh yes, you get your knocks and bumps and you wake up in the morning with a bump on your head and you're like, 'where did that come from?' [m, 24, Int08]

She fell over and hit her tooth off the curb and her tooth came out, her front tooth. Luckily the paramedics managed to find it and she got it put back in. So she's been in A&E. Then on one of these nights, I don't know if she's on there… No, she's not on there but one of the girls broke an ankle, just from clear fighting and just being generally stupid. [f, 27, Int23]

I'd got out of the taxi, like to go into my house there's a stair, like, that thing to go onto the path and I got out the taxi and fell over and whacked my eye. I've got a scar. I, like, whacked my head off the corner of the kerb and, kind of, knocked myself out and then some girl found us on the street and took us into the house. [f, 25, Int20]

Over and above the apparent lack of consideration of these other acute risks, no risk management strategies were identified. In some instances, this lack of consideration may reflect a view that the risks in question are not in fact very severe. For instance, this may be the case with risks associated with consensual sex, such as STIs or unwanted pregnancies:

It's kind of just been if I'm awake enough, as it were, I will try and make sure [there is some protection] but sometimes, no. I hoped that it wouldn't happen, and every time that I've done that, I've always gone and got checked out as well, and I've always been fine. [f, 22, Int28]

My mates are not bothered. If they have sex, they're not bothered about using protection. She could be a tramp, they don't care. A lot of people, I think, are like that these days. They don't actually understand the dangers of it. [m, 21–24, WSI]

f1 Most people these days are on contraceptives, aren't they, mostly, young people?
f2 I think when you go out, you don't think of it as on the top of your list. In your head you're not thinking 'that will happen to me'.
f3 I think like if you did get raped or anything you would take the morning after pill straight away. [f, 21–24, WSD]

Typically, however, the potential severity of the risks in question was acknowledged (unlike the long-term health harms discussed in **§16.2**). Instead, participants argued that these are areas of risk in which feelings of temporary invincibility hold sway:

It could happen, but you always think like, 'oh it will never happen to me'. [f, 18–20, WSA]

You always hear stories of someone doing something stupid and dying and you think 'that's not me'. [m, 18–20, WSC]

That's not going to work [information about possible effects of extreme alcohol consumption].

Everyone will look at that and think 'I don't drink enough alcohol to get blood alcohol poisoning'. But I probably do. [m, 18–20, WSC]

In **§13.1**, we reviewed a number of general factors that may contribute to the tendency not to consider risks during a drunken night out. Among these, *the lack of negative experiences* emerged as a particularly important factor in relation to other single-instance risks. In particular, participants contrasted statistical information with experiences or stories which make the risks more *personal*:

They are all bad, like now you think of it. But like I said, when I left this room now, it wouldn't cross my mind again, and I wouldn't think, the next time I drank alcohol, 'what percentage of people…?' […] I just think, because it hasn't happened close to home, to any of my friends or family, I just think it's not going to happen to me. […] You know there's people out there, but you just think 'yes, it's not going to happen to me'. [f, 18–20, WSA]

For me, the stats aren't real. If you wanted to shock me into not drinking to that point, you want to put someone in front of me and show me what it's like to pump his stomach. I've heard it's disgusting. I know a guy [who it's happened to]. I heard from his mates that it was horrible. [m, 18–21, WSE]

[Statement on effects of extreme intoxication] just struck me because I think it's probably the most relevant… not the most relevant but it scares me the most, because if I think back to some of the states I've been in, and you always do read, like, the kind of case in the paper where the boy's fell asleep and he's swallowed his tongue like from being so drunk and died like. It's quite scary. [f, 21–24, WSH]

For risks even to be considered, people have to feel that they *personally* are at risk. And even then, there may be little impact on behaviour – especially when the behaviours that give rise to the risks in question are experienced as being so normal. Even direct personal experiences appear to have a very time-limited effect:

We were drinking over at my friend's house, and my friend got taken into hospital. And a while after that, she had to have her stomach pumped, a while after that, me and the girls were like, no. And like, we didn't go out for a good while, about, well I don't know how long. It was a couple of years ago obviously though. After that, we were, like it makes you more aware then. And you're scared for a while. But then obviously, now, I wouldn't even think twice about it. [f, 18–20, WSA]

I mean, everyone has bad experiences but we still go out every weekend. It doesn't deter us. [m, 21–24, WSI]

16.2 Cumulative risks

Regular participation in drunken nights out also contributes to long-term health risks. In research with 18 to 24 year olds conducted for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013), reported consumption over the previous seven days indicated that 33% of Regular Intentionals (see **§3.4**) were drinking above guidelines, with 8% classified as high risk drinkers. Based on reported consumption in a typical week, these figures rise to 48% and 17%. The British Liver Trust talk on their website of a 'liver disease time bomb for young drinkers', noting that, 'many of the

young people suffering from booze-related liver disease are 'everyday drinkers' rather than alcoholics'.[59]

Unlike the single-instance risks discussed in **§16.1**, however, these cumulative risks – risks that arise only after many drunken nights out – were not recognised by participants even when raised in discussion in workshops.

A number of reasons were given for discounting long-term 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:

We're not stupid. Just because you don't get drunk that doesn't mean it's not doing any damage. That's why you don't binge every single night of your life. You binge once a week and then you wake up and think oh my god I'll never drink again and then you go and do it again. But if people didn't think that already I think they'd probably be drinking a lot more. And I think that's a problem in older people because they'll drink like a bottle of wine every night at dinner… [m, 18–21, WSE]

m1 I just think you can have a small amount, a bit of alcohol, compared to alcoholics and things like that because they drink every day, constantly and I… whereas if it was me, I go out twice a week, once a weekend so… […] It's not a lot compared to something, like, to people who are addicted to it, like…
m2 You've, kind of, got the rest of the week then to, sort of, bring yourself back up together again. [m, 21–24, WSB]

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 only after a period of time, was seen to make the risks irrelevant to current behaviour:

That's something you'd think about when you're older. […] Because I've only been drinking properly for a year so I don't think I'm going to be affected. I don't drink every night. I drink maybe twice a weekend. So why would that happen to me? [m, 21–24, WSI]

In stark contrast to single-instance risks, which participants recognised could change their life literally overnight, it was felt that there would be time in the future to address long-term risks of drinking:

What to raise is death, rape, STIs and pregnancy, because I think that they're all things that can change your life right there. Like with the alcohol poisoning, the impact on the brain, liver disease, you can kind of… you can do something about that as you go along, but… [m, 21–24, WSB]

I would prioritise things that happen to you rather than things that happen to your body. [m, 18–20, WSC]

In particular, many participants argued that they expected to cut back on their drinking as they got older – an expectation which may in fact be reasonable (see **Chapter 18**).

59 http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk/liver-disease-timebomb-young-drinkers/, accessed 2 January 2014.

I think, because of the way I was brought up and nurtured, I think I tend to feel that the later on in life I get, the less and less I'll drink. I think I could see myself, maybe when I'm in my 30s, even giving up alcohol. [m, 23, Int09]

I think you drink more when you're young. I think, as you get older, you'll get to a stage where obviously you're not going to go out as much as you do when you have a family and things like that. You might just drink on special occasions. So it's not going to affect you as you do, if you carry on drinking the same amount throughout the whole of your life. [f, 18–20, WSA]

You drink when you're younger, and so when you get older you've got a chance to get better, like. [m, 21–24, WSB]

As Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) found in their research that, 'the belief that young adulthood was a temporary life-phase supported excessive forms of consumption that, also seen as temporary, felt disconnected from longer-term patterns of consumption.' Some participants argued that the long-term effects of alcohol would even be reversible in later life:

I don't think a lot of people will take note of some of the stuff because you can reverse a lot of the stuff there. [m, 21–24, WSB]

I was going to say, I get told… I don't know if it's true or not… the liver's the only organ than can heal itself or something, it will repair itself. […] So then when I drink as well, I say, oh, it's fine because it will repair itself. [f, 21–24, WSH]

Over and above all this, the idea of alcohol as a harmful substance was cast into doubt for some participants by the sheer normality of alcohol in our culture, and the extent to which its consumption is actively encouraged:

f1 I just think people… you don't take that into account because you think, well everyone drinks. You know, how bad is it going to affect me?
f2 Like, they're promoting it all the time, aren't they? You've got drinking and that. So, would they promote this so much, if it was bad?
f1 You wouldn't have thought, would you, that it'd be that bad for you? Because everybody does it. [f, 18–20, WSA]

You hear it on programmes where they say 'a glass of wine a week is good for you' and all that, so apparently alcohol is good for you in one sense. [m, 18–20, WSG]

Making it current

In **§13.1** we argued that a lack of past negative experiences can underpin a feeling of invincibility – a belief that a general risk does not apply to one personally. The fact that long-term health harms are, by definition, in the future, and therefore neither experienced personally nor seen in any of one's peers, contributes to the tendency to discount long-term health harms:

In secondary school we had like people come in and show you about like liver disease and impact on brain stuff but I think, although they show you that it doesn't, you don't really take any notice until it actually affects you. So I thought if maybe they focus more on the little stuff like, well not little stuff

but things that maybe seem less important like, I don't know, getting arrested and stuff like that, then people would take more, like listen to it more because it actually happens to quite a few people, whereas, I don't know, I don't know anybody who's sort of had liver disease or anything. So I don't think about that side because it's never affected me but if it did affect me then I'd think about it more. [f, 18–21, WSE]

I'm just thinking like 'what am I going to tell a 16-year-old about liver disease and how's he actually going to be bothered about it?' It's something that's more, that's happened, well, maybe I'm wrong, but I thought it's something that happens later in life, I just don't think it's going to have any… they won't think it's relevant. [m, 18–20, WSG]

There are loads of people at uni but I've never heard of that [liver disease]. [m, 18–20, WSC]

In fact, participants in drunken nights out experience the negative effects of alcohol nearly every time they go out, in the form of a hangover. As noted in **§7.1**, hangovers are often accompanied by empty resolutions to cut back on one's drinking:

We do always say that the next day like what it's doing to us but we don't really think the night before, if that makes sense. [f, 20, Int05]

Even though in my head I know that I shouldn't drink as much as I do or I know that I should stop, like, I still think that I just carry on the same. […] Because it's bad for you. Like, honestly, sometimes I wake up with a hangover and I think, I don't know how I'm still alive, like, that's how it makes us feel. And it's so bad, like, if it can make you feel like that, like, what is it doing to your insides, do you know what I mean? And it can take you a full day, like, to recover, like. Sometimes I'll have two-day hangovers and that's really bad. [f, 25, Int20]

The resolutions achieve nothing, of course, in part because hangovers are seen as entirely temporary phenomena; and also because they occur at the wrong moment to affect behaviour (just after, rather than just before a drunken night out):

The way I feel on a Sunday morning, it must be totally ruining my liver because I feel awful. I feel like somebody's actually probably ran me over sometimes, and I think to myself how much damage am I doing? Like, I do on a Sunday morning, but on the Saturday it doesn't stop you. [f, 21–24, WSH]

Nevertheless, there was some evidence in our workshops that linking the long-term health effects of alcohol to *current* experiences might at least prompt some people to recognise the reality of the risks: that is, move long-term health harms from the category of discounted risks to the category of unconsidered risks. This evidence comes from reactions to one of a number of pieces of information presented to participants as stimulus for discussion:

If you develop a 'tolerance' to alcohol, that does not mean you can drink more safely. It means the alcohol is already starting to change your body and brain. The more you drink, the more damage you'll do.

This statement was singled out as thought-provoking by some (though by no means all) participants. Its effectiveness appears to lie in the way that it links long-term damage to a familiar current experience – the experience of increasing tolerance. Far from being in the future, the symptoms of long-term harm are situated in the present:

I think you just take for granted that you just, sort of, get used to drinking. That's why you can drink more, rather than it actually already starting to damage you. [m, 18–21, WSE]

I just found it interesting because I've noticed that I can drink a lot more than I could have done a couple of years ago. I think it's probably quite scary that, how much I can put away in a night now. […] Because obviously my body is getting a tolerance to it, so I'm damaging my body more and more every weekend. [f, 18–20, WSJ]

I think you do think like the more you drink you think the more you can drink before you get drunk. And I just think that the fact that it says that it's like already starting to change your body and brain… It's quite a sort of shocking thing that you wouldn't really think about because you're just doing it without thinking about that sort of stuff so I think it would make you just maybe stick to the same amount that you're drinking. Instead of thinking, oh I can drink a bit more today because like, I drunk yesterday or whatever. [f, 18–21, WSE]

New news

One other way in which information about the long-term health harms associated with alcohol might possibly gain a hearing with this audience is through the presentation of new information. Again, one statement presented in workshops – reflecting work being conducted in parallel by Drinkaware on the impact of alcohol on the brain – was singled out as thought-provoking by some (though again, by no means all) participants:

Alcohol causes permanent changes in your brain, damaging your ability to learn and remember, and increasing the chances of depression. Young people are at much greater risk of this kind of subtle brain damage.

