Is Britain the binge drinking capital of Europe? What factors in our national culture contribute to our drinking habits and how might be change them?

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Introduction

Alcohol is an everyday part of British culture which the majority of drinkers enjoy responsibly, such as with a celebratory glass of champagne. However the social phenomenon of ‘binge drinking’ conjures up a very different image, altogether much less pleasant.

There is no standard definition of binge drinking but there is a general consensus that it is an excess of alcohol consumed over an extended period of time. It has also more recently come to be quantified by the number of drinks or units consumed, and also through clinical signs of acute intoxication (Alcohol Research UK, 2007). Alcohol misuse in general costs the NHS an estimated £3.5bn every year (ONS, 2013) and binge drinking is associated with both increased accidental and intentional injuries to oneself and others, alcohol poisoning, cardiovascular problems and other widespread ramifications throughout the body (CDC, 2014; WHO, 2012).

Britain has long had a reputation for being a hotspot for binge drinking with recurrent newspaper headlines reiterating this; however prevalence has been decreasing since 2007 (IAS, 2013). However the factors that influence the British drinking culture are complex. This essay aims to explore some of the key factors that determine British drinking habits, and how they might be overcome and changed for the better.

Binge Drinking: The Origin

The term ‘to binge’ was believed to have originated in the 1940s and 1950s where it signified a period of extended drinking, strongly associated with alcoholism (Berridge et al., 2009). However the heavy drinker is believed to have almost always existed throughout changing societies in Britain ever since the discovery of fermentation some 12,000 years ago (Politics.co.uk, 2010). Arguably binge drinking has now come to mean a single event of excess drinking which may not necessarily be linked to alcoholism, or simply even just a term for public drunkenness.

Berridge et al. argues that the habit of binge drinking was not simply replaced from one practice (period of extended drinking) to another (a single event of excess drinking), but that they continue to coexist and it is the balance between these two definitions that changes over time (Berridge et al., 2009). Reference to binge drinking in this essay will agree with this broader definition of excess alcohol volume, either at one time or otherwise. However in the context of different reported statistics, the quantitative definition used will be stated.

British Drinking within Europe

Firstly the context of British drinking habits can be compared with those in Europe which may provide a platform for contrast with other nations.

A recent study requested by the European Commission included 26,788 respondents from 27 EU countries covering an extremely large data set with participants from varying backgrounds, which may in this instance be confidently extrapolated to Europe in general. Within Europe, Scandinavian countries including Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands had the largest proportions of drinkers. However the prevalence of binge drinking was highest in Ireland where 44% of alcohol drinkers reported drinking five or more units at least once a week. Romania, Germany, Austria, the UK, Spain and Greece also had high levels of binge drinkers although there was no discernible geographical pattern for these results. The UK also had the highest percentage of drinkers answering that they would
exceed seven drinks in one sitting if they were to drink, however this figure was still only 6% (ONS, 2009). This is certainly a cause for concern given the severe health implications binge drinking can cause. Why is it that though Britain does not have the highest proportion of drinkers or those who drink with most frequency in Europe, it seems to be one of the most determined in drinking the greatest volume in one sitting then?

**Young adults: Rise of the ‘drinking to get drunk’ attitude**

Young adults in Britain are generally regarded as one of the most at risk age groups for binge drinking, helped also by the fact that they are very widely publicised with countless headlines such as *British girls ‘biggest teenage binge drinkers in the western world’* (The Guardian, 2011). Indeed evidence shows that young adults (defined as 16-24 years old) are most likely to binge drink than another other age group (ONS, 2009). Despite having a similar legal minimum drinking age to the majority of its European counterparts at 18 years old (DrinkingMap, 2014), Britain’s young adults are one of the biggest culprits when it comes to exceeding the recommended limits for alcohol. A 2007 survey of students recorded the UK as having the third highest average intoxication level on participants’ last drinking day, behind only the Faroe Islands of Denmark and Sweden (ESPAD, 2007).

One factor which contributes to this is the normality of drinking heavily and general drunkenness in the British young adult population. A study of both urban and rural areas discovered that young adults who were binge drinking viewed it as a temporary ‘phase’ in their lives, spurred on mainly by peer pressure (Valentine et al., 2007). This coping strategy seems to devoid themselves of the irresponsibility of drinking excessively. In actual fact though, young adults are the most informed about alcohol content of different drinks and the negative effects on their health, but simply choose a policy of ignorance when drinking (Valentine et al., 2007). This exemplifies just how immensely powerful peer pressure is as a persuasive tool. However there is also a contradictory societal pressure of both a disappointment and yet an expectation of student life to involve heavy drinking, also regarding it too as simply ‘a phase’.

