



WTAG binge-drinking research

**Report of research and consultation conducted by MCM Research Ltd
for Wine Intelligence**

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Introduction

The term ‘binge-drinking’ has, in recent years, come to replace earlier epithets such as ‘lager louts’ in discussions of alcohol-related antisocial behaviour. The use of such a new term is taken by many commentators to imply that the phenomenon to which it relates is also quite novel. But in the way that aggressive outbursts from motorists were common long before the descriptor ‘road rage’ was coined, the patterns of behaviour that fall within the loose boundaries of binge-drinking also have a long ancestry in Britain. One only has to read *The Pub and the People*, written by Tom Harrisson and his Mass Observation colleagues in the late 1930s, to be reminded of this. He refers us, for example, to the annual report of the Worktown (Bolton) Temperance Society annual report of 1854 which commented¹:

“That drunkenness is painfully prevalent in the Borough a thousand facts bear most painful testimony. Men and women staggering along the public streets, fights brawls of the most barbarous character ...”

The contemporary observations made by Harrisson and co in Bolton and Blackpool were, in many substantial ways, consistent with what we have seen in our research over the past 20 years and with the present-day patterns of activity in towns and cities all over the country. For example:

“At closing time back and front streets crowded, some people dancing, men and women doing foxtrots and a group of women trying to do a fling. Three observers independently estimate that at least 25 percent of the crowd are drunk ... (Later.) Along the promenade the air is full of beersmell that overcomes seasmell. It arises from people breathing. A swirling, moving mass of mostly drink people, singing, playing mouthorgans, groups dancing about. Chaps fall over and their friends pick them up cheerfully and unconcernedly ... a fight starts among four young men: the crowd simply opens up to give them elbow room as it flows by ... One of the fighters is knocked out cold and the others carry him to the back of a stall and dump him there ... In a litter of broken glass and bottles a women sits by herself being noisily sick.”²

Apart from the references to ‘foxtrots’ and ‘mouthorgans’ this description could well have referred to events in Nottingham, Watford or Brighton last weekend. Binge-drinking? — certainly. A result of the rapid expansion of licensed premises in town centres and a negative shift in alcohol-related behaviours as a consequence, or a new-found waywardness among young men and women in contemporary society? — hardly, given such historical precedents.

¹ Mass Observation (1943) *The Pub and the People*. London Gollancz, p236

² *Ibid*, p232

While these patterns of behaviour are very characteristic of what we take to be British drinking styles, they are not unique to this country. They are found elsewhere in what Levine (1992)³ and Peele (1997)⁴ describe as ‘temperance’ cultures – predominantly Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries that have experienced the influence of strong Temperance movements. Such traditions have generated what is commonly referred to in the academic literature as a ‘cultural ambivalence’ towards alcohol, compared with the ‘integrated’ approach that is characteristic of, say, Mediterranean countries and elsewhere that have not experienced to such a substantial degree the impact of religious and ideological anti-drinking forces. While these forces might be less evident today than in 1930s Bolton, their legacy remains – enshrined, for example in the complexity of current licensing laws, negative expectations regarding the outcomes of drinking and in the tendency towards ‘disinhibited’ drinking behaviours. We might also note that one of the most influential lobby groups concerned with drinking in this country, the Institute of Alcohol Studies, is entirely funded and managed by the United Kingdom Temperance Alliance.

Much of the rationale for the new Licensing Act, of course, is based on the idea that reducing restrictions on alcohol availability will lead to parallel reductions in binge-drinking and other negative behaviours presumed to stem, at least in part, from out-dated and inappropriate Temperance traditions. Where alcohol is less controlled and more integrated into everyday life – as in, say, Italy and Spain – the routine events seen in British town and city centres on Friday and Saturday nights are rarely, if ever, witnessed.