The statement was contrasted with more familiar information about, for instance, the impacts of alcohol on the liver:

m1 It's kind of a scary thing if you know that it changes your brain and it's, you know, like it's non-reversible, once it's happened, it's happened and you know, it's quite, you know, I wouldn't say scary but it's like…
m2 It changes the way you think of it. [m, 18–20, WSG]

The most impact on me, it makes you wonder 'would I have been a different kind of character if I'd never touched a drink?', like I don't know. [m, 18–20, WSG]

Participants were sceptical about the prospects of information such as this directly changing their behaviour during a drunken night out:

It is useful, but I would still drink, knowing that, now, I think. Well, I know I will, so… [f, 18–20, WSJ]

They have, like, all these campaigns and stuff and, like, things about smoking, like they'll put pictures on packets, but in reality if you want to do something you're going to do it anyway no matter what. [f, 25, Int20]

Even so, there was a feeling that there is value in giving people information about the effects of alcohol, even if they then choose to ignore it:

Just put the facts, just the whole facts, so even if you don't heed the warnings at least you've got the knowledge of what the effects have on you because they can tell you what happens to your liver after two or three nights out in a week, then you'd have the facts and maybe you won't listen to it now, but at least you'd know and you'd be educated about what the reactions are to alcohol. [m, 21–24, WSB]

I think what would be good is an app that you could visually slide the slider over how much you're drinking and it shows you pictures, as you slide the slider over, of how bad it gets. [m, 21–24, WSI]

But I think… I don't know, you probably should know the information and then decide what you're going to do with it, whether you are going to follow it or whether you are going to kind of take it in, or just keep on going. [f, 21–24, WSH]

PART E
DRINKING CAREERS

In this part of the report, we explore the ways in which participation in drunken nights out changes over time. As Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) note:

Exuberant, heavy episodic drinking within young adults' peer groups can be understood as a drinking arc, peaking in early adulthood and projected to decrease as adult status is achieved in other areas.

The chapters that follow explore the upstroke (**Chapter 17**) and downstroke (**Chapter 18**) of this arc, and the factors which typically shape an individual's drinking career – at least among those for whom that career involves a period of regular participation in drunken nights out. This analysis may therefore be seen as complementary to the analysis, provided by Herring et al. (2012), of the drinking careers of young people who drink little or no alcohol.

There was considerable variation in the drinking careers described by our participants. Nevertheless, some clear recurring patterns were apparent. The focus of this part of the report is therefore *biographical*, tracing changes in individual behaviour over time.

There is a second kind of analysis of change over time which might be undertaken, but which is beyond the scope of this report. This *historical* analysis would seek to trace how the practice of the drunken night out itself arose and has evolved over time (rather than how individuals pass into, through and out of drunken nights out). For example, while alcohol and drunkenness have undoubtedly played a significant part in British culture for centuries, perhaps millennia, the structures of the modern drunken night out have been traced by some to the more recent phenomenon of rave culture, with the replacement of one psychoactive substance (ecstasy) with another (alcohol). See Measham (2004) for a seminal statement of this argument.

17 Initiation

Key points

- 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. Participation is driven in part by changes in individual motivation and social context during early teenage.
- The 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 on the basis of what one can afford and get hold of.
- The image of the drunken night out – conveyed through the stories of older people or through media representations – provides a template for underage group drinking.
- 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.

In this chapter we explore the early stages of an individual's drinking career, prior to full (and legal) participation in drunken nights out. In particular, we explore:

- Underage drinking practices which can be seen as precursors of the drunken night out ***(§17.1)***
- Reasons why young people may become involved in these practices ***(§17.2)***
- The description of these practices by our participants as a training ground for drunken nights out ***(§17.3)***

We conclude by looking at the key moments which mark transition from these underage drinking patterns to full (and legal) participation in drunken nights out (**§17.4**), with particular attention to the experience of those who go to university (**§17.5**).

17.1 Precursors of the drunken night out

As Percy et al. (2011) note in their study of underage drinking practices, 'in a relatively short period of time (usually less than four years) young people progress from their first encounter with alcohol to regular drinking in bars and clubs'. This may include instances of supervised consumption in the presence of adults: but for most of our participants (in line with Percy et al.'s findings), alcohol was primarily consumed with groups of peers.

These group drinking sessions were characterised by constrained but increasing access: access to alcoholic drinks, and access to locations in which

those drinks may be consumed without sanction.[60] Group drinking practices at any given age reflected the level of current constraint and the extent which people were able to get round them. Typical practices included:

- Drinking outdoors – typically around the ages of 14 and 15, before in-home drinking was allowed.
- House parties – typically from around 16, as some parents began either to tolerate drinking in the home or to leave people unsupervised.
- Illegal use of night-time economy venues – contingent on the availability of ID, and generally seen as being easier for females.

These underage drinking activities are characterised by preoccupations and anxieties which are not present in the legal, post-18 drunken night out, such as how to get hold of alcohol, where to drink it, how to get into venues, and how to avoid detection by parents. In other respects, however, it is striking how *similar* these practices are to the drunken night out. For example:

- They are undertaken by groups, rather than individuals (see **Chapter 5**)
- They deliver the same suite of benefits, focused on escape, bonding and belonging, social adventures and stories (see **§8.1**)
- They are structured by norms and rituals, and provide arenas within which more intense and extreme social interactions are permitted (see **§4.3**)
- They are characterised by the same instrumental relationship with alcohol, and require drunkenness as a condition of participation (see **§9.3** and **§10.4**)

The last of these points is worth emphasising. The instrumental relationship with alcohol is, for many people, their *first* relationship: and it is this relationship which becomes embedded in group behaviour and underpins continued drinking in early adulthood. The process is described in some detail by Percy et al. (2011):

Soon after initiation young drinkers begin to recognise and appreciate the distinct pleasures arising from alcohol consumption and, in particular, alcohol intoxication. Intoxication permits young people to have a good time together, to have fun, to party, to lose inhibitions and to chat up other girls or boys. The longevity of our relationship with alcohol consumption is contingent on these pleasures of intoxication. […] As the young people grow older, drinking alcohol makes the transition from an illicit activity engaged in for its own right to being a constant part of the social lives of the young people. It becomes a routine aspect of group socialising, helping the young people achieve a range of different social and lifestyle goals. Although alcohol consumption begins to meet other social functions beyond simple intoxication – as the young drinkers mature – teenage drinking always involves some degree of drunkenness.

60 A number of our participants expressed the view that both alcohol and venues were *less* accessible than they had been when they were young. 'Ten years ago there were so many different sorts of under the cover sorts of things, weren't there? It was crazy. […] Now I'll go with my brother to drink alcohol and they still ID me now, to this day. I go to the same shop all the time and they'll still ID me. And it's just nice to know that the younger generation is more – I won't say more protected – but they're more aware.' [m, 24, Int08]

There is little evidence of what society considers low-level social consumption, although most of the groups consider their consumption relatively low, particularly when compared with that of others.

Alcohol is first encountered and used as a psychoactive drug, and alcoholic drinks are encountered as drug-delivery devices, selected entirely on the basis of what one can afford and get hold of:

I suppose back then it was more like, oh, I'll just drink whatever I can get my hands on. [f, 20, Int06]

From the perspective of a mature and responsible drinker, instrumental drinking practices can seem puzzling. By contrast, from the perspective of a young person being initiated into group drinking practices, drinking for any reason other than to get drunk is likely to be hard to understand.

The upshot is that, by the time people start using the night-time economy – whether illegally or when they turn 18 – many of the key structural features of the drunken night out may already be in place. As Bellis & Hughes (2011) argue: 'the culture of drunkenness seen in the UK night-life is established in young people well before they can legally use night-life'. Underage group drinking practices may reasonably be seen as precursors of the legal drunken night out – which in turn may be seen as an 'access all areas' version of what has gone before.

It is important to note that the relationship here is almost certainly reciprocal. Underage group drinking may establish patterns that are carried forward into the drunken night out; but the image of the adult drunken night out may in turn provide a template for underage group drinking:

I think it was the fact of being able to do this thing, like, you see older people do, like, going out drinking in a social environment, and you're thinking you're older than you are at that age. [f, 20, Int47]

Underage drinkers may be guided by the stories they hear from others already participating in drunken nights out – such as older siblings:

I don't know [why I wanted to get drunk at 14]. I suppose it was just… I just wanted to be like the older… say, like, the… we all had our older brothers and sisters and whatever… and cousins, and that's what they did to have a good time, so I suppose when they're telling their stories – 'oh yeah, we got drunk the other night, went to town' – well, if we couldn't go to town, we could at least get drunk. [m, 24, Int07]

Or these guiding stories can come from other sources – such as the many aspirational representations of drunkenness in our culture that present fun as a causal consequence of intoxication:

You've always got the idea of the, like, classic American college frat party and you all want that round someone's house. And you've got stuff on the TV, like Skins and stuff when we were growing up, that we all watched. And you all wanted to be like that. You wanted to have the ideal, well, teenage lifestyle that you've seen on the TV and in the media. So, and then, when you're at these parties you

actually think that you're close to or are there. […] Partying a lot and getting drunk and having loads of sex. […] Like the girls who were really drunk at the parties and stuff were trying to be like that and like were forcing it. So I think yes, and I think, yes, they were trying to be like that and they thought that the more they drink… Because apparently on these TV shows, they just drank loads and then had a great time. So if you drink loads, you're bound to have a good time, so… [m, 20, Int44]

17.2 Starting drinking

Measham (2007) notes 'a significant shift from a predominantly hostile view of drinking and drunkenness at primary school to a more favourable one during the course of secondary school'. In line with this, many of our participants described a transition which had typically occurred in early teenage:

I think you get to an age where everybody, like… Before that nobody was really interested in drinking, but then you get to a certain age group and then everybody's trying new things and… Shall we try and have a drink tonight? Or… So before that I wasn't really interested, really. [f, 19, Int02]

Individual motivations

To some extent, involvement with the precursors of the drunken night out may be driven by changes in individual motivation, and in particular the effects of puberty:

16 was when I started, like… Up to then I was just playing sports, and I didn't really care about drinking; like, you'd see people drinking at 13 and stuff, like, stupid.

Mod: So what happens at 16?
I don't know; just everyone's doing different, like… gone on to something different. Like, you've grown up a bit, like, hormones are raging; you're trying to, like, go out and meet girls, like. [m, 21, Int10]

Just like the drunken night out (see **§4.3**), its underage precursors provide an arena in which to explore different identities and interactions, away from the constraints of everyday life:

Everyone knew about it because it was an underage party and it was like gold dust, everyone was there and I can remember just going in there and it would be so packed – it looked like the walls were sweating because of the condensation on the walls, and there would be water dripping down the walls and there was a stage and the stage would be packed. You couldn't go anywhere – it would just be heaving. […] It was really, really fun. It was a new experience, to be honest: normally you'd go to a disco or a party and there would be a lot of parental guidance – whether it be parents around the side or teachers – and you'd hold back a bit in the party but the fact that we were on alcohol and there were no real limits, it was just wild. [m, 23, Int09]

Reflecting on their experiences of underage drinking, many participants drew attention to the ways in which alcohol facilitated social adventures – the same role attributed to alcohol in the context of the drunken night out (see **§9.4**). Alcohol makes it easier to talk to strangers – and also easier to pull:

There were some house parties we'd go to, we wouldn't even know the people there because they were all from different schools and that, but as soon

as you had a bit to drink it didn't really matter if you knew them or not because you just all were happy and you sort of got to know each other anyway. [m, 25, Int32]

Because you're drunk you're a lot more confident so obviously then, because I'm quite a shy guy – well, I was a shy guy at the time – so I hadn't met that many girls, so because I was drunk I just wouldn't care. So my friends would introduce me to girls or I'd go and say hello, and obviously they were drunk. [m, 19, Int43]

The boys would be with the boys, and the girls would be with the girls, and then as soon as you got drunk, it all turns like, like if you like that boy or you wanted to get to know him better, that was your chance to go over and starting talking to them. [f, 25, Int22]

One participant drew a comparison between the opportunity to take on a different identity, afforded by underage precursors of the drunken night out, and opportunities available online:

It's easier to meet someone online because then you can always, kind of, hide things a lot better than in person; you can always not tell them things that people in real life might know. You, kind of, lie to them a bit, not that I encourage that, but you can, kind of, be different. It's the same with being drunk as well because you can, kind of, be different from how you really are when you're sober. That was why the appeal was of getting drunk when I was a lot younger, was being able to be slightly different and, kind of, make people think I'm this way when actually I'm not. It's, kind of, bad and obviously now I look back I won't do that, but… [m, 19, Int43]

Social factors

As individuals' motivations are changing, however, the social context in which they operate is also changing fast, providing a different kind of impetus for participation:

All of my friends drank. […] I just don't think there was a much more fun thing to do because I suppose when all your group of friends are doing it, you're not going to find anything more interesting to do either, are you? [f, 20, Int06]

Not participating in the precursors of the drunken night out carries with it the risk of exclusion – not just from the drinking practices from themselves, but also (as with drunken nights out: see **§7.2**) from the stories that will be told the following week:

Alcohol played an important role in the social world of our teenagers. To an extent, a decision not to engage in this normative activity could lead to exclusion from the broader youth scene. […] Telling drinking stories plays a big part in the group interactions before, during and after drinking sessions. Going out drinking is important because it provides the main topic of gossip on Monday at school. (Percy et al., 2011)

Come Monday morning, one wants to be the person providing or participating in that gossip, not the person hearing it:

It's the drama of it, it always gave people something to talk about, and if you weren't there, if you weren't part of this, like, drunken brawl or drunken night out, then you weren't like, part of, you didn't have anything to talk about with people. [f, 25, Int22]

I think it would be really bad not to have been involved in that stuff. It isn't like something you talk about for a week, it isn't a massive thing, but it would definitely be a thing I'd want to be talking about for at least a few times in the next week. I think you'd feel really excluded. [f, 20, Int42]

It is even better to be the person being gossiped about, an obvious precursor of the embarrassing stories associated with drunken nights out (see **§7.3**):

You'd find on Monday, everyone would be talking about Friday; and all the people that weren't there, they would want to know everything that happened. If you had the craziest story, if you had been the most drunken, which tended to be me, not always for good reasons, just for oh, he's done it again, then you'd sort of move up the ranks as it were, and sort of people look at you a bit differently. They'd be like oh, that's [Name], he's the one that got really pissed on Friday. For some reason that was really good. [m, 25, Int31]

Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) argue that, 'alcohol has found a monopoly position in facilitating group belonging, and forging and maintaining friendship groups in young adulthood'. The same appears to be true for underage drinkers. The relative invisibility of other kinds of relationship with alcohol may also play a part in guiding individuals towards the instrumental relationship which characterises the precursors of the drunken night out. For example, Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) found that, 'having a number of drinking standards to observe and practise offered an alternative perspective on the styles of drinking promoted in young adulthood. This gave young adults a way of imagining different relationships to alcohol that could be put into practice'. In their study of young people who choose not to drink, Herring et al. (2012) note that, 'good parental role models play a part [in this choice] as does witnessing the negative effects of alcohol among people in the wider community'.