Contrastingly in Italian culture, drunkenness is regarded as highly irresponsible in teenage drinkers and looked upon with embarrassment. This has resulted in a high frequency intake of alcohol in Italy, but at much lower volumes and with less binge drinking, with the exception of more recent years where new generations have been adopting the dangerous habits of British teenagers (BBC, 2007). With newer reports revealing that perhaps binge drinking levels in young adults is actually decreasing, accurate representation of drinking habits particularly in this age group may be one method at relieving pressure from society and peers on them to drink (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009).

The attitude of temporary binge drinking in youth has led to young adults thinking they will just cut back later in life (Valentine et al., 2007). However there is also data that suggests those who binge drink in their early twenties increase their risk of continuing to do so 26 years later, by as much as twofold (Dobson, 2005). Therefore this ideal intention to reduce alcohol intake may not be so strongly associated with actual actions, and may in fact precede a life habit of binge drinking in certain individuals. This reinforces the importance of instilling a more sensible and moderate drinking habit from a younger age.

Another key factor that particularly influences drinking habits of young people is cost and availability. The accessibility of alcohol for young adults in night-clubs and bars, especially combined with discounted prices often offered to students has been instrumental in allowing reckless drinking to
continue. Night-life is also heavily dominated by activities involving alcohol, both for young people and adults (Morleo et al., 2010). The majority of young people surveyed for a study in 2012 agreed that cheap alcohol promotions encouraged a ‘drinking to get drunk’ attitude (Alcohol Concern, 2012). Moreover the increasing role of social media sites has led to increased publicity and sharing of promotions so that a wider audience may access them. The recent drinking game known as ‘NekNominate’ is just one example of an irresponsible competition to drink alcohol and other potentially harmful substances that has been encouraged by the online community (The Guardian, 2014). More traditionally student ‘fresher’s’ weeks' have often held social events involving alcohol such as pub and bar crawls which promote excess drinking and ‘crawling’ from bar to bar, making it incredibly easy to lose count of one’s actual alcohol intake. Changes should be proposed to incorporate other social activities that do not involve alcohol amongst young people, as well as marketing and providing alternative drinks in bars and clubs so that they are not as pressured to drink alcohol.

New trends of students’ preference for strong spirits and liquors may also be another factor in allowing the trend of binge drinking among young adults to continue. The National Student Drinking Survey in 2011 had 2197 respondents from around the country with 67% reporting vodka as their favourite drink, far ahead of any other alcoholic beverage (StudentBeans, 2011). Young men in particular have been shown to be competitive in both the strength and frequency of alcohol consumed, thereby increased the likelihood of ‘accidental’ binge drinking due to favouring high alcohol content drinks (Valentine et al., 2007). Young adult populations are also more likely to experiment with alcohol types than any other age groups (ONS, 2013). The fact that alcohol has become affordable enough for even student populations to have a wide variety of choice and multiple drinks from a relatively small disposable income is despairing; especially due to the potentiating effects alcohol can have due to mixing of drinks. Tackling the issue of regulating a price for alcohol will be a key factor in eliminating a fair proportion of binge drinking in the young adult and student populations.

However there is also now the worry that adolescents have begun drinking earlier, as binge drinking has increased in 11-13 year olds (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009). Nonetheless, a study found a 43% reduction in the probability of binge drinking in adolescents aged 13-14yrs by intervening with workshops in 21 London schools that introduced psychological strategies to manage emotions and impulses. Pupils were only invited to attend workshops if deemed high risk, based on factors of family history, behaviour and emotional difficulties, and personality traits; however the positive results of the study were found to have extended even to those who did not directly receive the intervention, coined by the study as a ‘herd effect’ (Conrod et al., 2013). Parents often feel disempowered in addressing the issue of binge drinking with children who are already suspected in drinking heavily (Smyth et al., 2010), but actually family has a critical role in shaping children’s views on alcohol (Bremner et al., 2011). Therefore though it may be easier and more effective to tackle the issue of changing young people’s attitudes towards alcohol (in those at higher risk of binge drinking) in a school environment where a herd effect may even strengthen the selected intervention, the role of the family in providing supervision and managing their own behaviour involving alcohol sensibly is also vital. This could be reinforced with schools’ resources in educating parents on the impacts family drinking habits could have on their children.

**Men vs. Women: Is it fair?**

The social behavioural differences in men and women, often from a historical basis, are another factor that contributes to national drinking habits of the British. Men are more likely to drink heavily than...
women (ONS, 2013; Kuntsche et al. 2004); a difference also exacerbated by the long associated history of sporting events and alcohol, a culture where the audience are typically male-dominated. In a survey carried out by Premier League Football, they recorded that 85% of their fans were male, with 42% of all fans reporting that they bought alcoholic drinks on match days, a figure which has remained fairly constant from 2002 to 2008 (SMRC Sportswise Ltd., 2008). Football, amongst other sports is another large part of the British culture, and its historical association with alcohol, due to the habits of the fans and also coverage of matches in pubs, is another factor that has led to a binge drinking habit. Ideally sporting events would be an area where changes could be implemented, as alcohol is widely advertised and the companies sponsor countless sporting events, which only fuels the unhealthy relationship further. However this partnership generates a lot of revenue for the parties involved and the difficulty is in finding a motivation to weaken this link so that binge drinking at these events can be reduced.