The approach, of course, has its strong critics and the prevalence and perseverance of binge-drinking is seen as evidence by some for the imposition of stricter controls rather than for liberalisation. The consensus among the majority of social researchers, however, based on extensive cross-cultural research, is that binge-drinking and other ‘aberrant’ patterns of alcohol consumption arise not from the chemical effects of alcohol (ethanol) itself but from a complex interaction between historical and cultural traditions, the dominant expectations in a society regarding the behavioural consequences of alcohol, the style of drinking places and the social dynamics of individuals and groups within them.⁵

³ Levine, H.G. (1992). Temperance cultures: Concern about alcohol problems in Nordic and English-speaking cultures. In M. Lader., G. Edwards and D.C. Drummond (eds.), *The Nature of Alcohol and Drug-Related Problems*. (Society for the Study of Addiction, Monograph No. 2). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Peele, S. (1997). Utilizing culture and behaviour in epidemiological models of alcohol consumption and consequences for western nations. *Alcoholism & Alcoholism*. 32(1): 51-64.

⁵ See, for example, Heath, D.B. (ed.). (1995). *International Handbook on Alcohol and Culture*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood

The idea that binge-drinking is a product of our continuing ambivalence about alcohol is not new, nor restricted to academic researchers. The novelist Doris Langley Moore wrote in the News Chronicle of June 1st, 1939:

“Licensing regulations, like many other old-fashioned methods of dealing with potential evil, were framed under the simple illusion that you can prevent people from doing something they want to do by placing difficulties in their way. The most acute students of human nature have long been aware that, on the contrary, difficulty frequently acts as a first-rate incentive ...”

The author goes on to argue that if people in Britain were treated in this context like the ‘Latins, Hungarians, Rumanians’, etc. “we should adjust ourselves to the idea of being treated as rational creatures, and would behave as such.”

It is, of course, too simple to say that binge-drinking is entirely caused by the restrictions we impose on alcohol consumption, and particularly on the hours during which drinking can take place. It is the case that in most towns and cities it is now possible to drink until 2.00am or later, although often at some considerable expense compared with pubs with ‘normal’ closing times. On the other hand, the fact that the determination to drink relatively large quantities of alcohol in a relatively short time is evident *only* in societies which impose such restrictions suggests that the two are not unconnected in some substantial way.

While Britain stands out from its European neighbours in terms of patterns of alcohol consumption and related behaviours there is evidence of a small degree of convergence occurring between traditionally ambivalent and integrated drinking cultures. In the late 1980s and 90s, for example, there was a rapid rise in beer consumption in Spain, particular among young males. Associated with this rise was the emergence of the ‘litronas’ – groups of young men engaging in typically British fashion, drinking beer by the litre (hence their name), getting drunk and engaging in anti-social behaviour (see, for example, Rooney, 1991⁶ and Gamella, 1995⁷). There are also similar but less extensive signs of such changes in some parts of France and Italy (see, for example, Nahoum-Grappe⁸, 1995 Cottino⁹, 1995).

In contrast, the adoption in Britain of more ‘continental’ styles of drinking establishments has been viewed as a positive development. The emergence of wine bars, Mediterranean style cafes and a type of pub less reminiscent of the

⁶ Rooney, J.F. (1991). Patterns of alcohol use in Spanish Society. In Pittman, D.J. and White, H.R. (eds.), *Society, Culture and Drinking Patterns Reexamined*. New Brunswick: Rutgers Center for Alcohol Studies.

⁷ Gamella, J.F. (1995). Spain. In D.B. Heath (ed.), *International Handbook on Alcohol and Culture*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood.

⁸ Nahoum-Grappe, V. (1995). France. In D.B. Heath (ed.) *ibid*.

⁹ Cottino, A. (1995). Italy. In D.B. Heath (ed.) *ibid*

traditional, male-dominated 'boozer' has been claimed by some as heralding a shift in drinking behaviour away from the drunken 'swill' to a more 'civilised' and 'moderate' pattern of consumption. This view, however, is rarely shared by police and other agencies in town and city centres that have been transformed into large drinking circuits and where the appearance of some bars and cafes is regarded as simply a cosmetic disguise for what are otherwise 'vertical' drinking establishments.