Diversity

From the perspective of a young person participating in the precursors of the drunken night out, it can seem that everyone their age is doing likewise – much as those who participate in the drunken night out itself think all young adults are doing the same (see **§2.4**):

Any parent nowadays with a teenager's just kind of got to get used to the idea that your teenagers are going to be out getting drunk. […] It's basically our culture, ain't it? [m, 24, Int07]

In reality, this is absolutely not the case. Many young people refrain from underage drinking altogether or, if they do drink, do not set out to get drunk. In a survey conducted for DCSF, for instance, only 10% of young people in England aged 9 to 17 who had had a proper alcoholic drink selected 'I want to get drunk' as a reason for drinking alcohol (Williams et al., 2010).

Nor do we wish to suggest that all of those who do participate in the precursors of the drunken night out will inevitably progress from one kind of pattern to the other. Herring et al. (2012), for instance, provide examples of participants put off drinking and/or drunkenness by their early experiences.

At the same time, however, others who have not engaged in underage drinking may become participants in drunken nights out at a later stage, for example when they go to university; this was the case for a few of our participants.

Further research, using different methods, would be required to establish why some people get involved in the precursors of drunken nights out while others do not, and the precise relationship (at an individual level) between underage drinking and later participation in drunken nights out.

17.3 Learning how to drink

Looking back on their experiences of underage drinking, many of our participants saw this period as a learning phase, during which they had discovered how to drink and get drunk. In particular, many claimed that this was the period when they had learned about their own personal limits. In particular, this related to consumption limits of the kind discussed in **Chapter 11**:

I think it's just I'm drinking less, I'm like pacing myself, you know what I mean. It's trying to stay, stay in control really. [m, 20, Int17]

However, some participants also talked about establishing limits in terms of their behaviour when drunk:

I'd say I'm a lot more mature, obviously, because I'm older. But when I was younger and I was going out, I would get into fights and stuff and I just looked like – I think of things I've done now and I just think, what are you doing? Like, I'd never do that now. You're young, aren't you? [f, 20, Int04]

In part, this process of 'calming down' reflected a shift in the focus of drinking. To begin with, the experience of being drunk may be sufficiently novel to be an end in itself. One of our youngest participants, who had only recently started drinking, still felt some of this early curiosity about the state of drunkenness:

It doesn't make sense but… I think, sometimes, you do it just to see how you react, like, just go past that edge and see how… see what is on the other side, kind of thing. [f, 20, Int47]

For the majority of our participants, by contrast, getting drunk had long since stopped being valued as an end in itself. Instead, people described themselves as getting drunk to realise the benefits of a drunken night out (see **§9.4**), or to conform with its norms (see **§10.4**):

I thought it was cool and I'd just drink until I couldn't drink any more or till I ran out of money or whatever, whereas now […] it's for the sake of bonding, it's for the sake of socialising, it acts as a, like kind of like a social glue. [m, 21, Int44]

That was the sole purpose when we were younger: to drink, to just get drunk. And it's not so much now. We just, I suppose it's just something you do when you go out. You wouldn't go to town, I wouldn't go to town without having a drink, because I'd be bored and other drunk people'd get on my nerves if I wasn't drunk. So I think it's just something you do. [f, 19, Int03]

Decreasing curiosity in the state of drunkenness itself removes the key motivation to keep drinking.

At the same time, negative experiences of the consequences of going too far provide a clear motivation not to drink beyond an intended limit (see **§11.2**). Many of our participants had stories of the nights when they had gone too far, very much in line with Percy et al. (2010), who reported that:

Almost all the teenage drinkers interviewed recounted episodes of either having completely lost control when drinking or having been around others who had experienced the unpleasant effects of extreme alcohol intoxication.

Moreover, experiences such as these were seen as an essential part of learning to become a competent drinker – the only way, in fact, that one can learn where one's limits lie:[61]

Forget the theory and do the practical. [m, 21–24, WSI]

I was out with my little brother and he was drinking shots and I know he was going to be hammered. I just let him. He's got to experience it. Later in a bar he was like proper mortal. The drunkest he's ever been but he's got to find that out for himself. [m, 18–20, WSC]

I think the thing is about 'know your limits', if it's your first time drinking then you wouldn't, would you? You'd have to kind of do it a few times and then you get to know your limits. […] Learn from your mistakes I suppose. [m, 18–21, WSE]

Herring et al. (2012) note how mistakes can lead some people to choose not to drink at all. By contrast, our participants saw mistakes as signs that they had to *get better* at drinking and being drunk:

In the early days I used to be sick quite often when I drank too much, so, you know, that happened. Then, you know, that was… obviously I was completely gone by then, so, you know, somebody had to walk me to the toilet, I think I nearly fell backwards down the stairs, woke up with my clothes, with a sick bowl next to me, stinging, like, headache, stink, the lounge is a mess, you know, it's just, it was just, like, whoa, God. Need to practice that. […] I didn't know what it was like to be drunk, but I went into it knowing that, God, this is just, this is a trial, really. [m, 29, Int36]

Indeed, as Percy et al. (2010) note:

Drinking sessions can be thought of as opportunities for teenagers to practise their new-found hobby, which requires time and effort. Much of this revolved around developing tolerance and the ability to consume an acceptable volume of alcohol. The teenage drinkers wanted to be regarded by their friends as competent alcohol consumers who were not going to lose control and get too drunk.

There was evidence of an ambivalent attitude towards these early experiences of going too far. Many of our participants, looking back, saw themselves as having been too young at the time, with a number stating that they would not want their own children to be drinking as much at that age. On the other hand, there was a clear sense that it had been necessary to go through what might be seen as a training period for drunken nights out:

61 There is a comparison to be made here with learning to drive, with many young drivers seeing a near miss or accident as an inevitable and valuable part of the process: see, for example, Christmas (2007).

I'm glad I had that [experience of losing control young], because otherwise it would be different now. At the same time, I'm glad it happened, in a way, although like, it made me realise what I know now. [m, 20, Int16]

The idea that experience makes people better at sticking to their limits is an attractive one, but is it actually true? While research conducted for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013) does not cover the under-18 age range, a comparison between 18 to 20 year olds and 21 to 24 year olds does yield one interesting clue. There are no significant differences in the frequency with which these two age groups drink; the quantities they drink (either in a typical week, in the last week, or on the last night out); the regularity with which they get drunk or indeed their intentions to get drunk. However, the younger age bracket are significantly more likely to report experiences in the last three months of having been unable to remember what happened the night before (14% vs 9%), injuring themselves (6% vs 2%) and being made to look bad on social media (5% vs 2%).[62] By themselves, these figures do not prove that people learn from experience, but they are at least consistent with the claim that the older cohort has become better at pacing its consumption and avoiding going past its limits of drunkenness.

17.4 The transition to drunken nights out

As noted in **§17.1**, underage drinking practices are characterised by constrained but steadily increasing access: access to alcoholic drinks, and access to locations in which those drinks may be consumed without sanction. Towards the end of the teenage years, this process concludes with entry into the fully legal drunken night out.

Not surprisingly, one of the critical events here is a person's eighteenth birthday, when key legal constraints on access are removed overnight. For some people, this was the moment of entry to a world of clubs and bars which had previously been off limits to them:

It just makes you feel on top of the world now that you're 18 you just, sort of, go out, experience it, and just have a really good time. [m, 20, Int18]

We'd only all recently turned 18, so it was more like the chance to just like start going clubbing and stuff instead of like have to… Like we've been waiting for it so long it felt like now we could just do it, and we did it all the time. [f, 18, Int40]

Me and my friend just used to go out, and we'd just, we just used to love it really. We just used to dance, and it was like wow, do you know what I mean? You were in town, and we're out. [f, 25, Int21]

Even among those participants who had already been using the night-time economy illegally, turning eighteen had been a significant moment in their drinking career:

I think we used to be more confident going out when we were 18 obviously because we were using our own IDs but before we used to go worrying, oh my God, are we going to get into the club, are they going to say it's not you and then obviously when we turned 18 we had our own IDs. [f, 20, Int05]

62 Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year.

For some of our youngest participants, legal drinking in the night-time economy experience was still a new and exciting experience:

I can't really say why I like it, I just find it… it's just an enjoyable thing to do for me, because it's still all new to me still as well. I think it's that because I'm old enough now to actually do it. [m, 19, Int43]

Often, this transition to legal drinking is followed by a peak in participation – a short period during which the norms and rituals of the drunken night out seem novel and exciting:

For about six months after I turned eighteen, that's where I went, and it just become something that I could now do, and took advantage of being able to do it and just sickened myself with it. [m, 20, Int16]

As these quotations indicate, this initial period of surfeit often leads to people cutting back. This is not to say that people stop participating in drunken nights out, or conforming to the norms and rituals that shape it. But participation and conformity quickly take on a different quality, becoming aspects of normality as opposed to something new and exciting:

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. It's now more about it being part of the night and part of the fun, rather than just doing it because it's new. [m, 25, Int32]

Turning eighteen is an important moment in an individual's drinking career. As with so many aspects of the drunken night out, however, it is important to remember that it is groups, not individuals, that go out drinking. Turning eighteen does not necessarily mean complete access to the drunken night out if other members of one's group are still underage. The final transition to legal participation occurs when the last member of the group has their eighteenth birthday party:

I enjoy because I can go out and I'm of legal age, as it were. And I can go to different bars and stuff. I haven't got to worry about who's with us. Like all my friends are 18 now. 'Who is with us? He's only 17, we need to go there.' So you can go, you can walk past them and go, 'that looks nice, we'll go in there'. [m, 20, Int44]

Well, when we first started turning 18, we absolutely loved town. […] We loved it, because we were finally allowed to go to town, we finally didn't have to find ID for people. [f, 19, Int03]

Eighteenth birthdays are fixed points in every drinking career. By contrast, the timing and significance of moves away from home varied greatly between different participants.

Our participants described parents with very different levels of knowledge of and attitudes towards their children's underage drinking, from complete bans on underage drinking (and ignorance of what was going on) to, in one case, buying the participant a fake ID for their sixteenth birthday. Homes, that is, were themselves

characterised by very different degrees of access. Even in those homes where drinking and getting drunk were frowned on, moreover, eighteenth birthdays often marked a loosening of attitudes.

For some participants, parents provided an important constraint on underage drinking. For instance, a number indicated that being caught underage drinking by police was not as serious as one's parents finding out. And even after turning eighteen, concerns about one's behaviour when one got home could serve as a check on how much one drank when out (see **§11.2**). By the same token, moving away from home could be a key moment in an individual's drinking career:

When I did leave home it was just like, it was like, no, I don't have to go home, I don't have to see my mum and dad, they don't have to know anything. [m, 29, Int35]

The move away from home also has one other crucial consequence: providing a space for pre-drinking.

For many of our participants, the transition to the (legal) drunken night out was a positive one. A number, however, noted that there was also loss involved in this transition. For these participants, the fact that one was breaking laws or family rules added an element of thrill to participation in the precursors of the drunken night out, and heightened the sense of escape:

When you're underage, it's the fun of trying to get in and stuff [m, 21, Int10]

At the time it was like trying to get away from your mother and trying to find some way of getting out the home. I think a lot of it was the thrill of being able to get out the house and do my own thing, not necessarily the drinking side of it, but more getting out the house. [m, 20, Int16]

The experience of legal drunken nights out can be diminished by this loss of an element of transgression:

It was a pain getting fake ID and stuff, but it was still the thrill of having someone else's ID, getting into a club and being really buzzing over getting into a club, do you know what I mean? Now, it's just like, oh, I'm 20 years of age, so I can get into a club. [f, 20, Int06]

I got my own place at 19. So, I think it… I don't know, it sort of did slow down a bit because I wasn't hiding it from anyone. Like, I didn't have to hide it from my mum or sneak around. […] I could get away with it and it wasn't as fun any more because I wasn't going to get caught out doing anything. [f, 24, Int29]

17.5 Going to university

In **§3.6**, we argued that there is no evidence that participation in drunken nights out is more prevalent among students than non-students. At the individual level, however, and for those who do it, going to university can be an important moment of transition. This was certainly the case for many of our participants who had gone to (or were still at) university.