The social behaviour of male and female groups is also relevant. Men’s drinking habits of engaging in ‘rounds’ reveal an increasing likelihood to binge drink as rounds are often bought repetitively of the same drink, without necessarily consenting all the individuals involved. This social practice, combined with the competitive drinking nature of men can easily cause groups to exceed their safe alcohol limit. On the other hand, women are much less concerned with competition amongst peers and are more likely to skip drinks, showing greater control of their alcohol consumption (Valentine et al., 2007). Discouraging the engagement of rounds in pubs and bars would be a step towards breaking down the peer pressure that exists in male drinking groups and preventing excess alcohol consumption by whole groups.

The perception of men and women drinking in public also differs quite significantly; whereas for men it is a sign of stamina and competitiveness, for women it is regarded quite negatively on the whole, particularly drunkenness (Valentine et al., 2007). However greater social and economic empowerment, changing social roles and the marketing process are factors suggested by Smyth et al. which have led to a greater acceptability for women to drink heavily (Smyth et al., 2010). This factor of social perception is a particular concern for young and lone mothers surveyed who wanted to be perceived as a good mother, and therefore were likely to drink far less, resulting in a much lower likelihood to binge drink (Valentine et al., 2007). However these societal views on drinking are also reflected in the reliability of the quoted statistics, as they rely heavily on the honesty of self-reporting. Men have been shown to be more likely to report their drinking habits accurately in both urban and rural environments than women (Valentine et al., 2007). After adjusting for under-reporting, one study estimated that the prevalence of binge drinking could be increased by as much as 20% in men and 28% in women (Boniface and Shelton, 2013). Women were found to be far more likely to under-report their true drinking habits, therefore the data in this gender group may not be as reliable (TNS Opinions and Social, 2010).

**Britain’s Hidden Drinkers**

One rapidly changing factor that has greatly influenced recent trends in binge drinking is the location of where alcohol is being consumed. In particular, domestic drinkers are a group that has generally been overlooked by the media, yet they account for 43% of the volume of Britain’s alcohol market (Valentine et al., 2007).

The accessibility of alcohol in off-licensed newsagents and supermarkets has revolutionised the alcohol market, historically available mainly in public houses. Moreover the introduction of the Licensing Act in
2003 brought an end to fixed licensing hours and restrictions on the selling of alcohol (Parliament UK, 2010). Alcohol is also now 65% cheaper than compared to in 1980, with supermarkets undercutting the price of many other retailers and on-licence premises (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009).

These factors have enabled the process of drinking to be shifted into the home, where adults are also more likely to drink larger volumes than they would in a social environment or licensed areas, and this trend seems to have accelerated since 2000 (Foster and Ferguson, 2012). People were most likely to have purchased alcohol in supermarkets in the last year (ONS, 2009). Additionally, the modern practice of internet grocery shopping allows alcohol to be purchased extremely easily, without the need for any confrontation or possible perceived judgement by a retailer or any limits on the volume purchased.

Throughout Britain there has also been a steady increase in older age groups over 25 years of age binge drinking, with a twofold increase in women alone from 1998 to 2006 (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009). This rise in home-drinking is also linked to higher socio-economic class (Foster and Ferguson, 2012). The reasons for this increase are manifold; explanations include a greater older population who are wealthier and have greater disposable income, increasing affluence and independence for women, increased stress, and boredom and isolation of older adults who use alcohol as a coping strategy (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009). However an area of concern is that older people lacked awareness of the alcohol content of drinks and the extent of their consumption (Valentine et al., 2007), therefore implementing clear labelling with strength of alcohol on bottles may be of some value in reinforcing the this as well as nationally recommended limits.

The Need for Change

Binge drinking remains a highly prevalent problem in Britain and though levels may seem to be steadying in recent years, changes within the demographics of society that are consuming these dangerous levels of alcohol are surely changing. Young adults have been identified as a large proportion of binge drinkers and evidence has shown their habits are controlled heavily by peer and societal pressures, combined with successful marketing and discounts. The evolution of the independent woman in society has led to a greater acceptability for women to drink; nonetheless males still dominate the practice of binge drinking, especially when taking into account the bravado attitude men adopt when in competition with others. These social factors are part of the British culture and will take time to continue changing.

The increasingly reduced cost of alcohol over time has been driven by the expansion of supermarkets into the alcohol retail industry and is a key factor in the high levels of binge drinking, particularly in young adults. A highly controversial change would be to establish a minimum price for alcohol, so as to discourage it from being such a cheap commodity that people can easily consume in excess, though the emerging trend for middle-class domestic drinkers will need to be tackled differently. However any of the changes suggested throughout this essay will need the cooperation of the government, media, drinks corporations, and the support of the public to truly change the culture of binge drinking in Britain today.
References


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