We have, then, the situation where, on the one hand, binge-drinking in 21st century Britain can be seen as simply as a continuation of timeless traditions of ambivalence about alcohol and its role in society. On the other hand we must recognise that changes are occurring in both the style of drinking places and in the types of drinks that are consumed within them. While the options available in 1930s Bolton were limited to ale, mild and porter for the men and port or sherry for the women, even modest pubs today provide a much greater variety of products from half-decent chardonnay via premium lagers to shots, shooters and alcopops. To what extent might these factors either exacerbate the binge-drinking traditions or provide some potential for their amelioration?

It is against the background of these considerations that the modest field research reported below was designed and conducted. Like Tom Harrison and his fellow mass observationists we started with a regard for history but also with an eye for what might be changing. We also started with a recognition of the fact that while binge-drinking might be nothing new it is, and always has been, problematic to one degree or another. There is nothing pleasant about the drunken and often aggressive demeanour of large groups of both men and women who constitute the late-night populations of most urban centres at weekends, even for most of the participants. The same was true of Blackpool in the 1930s.

We have also been concerned not only with developing a more accurate description of the problem, but also with generating ideas which may be of some small assistance in dealing with the problem, particularly within licensed premises.

Methodology

The aim of the work was to identify typical patterns of so-called binge-drinking, and the types of drinks most commonly consumed, in three areas of the UK – London, Nottingham and Manchester.

Informal interviews were conducted in a sample of town/city-centre pubs and bars with managers, staff and customers. Approximately 150 interviews were conducted in total involving the following individuals and broad protocols:

- **Area managers, managers and senior staff.** These focused on their perceptions of what defines binge-drinking; the types of people that most often exhibit such behaviour (e.g. gender, age, socio-economic class, etc.); the types of drinks consumed during various stages of the evening/night; the difficulty that their behaviour does or does not present to management; the strategies for dealing with the problem; etc.
- **Bar staff.** These focused more on their experiences of serving binge-drinkers; the types of drinks that they typically consumed; how such patterns changed during the course of the evening; etc.
- **General Customers.** These focused on their perceptions of binge-drinking and binge-drinkers; the types and volumes of drink most commonly associated with such patterns; the types of people most often involved; the consequences; etc
- **Customers fitting the ‘binge-drinking’ profile.** These focused on the types and volumes of drinks being purchased/consumed by those fitting the profile of binge-drinkers; their own experiences; their definitions of binge-drinking; their concepts of a ‘big night’; their motivations; etc

Observation work, focusing on the types of drinks being consumed by binge-drinking groups, was also undertaken in each of the locations.

In addition to this work an observation and interview study was conducted over two nights/early mornings at Bridewell Custody Suite, Nottingham. Police officers, Process Workers, Custody Sergeants, Detainment Officers and Alcohol Referral Workers were interviewed about their perceptions of binge-drinking; the types of people most often involved; the types of drink they typically consume; etc.

Definitions of binge-drinking

Definitions of binge-drinking were broadly consistent across the sample of Police, bar managers, bar staff and patrons. The most frequently cited were:

- Drinking with the intention of getting drunk, often mixing drinks
- Drinking to the point at which you lose control
- Drinking as much as possible in a short space of time
- Occasional, heavy drinking

Interestingly, very few respondents defined binge-drinking in terms of specific units of alcohol consumed and there was little consistency between those that did. Many of the bar staff and patrons, although vague about actual government guidelines, believed that the limits set to define binge-drinking were too low.

*“The standard binge drinking government definitions are way too low, 4 – 5 pints is not a realistic assessment of binge drinking” — **Bar manager***

A definition of binge-drinking, based on units of alcohol consumed was deemed inappropriate by the majority of respondents. The consensus was that tolerance of alcohol varied significantly according to age, gender and even occasion.

*“I really don’t see units as a useful way of talking about alcohol – everyone’s tolerance levels are different.” — **Bar manager***

*“I think people see binge-drinking as a young people’s problem, but it’s not. They just can’t handle it as well. They’re more likely to go and do something stupid.” — **Bar manager***

*“It’s weird. Some nights you can keep drinking and not get drunk. You know, you end up drinking yourself sober. Other nights, a couple of pints and you’re lashed.” — **Customer***

These sentiments highlighted a definition of binge-drinking that related to states of mind (i.e. ‘feeling drunk’) and types of behaviour that resulted from intoxication (loss of control, aggression etc). Intentionally or not the respondents did not differentiate between the actual unit quantity of alcohol, binge-drinking per se, and its associated consequences.