In part this reflects the fact that, typically, people go to university around the time that they turn

eighteen. For those who go to universities in other cities, this may also be the moment when they move away from home for the first time:

There's a lot more freedom, like, you… you feel, like, when you're at university if, like, you're out until, like, half three in a club and then you go to the chippy, then walk home and you're not in until, like half four. Whereas my mam would be worried sick, she'd be, like, where's [Name], where is she? [f, 19, Int41]

Also the fun of going out and not having the… not being restricted by my parents. Not having … not thinking – 'oh if I go in and end up throwing up after a night out, me mum's going to be – ah, you shouldn't have done that'. Whereas now if I do it, and I can go out and drink more, and get myself in a state, then it's …I've got to sort it out for myself. So yeah, so there's that sort of freedom, which is nice. [m, 19, Int38]

By going to a new city, however, they are not just leaving their parents: they are leaving an entire network of relationships and responsibilities developed while growing up. Many described the sense of liberation associated with this move:

Because [at home] people know your families, people know who you are. If you do something stupid, it affects people in other places, as well. [f, 20, Int47]

Because you don't know anyone, you can just be yourself the whole time. But back home there's so much… it's like Big Brother. Everywhere you go you're being watched. [f, 18, Int46]

Indeed, a social context in which most individuals are away from the places where they grew up can create a vicarious sense of freedom even for those who have stayed in their home town:

Every day is drinking day. […] I think it's just one of those things. Like, even though when I'm in my home town, I'm not at home anymore. Everyone else is away from their home town, so it's like a bit of liberation. [m, 25, Int31]

The move to this new social context, detached from previous relationships and responsibilities and surrounded by others in the same situation (and of the same age), creates an opportunity to forge a new identity:

I feel like I have two separate lives, like, one's university life and one's, like, from [home town]. [f, 21, Int27]

While often characterised in terms of opportunity, the transition to a new social context is also extremely stressful. New arrivals are faced by the need to form new social bonds rapidly, and new social identities within new groups of friends. The drunken night out – a practice which accommodates both group bonding and social adventures – offers an obvious way of coping with this situation:

It's a very stressful environment because you're trying to impress all these new people you don't know, and you're trying to make friends. And, also, you've got all the other stuff to worry about, like, first being… A lot of people, for me as well, it's my

first time being away from home so I don't think that helped, so a lot of people get a lot more drunk because of that, because a lot of people don't know, kind of, how to take it as well. So, then they, sort of, turn to drinks. It's something that everyone tends to do. I know some people would turn to drugs and obviously I don't talk to them, but for me it was drink for a, sort of, a coping mechanism of some sort. [m, 19, Int43]

Not only are drunken nights out an obvious solution, they are also readily available in the new context individuals find themselves in:

I'd say it was a big step up when you went to uni. Just the availability. The different nights out, there were about five nights a week that you could go out and get drunk. I'm not going to lie, the first month I probably went to all of them. [m, 21–24, WSI]

We had Freshers' Week, so the whole week was geared to everyone going out, even the uni were… yes, even the student union was promoting it, so it was just the done thing. [f, 23, Int30]

Over and above these factors, participants also described the strong social pressure to be drinking and getting drunk, based on the belief that that was what everyone else was doing:

You'd just drink and drink and then, yes, everybody… Everybody was really, really drunk. There's hardly ever anybody sober at a student night. [f, 23, Int25]

I suppose perhaps there was some kind of pressure because everyone else is out drinking and if you weren't going out drinking or something I suppose it would stand out but I didn't ever feel pressured but it would have stood out definitely. I think also because, because everyone else is going out, they're developing their friendships with each other and if you're not in that group then you know you can sort of feel pushed out of that group I suppose. So I don't think it was pressure but I suppose you felt like you wanted to be involved in whatever was going on, and if that was drinking so be it. [m, 29, Int33]

New arrivals may also find themselves initiated into new practices which they have not encountered before, such as pre-drinking and drinking games:

It was like you drink before you go out drinking, it's so strange. At home you just go out drinking, but here it's like you get drunk and then you get drunk again. [f, 18, Int46]

It's only since I've come to uni where I've learned these drinking games. [f, 19, Int01]

These pressures can be particularly strong during Freshers' week, not least because people arrive already expecting to spend their time drinking and get drunk:

Yes, the expectation at Freshers' week: you're there to get drunk, basically, that's all you do drink, Freshers' week you drink basically. [m, 19, Int43]

Like, that's the perception of university, isn't it? Everybody perceives that as that's what happens at university and I think when you go there you're kind of like, oh, this is what happens, so I'm going to do it, and you just do. […] I mean, even before you go, you kind of have that perception of uni. I think it's just… comes from talk at school, oh, uni's when you go and you get really drunk, and then you just do it. [f, 23, Int25]

In short, drunken nights out offer themselves as an obvious way of coping with an extremely stressful situation: the need to forge an entirely new social identity. They are familiar to many new arrivals from previous experiences of drunken nights out or its precursors, and strongly linked both to group bonding and social adventures. They are readily available and widely promoted. They are also mandated by peer norms, to the extent that people arrive expecting to participate in them. Many of these new arrivals – having recently turned eighteen and living away for the first time – are actively looking forward to participating in them, thanks to stories passed around at school and aspirational representations of drunkenness that present fun as a causal consequence of intoxication (see **§17.2**). Given all this, it is not entirely surprising that the new identities many people create for themselves are closely interwoven with drinking and getting drunk:

At uni you've met these people in that situation. Because I met like everyone else back home at school, so they know me as school-Debbie whereas at uni they know me as uni-Debbie which is like bar-Debbie as well. […] At home when you're in the bar you see everyone you know, because it's such a small town. And they see me as like the person I am at school. But at uni because you meet the people in the bar rather than like at school, so you see like bar-Debbie. [f, 18, Int46 – name changed]

What is surprising in this context is the fact that so many young people *resist* these pressures to participate in drunken nights out. Once again, it is important to challenge the belief of those who participate in drunken nights out (if not their sincerity in believing it) that *everyone* of their age is doing the same. Herring et al. (2012) provide an invaluable corrective to widespread stereotypes of young people.[63]

63 Our own research, it should be remembered, was conducted not with a sample of students, but of students *who enjoyed going out and getting drunk* (see **§1.3**).

18 Decline

Key points

- Participation in drunken nights out declines with increasing age. Not only was this pattern described retrospectively by older participants; it was also anticipated by younger participants.
- One of the key factors that can drive reduced participation in drunken nights out is the simple fact that, over time, participation becomes boring.
- An individual's personal circumstances and priorities tend to 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 change into a different pattern of behaviour, characterised by different choices of venue and a fundamentally different relationship with alcohol.
- 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.

In this chapter, we explore the ways in which participation in drunken nights out develops over time. A number of patterns were apparent in our participants' accounts. The single most important trend, however, is one of declining frequency of participation with age (see also **Chapter 3**). Drunken nights out are steadily transformed from a regular behaviour to something one does on special occasions, if at all:

I think it's gradually tailing off, to be honest. I think the older I get, the less I think about going out drinking. If people ask me, I'm like, 'oh, I don't know if I can be bothered', you know. [f, 23, Int25]

Not only was this pattern described retrospectively by older participants; it was also anticipated by younger participants, and offered as a rationale for current behaviour:

I'm, kind of, taking advantage of the fact that I can do it now, taking advantage of my youth, because in the future I'm not really going to want to drink because obviously my career's going to get in the way and I'm going to have a full-time job, and possibly have a family or something. [m, 19, Int43]

As Seaman & Ikegwuono (2010) found, 'a normative pathway, in relation to alcohol, was described as including a period of peer group excess followed by moderation, as both the responsibilities of their working and family lives came to the fore'.

Increasing responsibilities are in fact only part of the picture. Three distinct factors were apparent in participants' accounts (of declining participation in drunken nights out:

- Boredom ***(§18.1)***
- Changing personal priorities ***(§18.2)***
- Changing social context ***(§18.3)***

18.1 Boredom

One of the key factors that can drive reduced participation in drunken nights out is the simple fact that, over time, participation becomes quite boring. The norms and rituals that structure the drunken night out can also, over time, make it feel repetitive and stale; while repeated exposure to the same pool of people can also pall. Alongside statements of how much our participants enjoyed drunken nights out, complaints about how boring they found them were quite common:

It's the same, every week it's the same thing. It's like, you're just drinking for the sake of drinking, we go to the same stupid places, the same people. [m, 29, Int35]

That's why they're not as exciting because, like, the same thing happens and you go out and you're like, sometimes I think to myself, I don't know why I go out. Like, I've just spent loads of money and I didn't really have an amazing night. [f, 25, Int20]

Everywhere you go on a night out, it's generally the same places you go back to anyway. And it can be, just be repetitive. [m, 21–24, WSB]

I think now, we're like, oh, it's the same club you tend to see the same people out so, no, I think it will be more just nights in yes, with friends. [f, 20, Int05]

A number of participants described attempts to break up the monotony of repeated drunken nights out: going to new venues, for example; going off campus when a student; or going out in different cities. Over time, however, the most reliable way of making the drunken night out more interesting again appears to be to participate less often, so that the times when one does participate become more of a special occasion:

To be fair when you just go out, like, go into town, have a big night out, like, just every so often instead of all the time, it's a lot better. That's basically the reason. We cut back a bit and then obviously when we go out for a big night it's obviously going to be a lot better, you know what I mean. [m, 20, Int17]

Declining participation in drunken nights out may in part be a way of making nights out more special again, and recouping some of the initial sense of excitement that accompanies turning eighteen (see **§17.4**).

18.2 Changing priorities

At the same time as repeated participation in drunken nights out is becoming boring, an individual's personal circumstances and priorities may also be changing. Key changes associated with early adulthood – such as starting work, forming relationships, and having children – lead to a recalibration of the costs and benefits associated with participation in drunken nights out.

Increased costs

In **§7.1**, we saw how hangovers, while often described as a cost of a drunken night out, have a somewhat ambiguous status. With increasing age, however, this status appears to become more unambiguously negative, and the prospect of a hangover a more and more significant reason either to avoid participating at all or, if one does participate, to drink less.

To some extent, this may reflect an increasing sensitivity to the effects of alcohol. A number of participants felt that their hangovers had got worse as they got older:

I've wasted so much of that regenerative power that I had getting over hangovers, and things like that. You can only get your ticket punched so many times, and I think I've wasted a bit of that with, like drinking, and things like that, so that's a shame. [m, 29, Int34]

The key issue, however, appears to relate to the *opportunity costs* associated with a hangover, that is, the things one might otherwise have been doing with this time. As participants got older, they found other things to do with their time than reliving the night before, such as spending time with their partners, looking after children, or engaging in sporting activities:

It's finding the time; and it's finding the time when you can be hungover, as well; I know it's a wasted day now, more so than you thought before; with us both working. [f, 25, Int19]

I do triathlons, so during the summer I try and cut down on the crap that I eat and the crap that I drink, just to try and get myself a bit more trim for the competitions. [m, 20, Int16]

I've only had the horse for a couple of years, just after the wedding, so I think it's played a big part, that. Now I need to be up early and I can't just lie in bed, I have to be responsible, so I think that's played a big part. [f, 27, Int23]

Increased work commitments can also play a role. A number of students, for example, contrasted the first year of university – which they explained did not count towards their grade – with the more serious second and, in particular third years:

Because I'm a first-year the course seems to, sort of, take a bit of a backseat to all the social stuff. […] The first year doesn't really count as such to the rest of your degree, whereas the second and third year are so important. [m, 19, Int43]

Well, I've started going out a bit less now. […] Just because it's my second year, I need to get more focused and get on to my third year and get on with it. [f, 21, Int27]

For most participants, committing to a full-time job had marked (or was expected to mark) an end to going out in the week altogether:

I won't be going out as much, obviously, when I get a full-time job. It will be more, like, occasions I'll be going out, so I'll be drinking less. [f, 19, Int02]

You kind of get to that point where you're like, I really need to get a full-time job and like start earning proper money, and that's when you have to get serious, you know. You can't go out drinking in the week and expect to wake up, feel fine and go to work and do your job properly. [f, 23, Int25]

Just as young adults with changing priorities start finding better things to do with their time than being hungover, so too they start finding things other than alcoholic drinks to spend

their money on. It was striking that some of our younger participants felt they had little else other than drunken nights out on which to spend any money they earned or received. The move away from home, however, brought new financial responsibilities (alongside the new freedoms discussed in **§17.4**):

There are more responsibilities now than what there was, like my rent was paid when I was younger. [m, 24, Int08]

I've moved out now and I've realised I've got to pay for myself. I've got bills to pay, I've got rent to pay and everything. So I think now, it's only the last few weeks I've started picking up on money more. [f, 20, Int06]

Alongside these increased responsibilities, having a home of one's own creates new ways to dispose of one's disposable income (and spare time):

When someone says, oh, should we go up to the pub for drinks, come on, do I really want to waste £40 when I could go out and buy that nice new cushion for the sofa or whatever. I think no, I've worked too hard for it. [m, 29, Int35]

