

Symposium

Critical Perspectives on Young People's Drinking Cultures

Overview

Many young people in Western countries are involved in normalised heavier drinking practices. There has been widespread public and professional concern about the harms associated with 'binge drinking' practices of young drinkers. However previous research demonstrates that young people have been found to resist framing such behaviour as 'binge drinking' and rather view their drinking practices as routine, pleasurable, and involving having fun with their friends. This symposium presents a range of critical views on aspects of young people's drinking practices, cultures and environments. Speakers will address intersecting issues derived from research across Australia, New Zealand and the UK, including:

- how young people negotiate drinker identities in the context of a pervasive and normalised culture of intoxication within a neo-liberal social order, drawing on discourses of belonging and collective support;
- the specific contexts surrounding tertiary students' drinking practices and heavy drinking subcultures, bringing critical perspectives on Australian policies and public health interventions that inform students about harm minimisation;
- the ways in which both new technologies (e.g. social networking sites, the internet) and contemporary online marketing of alcohol play a role in student drinking cultures;
- the use of drinking practices as part of 'doing' gender in student and non-student drinking cultures; and
- portrayals of alcohol and drunkenness in popular celebrity websites

Discussion will consider young people's acceptance of, and resistance to, different constructions of drinking cultures and implications for policy and interventions.

Facilitators

Antonia Lyons & Christine Griffin

Oral presentation titles

The allure of belonging: Young people's drinking practices and collective identification.
Christine Griffin, Andrew Bengry-Howell, Chris Hackley, Willm Mistral & Isabelle Szmigin

Alcohol use and harm minimisation among young university students in Australia (AHMS Project)
Toni Schofield, Julie Hepworth, Jo Lindsay, Fiona Giles, Rose Leontini & John Germov

Undergraduates' drinking cultures and online alcohol advertising
Tim McCreanor, Ross Hebden, Antonia Lyons & Ian Goodwin

Drunken celebrities, new media and young adults' drinking cultures
Antonia Lyons, Ian Goodwin, Christine Griffin & Michelle Pedersen

Abstracts

The allure of belonging: Young people's drinking practices and collective identification

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This paper focuses on current moral panics around 'binge drinking' amongst young people in the UK, and young people's negotiation of collective identity and a sense of belonging in this context, and also in the context of the individualism and consumer discourses characteristic of neo-liberalism. Contemporary discourses of individual freedom, self-expression and authenticity demand that we live our lives as if this was part of a biographical project of self-realisation in a society in which we all appear to have 'free' choice to consume whatever we want and to become whoever we want to be. The paper reports on the findings from an ESRC-funded study of drinking advertisements and intensive research with young drinkers in a major metropolitan area and in two towns in semi-rural locations. This formed part of the ESRC Research programme on 'Identities and Social Action. We argue that the 'culture of intoxication' has become a normalised and all but compulsory aspect of many young people's social lives, but, paradoxically, against individualising trends, collective identity and friendship groups remain an important source of community, care and support. We end by considering the implications of this work for health promotion initiatives focussed on young people's alcohol consumption.

Alcohol Use and Harm Minimisation among Young University Students in Australia (AHMS Project)

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In Australia, young people's alcohol use is reported to be almost double the rate for Australians as a whole, and in 2004 29% of those aged 14-24 years were victims of alcohol-related abuse or violence. Despite these "risk behaviours" and adverse health outcomes, there is limited social science research into the drinking practices of young people in Australia, especially in heavy drinking settings, such as university colleges, known for their "drinking subcultures". This paper presents an overview of how through the AHMS project we problematise dominant public health interventions aimed at young people arguing that alcohol-related harm minimisation also requires people's consensual participation in health promoting practices and the provision of social and economic environments to support it. The research focuses on the combination of the social dynamics of students' alcohol use, their understandings of harm minimisation, what they themselves do to achieve it, and the approaches adopted by university colleges and State health authorities. We are examining college and non-college based young university students' alcohol use in NSW and Victoria, the two most populous states in Australia, to identify barriers and opportunities for harm minimisation. The project partner

organisations are NSW Health, the Victorian Department of Human Services, and university colleges represented by AHAUCHI, the Association of Heads of Australian University Colleges and Halls. It is anticipated that the research will produce a new evidence base and innovative theoretical framework for better understanding alcohol-related harm minimisation among university students and developing more effective strategies to advance it.

Students' drinking cultures, social networking and online alcohol advertising

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Student life is often associated with a 'culture of intoxication' in Aotearoa/New Zealand and has been linked to socialising, the development of friendships and negotiating identities. Social interactions between young adults are also increasingly conducted both offline and online, particularly through social networking sites. Online interaction has become a routine and everyday part of many young adults' lives. Researchers argue that the Internet has blurred traditional boundaries and social interactions, and also substantially altered contemporary marketing practices aimed at infiltrating and appropriating youth cultures, in order to sell more product. This project explored the ways in which four groups of tertiary student friends talk about their social networking within the context of their drinking practices and cultures. It also focused on exploring their knowledge about, and interactions with, online alcohol advertisements and specific alcohol product websites. Participants viewed the integration of these new media technologies into already present drinking cultures as completely natural. Sites such as Facebook were being used daily; often to organise, discuss and publish varieties of drinking events and related material, from a casual night out to more organised parties. Alcohol advertising strategies were entwined with social networking, allowing advertising that is cheap, directly endorsed by those close to individuals and harder to identify as advertising, making it less able to be ignored in an online environment. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for policies around alcohol marketing and targeted alcohol advertising, as well as health promotion for university students.

Drunken celebrities, new media and young adults' drinking cultures

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Contemporary drinking cultures are located within an increasingly technologically mediated world, saturated with images of youthful drunken excess, including 'drunken celebs'. An increase in excessive young women's drinking has also led to questions regarding changing gender identities, changing drinking cultures and associated health outcomes. This research explored representations of drinking and gender on popular celebrity websites, and their role in young adults' drinking cultures and gender identities. Multimodal discourse analysis was employed to analyse the images and language on selected websites, to examine how they functioned together to construct meaning. In stage two, 4 groups of young working adults (women and men) discussed these websites and we explored how they jointly accepted, negotiated or resisted their meanings. Online texts reinforced traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity and femininity, and particularly stigmatised women who were drinking if their

look 'slipped' from one of ideal femininity. However, participants strongly resisted this dominant reading of the website and were more flexible in the meanings they ascribed. They demonstrated much sympathy for the celebrities, and positioned celebrities as 'just one of us', thereby collapsing traditional boundaries. Implications of the results for gender relations, drinking cultures, and drinking practices are discussed. It is concluded that current discourses and meanings are open to challenge to provide better outcomes for alcohol- related public health interventions.