Rarely were the long-term health implications mentioned when referring to binge-drinking. The respondents generally paid the price of a big night out in the short-term

*“Sometimes you don’t feel so clever. Thick head, skint, worried that you’ve behaved like a prat. You soon forget — until you do it the next time.” — **Customer***

The *Interim analytical report*¹⁰, prepared by the Strategy Unit Alcohol Harm Reduction Project, is also mindful of the problems inherent in a unit-based definition of binge-drinking:

“..binge-drinking is a debated term. Since alcohol will affect different people in different ways, there is no fixed relationship between the amount drunk and its consequences.”

It would appear from the remarks made by the majority of the respondents that binge-drinking has little to do with what one might term a social evening out. For outsiders looking in, binge-drinking is the consumption of alcohol to a point where control and the usual rules that govern behaviour no longer seem to apply.

“Binge-drinking is not about going out for a social night out. It’s about going out to get hammered. Going out to get as drunk as possible. It’s an entirely different thing.” – **Bar manager**

For those admitting to binge-drinking, this loss of control and the ability to discard ‘the rules’ was seen as both an attraction and an inevitable consequence of drinking to excess.

“It’s just having a laugh really. Going out with your mates and letting go.” — **Customer**

Reports from both the police and alcohol referral workers are interesting in this context. The majority of those detained in Bridewell Custody Suite for alcohol-related incidents are first time offenders. For many, sobering up to find themselves in police custody is a new and often quite humbling experience. A common reaction expressed by these individuals on release is that arrest or detainment is an ‘occupational hazard’ of going on a big night out. A sense of embarrassment among the more compliant detainees is quite common, but even they are unlikely to display any sense of remorse.

“Everyone behaves like this when they’re drunk, don’t they.”

According to the police and alcohol referral workers the general reaction of detainees being questioned about drinking behaviour is *“I always drink like this”* which indicates regular excessive alcohol consumption. Of the 90% of the detainees that agreed to meet with the alcohol referral workers, 90% claimed that the incidents for which they have been detained were not their fault. Very few take responsibility for their own actions.

A few ‘familiar faces’ do re-offend. These are mostly long-term chronic drinkers. When they do re-offend it tends to be in cycles. These cycles may involve them being detained up to five times in one week. According to an alcohol referral worker, this cyclical pattern of binge-drinking among chronic

¹⁰ *Interim analytical report*. Strategy Unit Alcohol Harm Reduction Project

drinkers usually motivates them, if only temporarily, to try and address the problem.

“After a series of episodes like this they get to think ‘Yeah, I think I need to sort this out.’” — **Alcohol referral worker**

Binge-drinking – a modern problem?

By and large binge-drinking was cited as simply a ‘new label for an old problem’.

“Binge-drinking is something that has always existed. Drinking to get drunk. People have always done that.” – **Bar manager**

Even the police, who arguably deal with some of the most unpleasant fallout from binge-drinking, were generally loath to suggest that the situation was any worse now than it had been in the past.

“Is it any worse? I don’t think so. Going back a generation you’d maybe put them in the cells for the night and tell them to sleep it off.” – **Custody Sergeant**

There was a consensus that changes to police recording practices and the ‘media hype’ surrounding antisocial behaviour had skewed the true nature and scale of the problem.

Some of the police and bar staff respondents did subscribe to the notion that binge-drinking was on the increase. These individuals, however, tended to be younger and /or newer to the job so arguably their comparisons may not be quite so reliable. A number of senior police staff also suggested that experienced police officers on the street were in some respects more lenient; they were likely to than their ‘young, over enthusiastic’ colleagues to give warnings before bringing offenders into the custody suite. There is also greater pressure on new recruits to make arrests.

Some of the more seasoned bar managers even remarked that incidents of binge-drinking were actually on the decline.