I recently bought a house, so I spend every spare minute I've got doing that up at the moment. So, I haven't even had time to think about drinking or things like that. [m, 24, Int11]

The idea of saving money in order to do more things in the future also begins to become more attractive:

I have a great time and that, to be honest, I'm spending a lot of money on that sort of thing, whereas, I could start saving for stuff, you know, like a flat or another holiday, something like that. [m, 20, Int17]

I am looking to start going out less, because I've been spending so much money lately that is better invested… especially with everything else I've got going on [a personal business venture]. [m, 24, Int07]

Reduced benefits

Even as the costs of a drunken night out become more salient, so too the benefits may become less attractive. A number of participants described how, over time, one became less interested in drunken nights out, often characterising this in terms of increased maturity:

I just think it depends on your age. When you get to a certain point, you're not that bothered about things like that any more. [f, 28, Int24]

I don't really want to be doing that either, I've grown up. So it's fine, you know? I don't need to do that anymore. [m, 29, Int36]

Two key features of the drunken night out in particular become less important as time goes by. First, social adventures start to lose their appeal. This often coincides with settling down with a partner:

Having a girlfriend changes a lot of things as well […] Then I think you'd rather spend time with your

partner than you would just out with randomers, you know, sort of thing. [m, 24, Int11]

I think a lot of people go out to try and pull. But when they start getting girlfriends they're, sort of, not so bothered about going out, and that. [m, 21, Int10]

The above quotations imply that it is settling down with a partner that makes one less interested in social adventures, but the causality is as likely to be in the other direction. As we saw in **§6.2**, those who are still interested in adventures simply avoid getting into a relationship; and one participant described what might be seen as the reverse of this strategy:

I got a cat when I turned 21 because I needed a reason to go home. [m, 29, Int35]

In parallel, or perhaps as part of the same overall process, the need to generate new stories to bolster one's drunken night out identity diminishes. To begin with, this may have an impact on how people behave when drunk:

It's hard to say I'm a bit more sensible when I still drink the ridiculous amount that I've always drunk, but I do feel a bit more… I get into less trouble now than, say, when I was a little… couple of years back. […] I just can't be arsed with the drama now. It's just… maybe before, where I was a bit younger and I had that sort of pride and bravado kind of… felt like I had to prove myself. [m, 24, Int07]

As people's sense of themselves becomes more stable, however, they find they no longer need to participate. The fear of missing out, one of the most powerful drivers of participation in drunken nights out (see **§8.3**), and indeed its underage precursors (see **§17.2**), disappears:

I got bored of it, but I just carried on doing it, because I thought I was going to miss out on something. That's the thing, I don't any more, I'm quite happy to say like, you lot, you carry on, I'm going to bed, and I'll go to bed, I'll wake up in the morning, it's fine. [m, 29, Int35]

With social adventures and the generation of stories waning in importance, bonding and belonging move to the fore as the main drivers of continued participation:

So, still the same group of friends, but we just, we're a bit more relaxed now, it's not all about like rushing and having a drink, it's more like meeting up and being together now. [f, 25, Int21]

As was noted in **§5.2**, as people take on more responsibilities – work, partners, families – and have less time to see their friends, the relationship between the group and drunken nights out eventually becomes a reciprocal one, with the drunken night out being the only thing that holds the group together:

The older we get the less you obviously get to see of each other, because you're working, you've got more commitments and I think you'll end up having girlfriends and wives and mortgages. […] You'll lose some people, and you'll lose some friends but if you can keep tradition together you can still keep in touch. [m, 23, Int09]

In some cases, these rare drunken nights out may retain some of the extremity of their more regular predecessors, especially in respect of the amounts consumed. Indeed, their rarity may even lead to them being more extreme:

The thing is that when I go out now, sometimes I go completely mental and will just go and get really, really, really drunk. […] Probably worse [than I used to], on the opportunities that I get. I think that's because I feel like I'm missing out a little bit. [f, 22, Int28]

Alternatively, shorn of its distinctive associations with social adventures and the generation of stories, the drunken night out as group maintenance event may change into a pattern of behaviour that is no longer really a drunken night out at all, at least not of the kind described in this report: a pattern that is characterised by different choices of venue and – significantly – a fundamentally different relationship with alcohol:

If I go out now I'm going out with my mates to catch up and, you know, and have a chat and I'd much rather be somewhere quiet. I'd much rather be in a corner of a quiet pub where I can have a beer I like and a chat with a person I like rather than just going out to get drunk. [m, 29, Int33]

I just think I'm a lot more sensible now so I… I drink alcohol because I like it, not because I need to get drunk, so I wouldn't… I buy alcohol that I actually enjoy the taste of, and drinking now is more about sharing with people and sitting down and enjoying each other's company [f, 23, Int30]

I think it is a change in us all, the fact that we know, we're that comfortable with each other as a group of friends, that we can be as silly as we like and we don't need alcohol to have an excuse to be like that. [m, 29, Int35]

18.3 Changing social context

As with every aspect of the drunken night out, the changes in individual's circumstances and priorities, which drive declining participation in drunken nights out, also need to be placed in the context of a changing social context. Just as, among teenagers, the fact that one's peers are participating in the precursors in drunken nights out can create an incentive to participate (see **§17.2**), so too declining participation will have an impact – both by removing this incentive and, since one needs a group of friends to go on a drunken night out, by actually reducing the opportunity to participate.

These effects at the level of the group are reinforced, if one does go out, by the age profile of the other people one encounters. So sensitive are young adults to small differences in age that people can start to feel too old in the context of a drunken night out when they are still very young:

In town, to be honest, I think all of them are fourteen. I just assume everyone's fourteen in town now, only because I feel old when I go out. [m, 24, Int07]

When I go in now I'm like, it's full of young, annoying people. It's either chavs or young people. [f, 25, Int20]

Perhaps most importantly of all, however, the social context of an individual beyond the drunken night out also changes. The focus of this report has been exclusively on this one practice: but the people who took part in our research had full and rich lives beyond their drunken nights out, with wider networks of family, partners, colleagues and friends.

These too may change during early adulthood, with implications for participation in drunken nights out. A new partner or friend, for instance, can have a significant impact on an individual, whether by directly intervening or merely by providing a concrete role model of a different kind of relationship with alcohol:

[My husband] is a bit older than me. […] He's not bothered about having a drink now because he'd done it all and it doesn't bother him now. He would rather be fresh on a Sunday morning is what he says. [f, 28, Int24]

She sort of grounded me, in a sense, because I was getting – not out of control – but I was sort of enjoying it too much. [m, 24, Int08]

[Friend] is a big influence on it, actually, because he's the most sensible drinker I've ever met in my life. He'll get to three pints and stop, every time we go out, no matter whether we're in the pub in the local, or whether we're out doing something else. He might have a couple more, but normally… And through doing that – and because a lot of the time I get taxis home with him and stuff, because we live round the corner from each other – I think that's affected the way I drink a lot. And I've noticed I enjoy my nights out a lot more if I stop when he stops, sort of thing, rather than carrying on and just getting trashed. [m, 24, Int11]

18.4 The drunken night out as a phase in life

As noted at the beginning of chapter, declining participation was described not only retrospectively by older participants, but also anticipated by younger participants. Many of our participants saw their own behaviour as a phase in life, an opportunity to get something out of their system before taking on responsibilities – though projections of the age at which they would need to move on varied:

Basically by the time I turn 21, I've got to be sensible. […] I've just been saying that since I was about 18. I'll get all my stupidness out of my system. [m, 20, Int17]

Life's too short, if I want to go out, if I want to get drunk and dance on chairs, and stuff like that. Before you know, it will be ten years on and I'll have kids and I won't be able to. [f, 25, Int22]

I just see drunken antics as a youth thing and at some point you have to grow up and not get drunk anymore. [f, 23, Int25]

Right now I've got the time to do it and I've got nothing to worry about, as such. So, I'm more, kind of, enjoying that aspect and trying to enjoy my youth while I can. I don't know if that's the best way to describe it. [m, 19, Int43]

There were mixed feelings about this inevitable progression. Looking ahead, one of our student

participants wondered what the change would mean for the new identity they had created for themselves in at university:

I think that's a sign, for me, when I'm grown up, like, that I can finally go out with people, socialise, and socialise in a way which may be… I don't have to get into that state of mind to, kind of, enjoy myself, and I can just enjoy. […] It scares me a little bit because I'm so used to what I do now. I think, you're, like… it's obviously a nice thing to think, in the future, I can and I will have this kind of lifestyle where I can go out for dinners and I can do the bottle of wine. But, then, it does, kind of… you're, like, that's not me. Will I change? Like, what's going to happen to my personality? Will I sink back into that quiet, shy person? [f, 20, Int47]

Other, somewhat older participants noted a reluctance to move on among their friends – or in themselves:

I think some of my friends are missing university a little bit and the drinking games remind them of being there. [f, 23, Int25]

Obviously you're around older people all the time, aren't you? So I see how responsible and normal they have to be, and I just think I don't want to be like that. I like being drunk, I like going out drinking and I don't really want to stop that. [f, 22, Int28]

Meanwhile, among our oldest participants, alongside the descriptions of how much they had enjoyed themselves and assertions that they would not do anything differently, there were some clear signs of regret at what had been lost through regular participation in drunken nights out:

I think reality set in a little bit. I realised that I'd messed up my university course, I'd moved back home so that felt like a step back. [f, 23, Int30]

Looking back, what did I gain from any of it? There's lost years there, you know. I could have done so much, I was thinking about all the money I used to earn, I used to earn very good money, I'm a qualified chef, that's what I trained, I went to college for and I trained and all I did was work and go and get drunk and spend my money and waste my money. Over those years, if I'd saved some of that money, I wouldn't have to work so hard and work two jobs now, and I did, I wasted that money, for the sake of going out and getting drunk really. I don't like myself very much for that. [m, 29, Int35]

IMPLICATIONS

19 A strategic framework for Drinkaware

Key points

- 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.
- 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.
- The Prototype Willingness Model provides an appropriate starting point for the development and evaluation of interventions.
- 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 such as those delivered by Drinkaware:
  - Boundaries: interventions which seek to encourage the establishment of clearer boundaries around bad behaviour.
  - Conscience: interventions which seek to strengthen the existing role of the group in managing risk so that it becomes much more effective.
  - Consequences: interventions which 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.
  - Vulnerability: interventions which seek simultaneously to encourage people to lower their intended limits and to reduce their willingness to break them.

In this chapter, we draw on the evidence presented in this report to set out a strategic framework which can be used by Drinkaware to develop, implement and evaluate interventions which aim to reduce the harms associated with drunken nights out.

We first consider the question of which behaviours need to change if harm is to be reduced (**§19.1**). Whatever behaviours are targeted, it is also important to recognise that education and communications are unlikely to change by themselves: and that education and communications objectives need to be developed as part of a wider package of interventions (**§19.2**). The design and evaluation of appropriate interventions would greatly benefit from the use of an appropriate behaviour model (**§19.3**).

Lastly, in **§19.4**, we set out four strategic territories which, on the basis of the evidence presented

in this report, offer the greatest potential for education and communications interventions such as those delivered by Drinkaware.

19.1 Which behaviours need to change?

As noted in **§2.1**, a drunken night out represents a complete behavioural package, comprising numerous behaviours – of which consuming alcohol is only one.

In light of this, and the focus of this review on reducing harm, Drinkaware's ambition to act as a catalyst for behavioural change invites a question: which behaviours need to change? Levels of alcohol consumption during drunken nights out play a significant role, but consumption is not the only factor. Harm could potentially be reduced if:

1. People got less drunk (e.g. as a result of changing levels/patterns of consumption)
2. People spent less time drunk (e.g. as a result of reducing pre-drinking, or going home earlier)
3. People got drunk less often (e.g. as a result of having fewer drunken nights out)
4. People behaved differently when drunk (e.g. as a result of reduced social acceptance of violence when drunk)
5. Risk factors in the environment were tackled (e.g. through the application of best practice in the design of drinking environments, management of transport, etc.)

Positive action by Drinkaware in any of the five areas above could make a contribution to harm reduction – although in practice, Drinkaware's remit mean that its scope for action is limited to items 1 to 4.

It is critical that the behaviour change(s) targeted by any given intervention is/are clearly specified from the outset – both the type(s) of change (from the list above) and, within that, the specific change(s) sought (for example, how exactly people should behave differently when drunk).

19.2 What is the role of education and communications?

While the focus of this report is on the role that education and communications could and should play in reducing the harms associated with drunken nights out, in line with Drinkaware's remit, our strong recommendation is that any such interventions should be made alongside other kinds of intervention, as part of a co-ordinated programme delivered with national or local partners.

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. As Stead et al. (2009) note:

Complex problems need complex solutions. Sometimes mass media communications can be the principal component and advertising can do most of the work. Typically however, more multifaceted efforts are needed, including upstream changes to policy and services which support people in making changes.

In fact, the need for a mixed approach applies not only to education and communications, but to other kinds of intervention. A House of Lords

Science and Technology Committee (2011) review of approaches to behaviour change concluded that:

The evidence supports the conclusion that non-regulatory or regulatory measures used in isolation are often not likely to be effective and that usually the most effective means of changing behaviour at a population level is to use a range of policy tools, both regulatory and non-regulatory.

The non-regulatory tools required as part of the overall intervention mix are likely to include education and communications. For example, the committee cites witness testimony regarding the role played by communication in areas such as seatbelt wearing and smoking:

Usually examples of legislation being maximally effective are when there is also work done on persuasive communication – for example, seatbelts and the smoking ban. If these legislative measures had been taken out of the blue, I don't think they would have been as effective as having a big communications campaign at the same time. On the other hand, if one just did the persuasive communication, it wouldn't have been effective.

A similar position on the role of education and communications as part of a wider mix of interventions is apparent in the World Health Organisation's (WHO, 2009) findings on community based-programmes:

Community-based programmes that include education and information campaigns, media advocacy, counter-advertising and health promotion, controls on selling and consumption venues and other regulations reducing access to alcohol, enhanced law enforcement and surveillance, can all have an impact on creating safer drinking and living environments, reducing underage drinking, reducing harmful patterns of drinking, and reducing drink-driving accidents, although they can be costly to implement and sustain.

Overall, the evidence suggests that education and communications should be seen as one family of approaches among others, to be drawn on according to the specifics of the situation. In line with this, the aim of this review was not to develop recommendations for Drinkaware acting in isolation, but to identify the kinds of role which Drinkaware could play alongside other partners.

We recommend that Drinkaware use our findings as the starting point for further conversations with prospective partners – at a national or local level – to develop co-ordinated programmes to which Drinkaware can contribute as a catalyst for behavioural and social change. The development of these programmes will require a review of the full range of possible interventions (regulatory and non-regulatory), and the development of specific education and communications interventions as part of this mix. Conversations with prospective partners would benefit from the use of a systematic approach, such as that offered by Michie et al. (2014).

Criticisms of industry funding for education and communications

A different line of argument has been developed specifically against the value of education and

communications when it is funded by the alcohol industry. For example, the WHO (2009) also notes that, 'although there is limited research, there is some evidence that campaigns funded by the alcohol industry can have negative effects'. Drawing on evidence of this kind, Stead et al. (2009) specifically cite activity by Drinkaware (which receives its funding from the industry) as likely to be counter-productive.

This argument, if sustained, would be highly relevant to our conclusions, since it would suggest that Drinkaware has no positive contribution to make to tackling the harms associated with drunken nights out. It is therefore important that we are clear about our views on the issue. These have been developed by unpacking the WHO (2009) analysis of the reasons why funding could be associated with negative effects. Two key themes are apparent:

- *The first theme relates to the branding of messages:*
  With alcohol, there is evidence that social responsibility messages, whether stand-alone or when added to product advertisements, benefit the reputation of the sponsor more than public health.

- *A second theme relates to the ways in which campaigns are developed:*
  There is also evidence, as with tobacco, that alcohol companies are more circumspect about their messaging than public health sources are. […] They also co-opt social responsibility messaging to serve product marketing objectives, conflating the two agendas. Thus, seemingly pro-health messages can end up serving to advance both industry sales and public relations interests.

That is, the evidence cited by the WHO (2009) supports the view that it is not industry funding *per se* that leads to negative effects, but other factors which are usually *associated* with such funding. The evidence does not support the argument that, merely by dint of the fact that it is funded by the industry, Drinkaware cannot *in principle* have a positive role to play in reducing the harms associated with drunken nights out, alongside other partners.

In practice, Drinkaware clearly can and should take concrete steps to ensure such factors are not present in its own work. These steps might include appropriate expert scrutiny, transparency and contestability in the development of interventions (starting with the publication of this report), and robust independent evaluation.

19.3 How should behaviour be modelled?

In order to develop and evaluate interventions, Drinkaware needs to identify an appropriate model for the behaviours it seeks to change. Such a model should provide a starting point both for the development of interventions and their effective evaluation. As Darnton (2008) explains:

Behavioural models can be used in the initial design phase to help identify those factors that may be worked upon in the intervention. In turn, the interventions can be evaluated in terms of impact on those target variables, as well as in terms of change in the end behaviour itself.

The identification of target variables is particularly important in the development of education and

communications interventions, especially if those interventions form part of a wider behaviour change programme. While the mediated effect of education and communications on behaviour may be hard if not impossible to establish accurately, the immediate effect on target variables can be established more reliably.

While an appropriate behaviour model can provide an essential framework for the development and evaluation of interventions:

It is essential that […] models are used appropriately: not as templates for behaviour change policies, but as tools to be used in the design of those interventions. In all instances, analysts and policy makers should use models as aids to thinking, and not seek to impose them on the public uncritically through interventions. (Darnton, 2008)

The map should not be confused with the terrain.

Criteria for an appropriate model of behaviour on drunken nights out

In light of the analysis of drunken nights out set out in this report, we would suggest that an appropriate behaviour model should address the following:

1. *The pivotal role played by norms and rituals in the drunken night out:*
   Throughout this report, we have drawn attention to the importance of social explanations in our participants' accounts of drunken nights out, and the role of norms and rituals in particular.

2. *The circumscribed role played by rationality in behaviour on a drunken night out:*
   We have argued that choice and intention play a role in behaviour throughout the drunken night out, but that rational explanations provide only a partial explanation of behaviour – especially as the night proceeds and people become more drunk.

3. *The importance of situational cues – especially as people become more drunk:*
   With increasing drunkenness, factors other than choice and intention play a greater role in behaviour – including norms and rituals, but also situational cues. An appropriate model of behaviour on drunken nights out has to be able to accommodate these basic effects of drunkenness.

4. *The importance of identity and self-image in the drunken night out:*
   Identity and self-image have emerged as important factors in behaviour on a drunken night out. Indeed we argued in **§4.3** that the opportunity to take on a different drunken night out identity lies at the heart of the benefits of escape.

5. *The role of feelings of personal vulnerability in moderating limits:*
   While intended limits are often breached, participants argued that they do adjust limits in response to a number of factors, and in particular feelings of personal vulnerability. An appropriate model should accommodate the possibility that this happens.

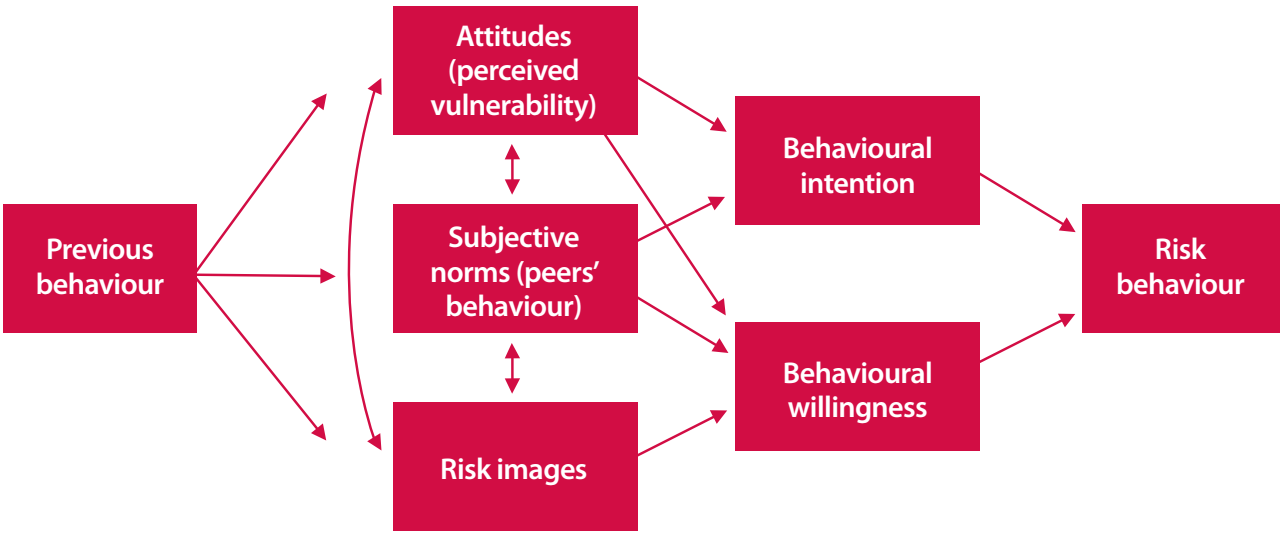
6. *The likely role of habit:*
   While habitual explanations have not featured prominently in participants' accounts of their own behaviour, habit is an important factor in most or all human behaviour, and creates an important obstacle to behavioural change.

Over and above the above criteria, an appropriate behaviour model for Drinkaware's purposes must identify variables which it is reasonable to believe that education and communications might influence. Such variables of course include the traditional targets of knowledge and attitudes, but, in light of the criteria above, a model which identifies *only* these variables is unlikely either to offer an adequate explanation of behaviour on drunken nights out or to provide a useful starting point for effective intervention development. We return to the opportunities for education and communications below.

The Prototype Willingness Model

In light of the above criteria, we recommend that Drinkaware use the Prototype Willingness Model, first proposed by Gibbons et al. (2003), as a starting point for the development and evaluation of interventions. This model is summarised in **Figure 7** below.

Figure 7: The prototype Willingness Model



Source: adapted from Gerrard et al. (2008)

Originally developed to model risky behaviours in adolescents, the Prototype Willingness Model is a dual-process model which aims to accommodate less deliberative modes of reason:

When asked if they intend to engage in risky behaviours in the future, most young adolescents will say no, even if they have engaged in that behaviour in the past. Of course, many of them do engage in these behaviours and some of them do so repeatedly. This discrepancy between intentions and behaviour is not a misrepresentation or lack of awareness of their intentions. Instead it is a reflection of the nature of their risk behaviour and the decision-making involved: rather than being premeditated or reasoned, much of it is a reaction to common risk-conducive situations. Hence the dual-path approach. (Gerrard et al., 2008)

A key feature of the model is the recognition that such behaviour can be a 'social reaction', rather than the product of an intention. Alongside this dual-process approach, the Prototype Willingness Model introduces two important variables (by comparison with, say, widely used single process models such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour): 'risk images', and perceptions of personal vulnerability.

- *'Risk images'*
  The idea of an image should not be taken too literally here. As Gerrard et al. (2008) explain: 'although some of these images have a visual component, they are primarily characterological, e.g., the type of person your age who smokes cigarettes. Thus, the image is a typology rather than a description of the physical appearance of the type of person'.

  They also note that, while the model was initially developed with adolescents in mind, 'studies of images related to college students' and adults' risk behavior provide reason to believe that changing risk images can […] be effective in these populations'.

  Originally it was supposed that these images provided a fresh kind of goal: someone who had a positive image of someone engaging in a risky behaviour, it was thought, would engage in the behaviour to be like that image. In fact, Gerrard et al. (2008) cite evidence that the relationship is more complicated, noting that even those with a high willingness to perform a behaviour may have a negative image of people who do so, and a positive image of abstainers. Relevant variables may include the degree of difference between images and performers and abstainers (as opposed to their absolute position in relation to one another) or the frequency with which a person thinks about the image of abstainers.

- *Perceptions of personal vulnerability*
  The personal element of assessment here is very important. As Gerrard et al. (2008) note: 'In the prototype model, this construct is a conditional perception of vulnerability, measured in the subjunctive, e.g., 'If you were to drink and drive what are the chances that you would have an accident?', rather than an absolute assessment, e.g., 'How dangerous is it to drink and drive?"

  Gerrard et al. (2008) also cite evidence that the relationship between perceived personal

vulnerability and willingness may in fact be reciprocal: higher willingness can actually lead to lower perceived vulnerability.

Assessing the Prototype Willingness Model against the criteria

The Prototype Willingness Model largely meets the criteria we have outlined:

1. *The pivotal role played by norms and rituals in the drunken night out:*
   Norms occupy a central position in the Prototype Willingness Model, being linked to both intentions and willingness. We would add that the behaviour of others can also provide the kind of situational cue to which behaviour is a social reaction. Hence social norms are actually involved twice in the willingness route, shaping both the willingness of the individual to behave in a certain way, and the likelihood that they will be cued to do so by the behaviour of others.

   As in other psychological models (such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour), norms are conceptualised in the model as 'subjective norms' – individual perceptions of what others expect. Attributes of groups, that is, are reconceptualised as individual attributes.

   Rituals are not explicitly referred to in the norm. The link between previous behaviour and subjective norms flags up the way in which patterns of behaving can become self-sustaining over time. However, as a psychological model, the Prototype Willingness Model does not directly address attributes of groups, such as rituals.

2. *The circumscribed role played by rationality in behaviour on a drunken night out:*
   As noted above, a key motivation for the development of the Prototype Willingness Model was the need to explain behaviour which is not the product of prior intentions. The dual process nature of the model implies that no one process can entirely account for behaviour.

   Importantly, however, while the model describes another route to behaviour, rational processes remain important. The role of intention and choice are not denied entirely, merely circumscribed.

   This is important, because certain behaviours during a drunken night out do appear to be closely linked to intentions. These include the decision to drink excessively in the first place. For example, Johnston & White (2003) found that the combined components of the Theory of Planned Behaviour – a single-process theory which models intentional behaviour only – accounted for 69% of variance in students' intention to binge drink, with intentions and perceived behavioural control accounting for 51% of actual binge drinking.

   The Prototype Willingness Model retains most of the elements Theory of Planned Behaviour (although not perceived behavioural control).

3. *The importance of situational cues – especially as people become more drunk:*
   This is the area where the Prototype Willingness Model most clearly builds on single-process

models such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour.

As we saw in **§9.6**, the evidence suggests that one of the key effects of alcohol is to disrupt higher level cognitive functioning, including the capacity for deliberative reasoning. Applying this insight to the Prototype Willingness Model, we might anticipate that, as someone gets more drunk, intentions would become less and less important in determining behaviour – making willingness a more important factor.

For example, a study of American students going on spring break looked at the relationship between their intentions and willingness to engage in certain behaviours and their actual behaviour. The study found that intentions were a stronger predictor of 'getting drunk', but willingness a stronger predictor of 'getting drunk enough to black out or pass out'. The authors interpret this in terms of the level of associated risk, but we would argue that the difference reflects the *timing* of relevant decisions during a night out, and strongly echo the discussion of limits in **Chapter 11**.

4. *The importance of identity and self-image in the drunken night out:*
   The Prototype Willingness Model does not directly tackle issues of identity and self-image. However, in the inclusion of risk images as a factor in willingness, it does hypothesise a role for evaluations of the kind of person who engages in certain types of behaviour.

   It is beyond the scope of this report to conduct a full review of current evidence regarding the precise nature of the proposed link between images and behavioural willingness. Clearly this relationship is a complex one. To the extent that Drinkaware pursues interventions which seek to influence risk images, further expert advice on this topic would be valuable.

5. *The role of feelings of personal vulnerability in moderating limits:*
   The Prototype Willingness Model posits a direct connection between perceived personal vulnerability and behavioural willingness, providing a clear theoretical model for the role of vulnerability in moderating limits.

   Based on our qualitative findings, however, we would suggest that another possibility is worth considering: namely that feelings of vulnerability have roughly the opposite effect that alcohol does, tending to increase the role of intentions. To put the point another way, when people feel vulnerable they may be more consciously careful about not breaching their limits. This would resonate with the description of some participants of 'sobering up' when there is trouble around – effectively, the operation of intentions and deliberative reasons can be switched back on when necessary.

6. *The likely role of habit:*
   As with many psychological models, habit is not effectively addressed by the Prototype Willingness model. It is very positive that the

model explicitly notes the role of previous behaviour as a determinant of attitudes, norms and images. However, this is not quite the same as habit, which would better be conceptualised as a direct link between previous behaviour and future behaviour.

The Prototype Willingness model and education/communications

As noted above, an appropriate behaviour model for Drinkaware's purposes must also identify variables which it is reasonable to believe that education and communications might influence.

In line with single-process models, education and communications are often conceived of as influencing behaviour via knowledge and attitudes. These in turn are believed to influence intentions, which in turn shape behaviour. Whether this narrow conception of the role of education and communications is ever appropriate is open to question. In the specific context of a drunken night out, however, the limitations of the approach hardly need pointing out: when people are drunk, their intentions become less relevant – and so, by extension, do interventions which seek to change those intentions.

For example, consider a specific behaviour associated with harm: fighting. A campaign which alerted people to the risks of injury or arrest, and aimed to build their determination not to get into fights when drunk, might have little or no impact at the actual *moment* of over-reacting to a chance remark, when intentions may have very little effect on behaviour.

The Prototype Willingness Model, in contrast to single-process models, allows us to characterise a number of different risk profiles for a behaviour such as fighting. For instance, consider the following three people in relation to their likelihood of getting involved in a fight.

- A has a behavioural intention to fight on a night out. He goes out looking for a fight.
- B has a behavioural intention not to fight on a night out, but a high behavioural willingness. He isn't looking for a fight, but if the circumstances *arise and he is drunk*, he is likely to pile in.
- C has neither intention to willingness to fight. If he finds himself in a situation that could turn into a fight, he is likely to withdraw – even if drunk.

These three profiles fit very well with the different accounts of fighting offered by our participants. A, for example, fits with the model presented in **§6.2**; B with the model presented in **§9.5**; and C with the risk management strategy described in **§15.1**.

Similar examples could be constructed for other risky behaviours such as: having another drink when already too drunk; wandering off from friends; walking down a dark alley; going home with a stranger; committing vandalism; driving when drunk; groping someone in a bar; assaulting someone; committing rape; etc.

Focusing on the traditional targets of knowledge, attitudes and intentions may be appropriate for people of type A. In the context of the drunken

night out, however, it seems that a more important task may be to look to convert people of type B into people of type C. This means influencing not behavioural *intentions* (B already intends not to fight) but behavioural *willingness.*

The Prototype Willingness Model suggests clear tactical possibilities for achieving this end, which go beyond the traditional targets of knowledge and attitudes. In particular, it suggests the development of education and communications that seek to influence:

- Perceptions of personal vulnerability
- Risk images associated with target behaviours

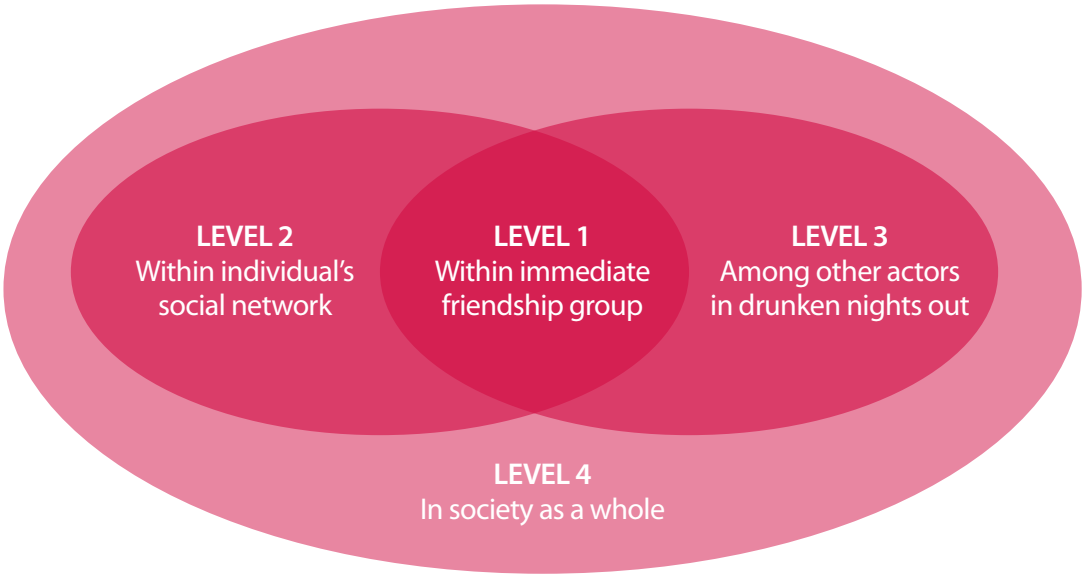
The challenge of norms

Alongside the factors noted above, there may also be potential for education and communications initiatives to seek to influence social norms. For example, it was seen in **§6.3** that a proposition relating to the re-establishment of boundaries around behaviour such as groping was well received by participants in our workshops.

A positive reception is not the same as effectiveness, however, and efforts to influence norms need to take into account that any messages from Drinkaware will represent only a small fraction of all the messages – explicit or implicit – received by participants in drunken nights out.

It is worth distinguishing a number of distinct levels (see **Figure 8** below) at which social norms can be either sustained and strengthened or weakened and changed:

Figure 8: Levels at which norms are sustained/weakened



- *Level 1 – within the immediate friendship group*

- *Level 2 – within an individual's wider social network:*
  Each individual within a group will have their own network beyond that group, which may or may not influence their drinking behaviour. In particular, that network may (or may not) afford positive models of drinking practices other than the drunken night out, or negative examples of the consequences of excessive drinking.

- *Level 3 – among other actors in drunken nights out:*
  The third level extends beyond the immediate friendship group in a different direction, to the context of drunken nights out and the behaviour of other actors within that context. This includes all the other people participating in drunken nights out – and the obvious fact that so many of them are also getting very drunk.

  Other drinkers are not, however, the only actors at this second level. Messages regarding what is and is not normal will be sent by the behaviour of other key actors in a drunken night out, such as bar staff, bouncers, or police. They will also be sent via the artefacts of many agents who are not literally present, such as those responsible for the design and marketing of venues, the design and marketing of products, or licensing decisions. Given the ubiquity of Drinkaware's logo, these agents include Drinkaware.

- *Level 4 – in society as a whole*

An effective approach to influencing norms would seek to co-ordinate the activity of multiple agents at Level 3 – including both those who are present and those who are not – and, in so far as is possible, at Level 4. This co-ordination would need to cover:

- The delivery of messages supporting the new norm (explicit or implicit).
- The elimination of messages, explicit and implicit, which, intentionally or unintentionally, sustain and strengthen existing norms associated with increased harm.

19.4 Strategic territories

In this section, we set out four strategic territories which, on the basis of the evidence presented in this report, offer the greatest potential for education and communications interventions such as those delivered by Drinkaware.

For each territory, we provide references to relevant sections of the report, outline what a strategy for education and communications activity in this area might seek to achieve, note which of the classes of behaviour in **§19.1** one might realistically set out to change, and identify which factors of the Prototype Willingness Model (see **§19.4**) might be most relevant to doing so.

While all four territories aim to reduce harm, we note that only one (Territory 4) directly seeks to reduce consumption. This does not reflect either complacency about or connivance with the quantities being consumed on drunken nights out, but realism about the enormous challenges associated with challenging a behaviour which is so normalised in the context of the night-time

economy. As noted in the discussion of norms at the end of **§19.3**, tackling a norm of this kind would require co-ordinated activity across all the agents involved in a drunken night out, to deliver messages supporting a new norm, while eliminating those that, intentionally or unintentionally, sustain and strengthen existing norms.

Territory 1: Boundaries

In contrast to the popular representation of drunken nights out as chaotic and out of control (**§2.5**), drunken nights out are in fact highly ritualised and rule-bound, with social norms governing many aspects of behaviour (see for example **Chapters 4** and **9**).

Nevertheless, as we argued in **§6.3**, there is a lack of clear boundaries around interpersonal interactions. There are very different ideas, even among those who get very drunk, regarding what behaviour they are prepared to accept or tolerate on a drunken night out. 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 are permitted (**§4.3**), including more extreme interactions with strangers – social adventures (**§6.2**). 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 (**§6.3**). 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 (**§9.5, §9.6**).

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.

In our workshops, we tested the proposition: 'There are still limits, even when you're drunk. If behaviour is inappropriate when you're sober, it's inappropriate when you're drunk'. This was well received by both genders, especially females, who felt it gave them permission to reject unwelcome behaviours (sexual behaviours in particular). It chimes well with a widely (though not universally) held view that alcohol is not an excuse for such behaviours (**§9.5**).

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.

Such a strategy would seek to change how people behave when they are drunk (Behaviour type 4 in **§19.1**) 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 (**§5.1**). So pivotal is the role of the group in the drunken night out, indeed, that one may legitimately question whether the individual drinker is the most appropriate unit of analysis for either research or intervention.

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 (**§15.2**), intervening to help individuals establish boundaries, to defuse situations, or to protect other group members (**§6.3, §9.5**).

- 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 (**§11.4**).

As we saw in **§15.2**, 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.

In our workshops, we tested the proposition: 'Keep an eye on each other. If you leave someone behind and something bad happens to them, it will be on your conscience'. This proposition was very popular with participants, in part because it builds so clearly on current norms within the drunken night out. In particular, the proposition appeared to chime with the highly social nature of a drunken night out in a way that individualised 'responsible drinking' messages fail to do. The word 'conscience' in particular had a significant impact, forcing people to think not just about the immediate risks to a friend, but also to a form of irreversible damage to their own identity – although care would be needed with use of this kind of language (see **§15.2**).

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 (Behaviour type 4 in **§19.1**). 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 (**Chapter 11**). They have strategies in place for managing the risks associated with non-consensual interactions such as violence or sexual assault (**Chapters 14** and **15**). They acknowledge that other risks associated with single instances of extreme intoxication (such as injury) are real (**§16.1**), 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.*

In **§16.2**, we saw a number of reasons offered by participants 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 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 (Behaviour type 3 in **§19.1**) 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 (see **Chapter 18**). 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 (**§9.1**). Drunkenness is both valued for its perceived connection to the benefits of a drunken night out (**§9.4**), and mandated by powerful social norms (**§10.3**) – to the extent that drunkenness has become a required condition of participation in drunken nights out, as opposed to an allowed consequence of participation (**§10.4**). The consumption of alcohol is itself driven by social norms (**§10.1**), especially at the level of the group (**§10.2**). As people become drunk, further consumption is prompted by social and situational cues (**§11.1**). In this context, traditional efforts to encourage moderation or responsible drinking face considerable challenges (**§11.5**).

Nevertheless, as we saw in **§11.2**, 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.

Such a strategy would seek to change how much people drink (Behaviour type 1 in **§19.1**), and possibly, albeit indirectly, how long they remain drunk (Behaviour type 2). 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 (see **Chapter 14**). 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.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - Regular, Occasional and Never Intentionals

From **§3.4** onwards, this report makes a number of references to research undertaken with 18 to 24 year olds for Drinkaware by Ipsos MORI (2013). Ipsos MORI conducted an online quota survey among a representative sample of 748 18-24 year olds across the UK between 29th October and 11th November 2013. The data were weighted by age, gender, region and social grade to the known offline population profiles. Of particular interest for this review is a simple grouping based on responses to the following question:

When you drink alcohol, how often, if ever, do you do so with the specific intention of getting drunk?

Three groups of 18- to 24-year-old drinkers may be identified on the basis of these responses:

- Regular Intentionals (responding 'every time' or 'most times') – 15%
- Occasional Intentionals (responding 'some of the time' or 'occasionally') – 48%
- Never Intentionals (responding 'never) – 36%

Responses to other questions in the survey by these three groups reveal a series of striking patterns in both reported behaviour and reported attitude. (However, in interpreting these patterns it is important to note that the base size of 100 Regular Intentionals is small, and that findings should therefore be considered as indicative only. For some questions, base sizes are even smaller, as noted below.) The tables below summarise these patterns.

Statistically significant differences (p=0.05) are marked with letters, as follows:

- 'a' indicates that a figure is significantly higher than the figure for Regular Intentionals
- 'b' indicates that a figure is significantly higher than the figure for Occasional Intentionals
- 'c' indicates that a figure is significantly higher than the figure for Never Intentionals

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'How often if at all do you have an alcoholic drink?'			
Base: all respondents	*100*	*309*	*231*
Almost very day	3%	1%	1%
5 or 6 days a week	2%	5%c	1%
3 or 4 days a week	18%c	16%c	7%
Once or twice a week	53%c	51%c	36%
Once or twice a month	15%	17%	31%ab
Once every couple of months	8%	6%	16%b
Once or twice a year	1%	3%	8%bc
Less often	-	-	-
Never	-	-	-

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'How often, if at all, do you have an alcoholic drink outside of your own or somebody else's home (for example in a bar, pub, club, restaurant or other venue)?'			
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year	*100*	*309*	*231*
Drinks outside home at least once a week	49%c	43%c	24%

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'If you are going out drinking, how often do you have a drink at home, or at a friend's home, before you go out?'			
Base: all who drink alcohol outside the home	*97 (note small base)*	*296*	*207*
Always	49%bc	17%c	3%
Usually	28%c	32%c	13%
Occasionally	14%	34%a	30%a
Rarely	7%	14%	32%ab
Never	1%	3%	22%ab

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'Please indicate how many of the following you drink in a typical week?'			
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a week	*76 (note small base)*	*225*	*105*
Low risk drinkers	52%	61%	82%bc
Increasing risk drinkers	31%c	31%c	17%
High risk drinkers	17%bc	8%c	1%

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'Please indicate how many of the following you drink in a typical week?'			
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a week	*76 (note small base)*	*225*	*105*
Low risk drinkers	59%	72%a	88%ab
Increasing risk drinkers	30%c	24%c	10%
High risk drinkers	11%bc	3%	2%

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'Earlier, you said you drink alcohol outside the home. Think about the LAST time you had a night out like that. Please indicate how many drinks you drank over the whole evening (including before you set off and after you got back).'			
Base: all who drink alcohol outside the home	*97 (note small base)*	*296*	*207*
1 unit or less	-	-	6%ab
2 units	6%	8%	11%
3 units	4%	8%	20%ab
4 units	2%	5%	9%a
5 to 10 units	35%	33%	36%
11+ units	47%bc	34%c	12%

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'When you drink alcohol, how often, if ever, do you end up getting drunk?'			
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year	*100*	*309*	*231*
Every time I drink	22%bc	1%	-
Most of the time I drink	63%bc	11%c	1%
Some of the time I drink	15%	54%ac	7%
Occasionally	-	32%a	48%ab
Never	-	3%	45%ab

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'If you were being honest with yourself, which of the following statements best describes your drinking habits?'			
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year	*100*	*309*	*231*
I am a sensible drinker and drink well within the accepted safe limits	20%	30%	72%ab
I drink more or less within the limits of what is good for me	27%	35%c	20%
I don't drink to excess but I probably drink a little more than is really good for me	32%c	27%c	6%
I frequently drink quite a bit more than what is supposed to be safe	20%bc	8%c	-

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'Here are some of the things people have said they do to control their drinking and avoid getting too drunk. Have you tried any of these?'			
Percentages selecting 'I could never see myself doing this' as response			
Base: all who drink	*100*	*309*	*231*
Turn down a drink from friends	29%bc	18%c	5%
Alternate alcoholic drinks with soft drinks or water	28%bc	14%c	8%
Avoid drinking shots	32%bc	14%	15%
Avoid being in a round of drinks	32%bc	20%	17%
Avoid drinking too much before I have left home	18%bc	10%	8%
Drink lower alcohol drinks	29%	26%	25%
Avoid always having alcohol in the house	28%	33%	29%
Set myself a spending limit	13%	8%	14%b
Leave my cash cards at home	26%	30%	35%
Have one or two nights off drinking	4%	4%	7%
Make sure I eat before drinking	3%	3%	3%

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'People react differently and experience difference consequences when drinking alcohol. Several of these possible consequences are listed below. Please indicate if any of the following things have ever happened to you as a result of drinking alcohol.'			
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year	*100*	*309*	*231*
Vomited (either after drinking or the following day)	68%c	64%c	31%
Woke up feeling embarrassed about things you had said or done	60%bc	45%c	14%
Was unable to remember what happened the night before	60%bc	40%c	12%
Took risks with your personal safety (such as walking home alone or through poorly lit streets)	44%bc	33%c	9%
Missed a day of work, school, college or university	37%bc	27%c	7%
Injured yourself	42%bc	22%c	5%

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'People react differently and experience difference consequences when drinking alcohol. Several of these possible consequences are listed below. Please indicate if any of the following things have ever happened to you as a result of drinking alcohol. (CONTINUED)			
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year	*100*	*309*	*231*
Felt that you had spoiled someone else's night	*32%bc*	*21%c*	*6%*
Got into a fight/argument	40%bc	17%c	6%
Lost a valued possession (such as a mobile phone or wallet)	27%c	18%c	5%
Regretted a decision to engage in sexual activity	29%bc	17%c	3%
Did something which put you in a risky situation	28%bc	14%c	3%
Made to look bad on social media the next day	26%bc	13%c	3%
Had unprotected sex	27%bc	12%c	3%
Been a victim of crime	11%bc	4%c	*
Got into trouble with the police	8%c	4%	1%
None of the above	7%	14%	54%ab

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'Please indicate if any of the following things have happened to you in the past three months as a result of drinking alcohol.'			
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year	*100*	*309*	*231*
Vomited (either after drinking or the following day)	36%bc	22%c	4%
Woke up feeling embarrassed about things you had said or done	35%bc	11%c	1%
Was unable to remember what happened the night before	33%bc	12%c	-
Took risks with your personal safety (such as walking home alone or through poorly lit streets)	21%bc	8%c	2%
Missed a day of work, school, college or university	16%bc	5%c	1%
Injured yourself	12%bc	4%c	1%
Felt that you had spoiled someone else's night	9%bc	3%	1%

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'Please indicate if any of the following things have happened to you in the past three months as a result of drinking alcohol.' (CONTINUED)			
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year	*100*	*309*	*231*
Got into a fight/argument	12%bc	4%c	*
Lost a valued possession (such as a mobile phone or wallet)	6%c	3%c	*
Regretted a decision to engage in sexual activity	9%bc	3%c	*
Did something which put you in a risky situation	8%bc	2%c	-
Made to look bad on social media the next day	10%bc	3%c	*
Had unprotected sex	11%bc	1%	1%
Been a victim of crime	-	1%	-
Got into trouble with the police	1%	-	*

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'			
Percentages selecting 'strongly agree' or 'tend to agree' except where indicated			
Base: all respondents	*100*	*309*	*231*
I think more about how much I drink nowadays than I used to	56%	49%	45%
I've seen quite a bit recently about the dangers of drinking too much	52%	46%	53%
It is not as acceptable these days to get drunk as it used to be	36%	35%	48%ab
Disagreement with above statement	44%bc	30%c	22%
I would like more information on how I could keep an eye on the amount of alcohol I drink	32%bc	19%	19%
I sometimes feel pressure from my friends to drink more alcohol than I would like to	32%	36%	30%
I don't have to get drunk to have a good night out	45%	69%a	89%ab
Disagreement with above statement	33%bc	7%	4%

	Regular	Occasional	Never
'How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'			
Percentages selecting 'strongly agree' or 'tend to agree' except where indicated			
Base: all who drink alcohol at least once a year	*100*	*309*	*231*
Drinking gives me the confidence I need to meet people and make friends	62%bc	45%c	19%
I often wake up feeling embarrassed or worried about things I've said or done after drinking	44%bc	27%c	8%
I tend to stop drinking before I get very drunk	37%	61%a	80%ab
Disagreement with above statement	44%bc	14%c	4%
I feel ashamed of myself when I drink too much	44%c	34%	31%
Disagreement with above statement	32%	29%	24%
I only let myself get drunk when I'm with my best mates	55%c	54%c	24%
It is difficult to think of things to do on a night out that don't involve alcohol	47%bc	30%c	10%
If I'm out with my girlfriend or boyfriend I don't drink a lot	37%	35%	48%b
Spending time with my friends is more fun when I'm drunk than when I'm sober	42%bc	28%c	7%
I find it hard to turn down a drink on a night out, even if I didn't intend to drink alcohol	51%bc	39%c	14%
I don't really get drunk when there are both boys and girls in the group	18%	18%	36%ab
I don't get drunk if I have to work the next day	58%	71%a	72%a

Appendix 2 - Recruitment screener

Key screener questions used in the recruitment process are summarised below. Details of the sample structure for each phase of the research will be found in **§1.4**.

Participants' gender, age, socio-economic group and ethnicity (open response) were also recorded.

Exclusions

1. We are conducting a survey on the local environment but firstly, can you please tell me if you or any of your family or close friends work in any of these industries:

Advertising / Market Research / Journalism / PR / Marketing	CLOSE
In the manufacturing of alcoholic drinks	CLOSE
I work as a bar manager / club manager	CLOSE
I work in a bar or club as bar staff[64]	
None of these	

2. Have you been to a group discussion before? (if so, when was that?)

Yes, within the last 6 months	CLOSE
Yes, more than 6 months ago	ASK Q2b
No, never been to one before	

2b. On what subject was the previous group discussion(s)?

CLOSE IF RELATED TO THIS ONE

3. Can I ask where you grew up?

UK	
Outside the UK	CLOSE

Work/student status

4. Can I ask your current work status?

I am in full time work	
I am in part time work	
I am a university student in year 1 / 2 / 3	ASK 4b
I am not a university student but am in full-time education	CLOSE
I am not currently working	

64 The decision was made not to exclude those who work as bar staff given that this may be quite a common experience.

4b. And where do you live during term time?

At home with my parent(s) / family	
On my own / shared house / student halls	

Drinking and drunken nights out

5. How often do you drink alcohol in a typical week?

More than 5 days a week	CLOSE
3 - 5 days a week	
1 - 2 days a week	
Less often than weekly	CLOSE
I rarely / never drink alcohol	CLOSE

6. How well does this statement describe you: 'I really enjoy going out to get drunk'?

Definitely agree	
Tend to agree	
Tend to disagree	GO TO Q11
Definitely disagree	GO TO Q11
Don't know	GO TO Q11

7. How well does this statement describe you: 'I sometimes get very drunk on a night out'?

Definitely agree	
Tend to agree	
Tend to disagree	CLOSE
Definitely disagree	CLOSE
Don't know	CLOSE

8. How often, typically, do you go out and get drunk?

Three or four times a month or more	
At least once a month	
A few times a year	GO TO Q16
Once a year at most	GO TO Q16

9. And is this typically in bars, pubs, and clubs in town?

Yes	
No	CLOSE

10. When you go out and get drunk – do you drink at home or at a friend's home first?

Usually
Often
Rarely
Never

Lapsed participation (route 1)

The following questions asked only of those directed here from Q6.

11. Suppose I had asked you the same question a couple of years ago. How well does this statement describe you back then: 'I really used to enjoy going out to get drunk'?

Definitely agree	
Tend to agree	
Tend to disagree	CLOSE
Definitely disagree	CLOSE
Don't know	CLOSE

12. Why do you think that has changed? (Why do you enjoy going out and getting drunk less now?)

CLOSE IF ANSWER INVOLVES A NEW CHILD

13. Still thinking of a couple of years ago, how well does this statement describe you back then: 'I sometimes used to get very drunk on a night out'?

Definitely agree	
Tend to agree	
Tend to disagree	CLOSE
Definitely disagree	CLOSE
Don't know	CLOSE

14. How often, back then, did you typically go out and get drunk?

Three or four times a month or more	
At least once a month	
A few times a year	CLOSE
Once a year at most	CLOSE

15. And was this typically in bars, pubs, and clubs in the town where you were living at the time?

Yes	
No	CLOSE

Lapsed participation (route 2)

The following questions were asked only of those directed here from Q8.

16. Suppose I had asked you the same question a couple of years ago. How often, back then, did you typically used to go out and get drunk?

Three or four times a month or more	
At least once a month	
A few times a year	CLOSE
Once a year at most	CLOSE

17. And was this typically in bars, pubs, and clubs in the town where you were living at the time?

Yes	
No	CLOSE

18. Why do you think that has changed? (Why do you go out and get drunk less now?)

CLOSE IF ANSWER INVOLVES A NEW CHILD

Appendix 3: Detailed contents

Tables

Figures

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