“Binge-drinking is not a new thing, especially in the City. Thursday nights have always been a big night out in town. If anything rates of binge-drinking have gone down, particularly with modern attitudes to drink-driving and fear of getting breathalysed.” – **Bar manager**

Causes

Marketing, pricing & promotions

A popular conception is that binge-drinking is fuelled, if not largely caused by heavy discounting practices. Promotions and special offers are seen by many to encourage unhealthy patterns of alcohol consumption. A few bar managers had some empathy with this point of view

“What causes binge-drinking? You only have to look at the price list.” – Bar manager

Others believed it was a little less cut and dry. Cut-price drinks, it seems do not always equate to a consistently busy establishment.

“On Wednesday nights, we have a £1.50 drinks night which is rarely as packed as you would expect — seems that happy hours etcetera don’t make much difference.” – Bar manager

“These price cuts etc do not always affect binge-drinking levels in cities. If you offer the punters in here something for half price they’ll want to know what’s wrong with it.” – Bar manager

These views were reinforced by the observational work and interviews with the customers of establishments that operated heavy discounting. Some bars and pubs that were renowned for cheap drinks, sometimes had a less than desirable reputation precisely because of the types of people they were thought to attract — young, aggressive binge-drinkers.

To those patrons fitting the binge-drinking profile, particularly those in large stag and hen groups, these venues were seen as a good place to start, but they would rarely remain in these bars for any length of time. These were not regarded as destination pubs, more stopping off points and as such were often relatively empty by closing time.

A number of pub managers believed that discounting in rural and less affluent areas had more influence on binge drinking than it did in cities.

“If you’ve only got a few quid, and you want to get drunk, then obviously price is important. Customers in my old pub, a traditional working class boozier on the outskirts of the city, regularly used to drink the cheap stuff.” – Bar manager

Managers of the city venues, however, were aware of core, ‘hardened drinkers’ that effectively followed a circuit of pubs that offered discounts on different days of the week.

There was little doubt in the minds of the alcohol referral workers and some of the police that ‘aggressive’ marketing and promotion practices had a significant effect on the incidents of binge-drinking.

“Some specific venues are involved in aggressive marketing practices that I believe are irresponsible and inappropriate. Shots being taken from table to table, on a tray, which encourages customers to consume more alcohol, particularly when they are in large groups. I think society is paying the price for this.” – Alcohol referral worker

Heavily stylised television advertising campaigns were also cited by alcohol referral workers and a few bar staff as influencing binge-drinking behaviour. In this context pre-packaged spirits were most significantly implicated.

Up-selling

The practice of ‘up-selling’ was mentioned on a number of occasions, mostly by bar staff and customers. The prevalence of shots, and their prominent in-house promotion increased alcohol consumption, particularly among those with a propensity to binge-drink. These individuals often required little persuasion to augment their rounds with chasers.

“They get to the bar and see the bottle of Aftershock and that’s it.” – Bar staff

Experienced bar managers, however were quick to point out that the practice of drinking shorts as chasers is not new. The drinks involved may have changed but the practice itself remains the same.

“The range of drinks is wider now. We didn’t have Aftershock or anything when I was a teenager, you just drank whisky.” — Bar manager

Wine was cited frequently in the context of up-selling. It appeared to be an almost universal practice to offer a bottle to customers who ordered two glasses or more, on the basis that buying by the bottle represented better value for money. Observing this practice on a significant number of occasions this up-sell was in most instances accepted by the patrons.

Disposable income

It was a common perception among the respondents that a rise in young people’s disposable income had an influence on episodes of binge-drinking.

Broad societal shifts, delaying the age at which young people ‘settle down’, get married and start a family, may mean that the slightly older generation now has more money to spend on socialising and fewer responsibilities that would restrict their ability to go out.

“Kids just seem to have more cash these days and they seem to want to spend a lot of it getting drunk.” – Bar manager

Licensing restrictions & licensing environment

There was a consensus among the customers and bar workers that drinking-up times exacerbated binge-drinking by encouraging consumption of significant quantities of alcohol in a short period of time.

“It gets to closing time and the whole bar goes nuts. They’re either going to a club, where the drinks cost more or going home. Either way they seem to want to cram a bit more drink down their necks.” – Bar manager

This view was not as well represented among the police. To the police and alcohol referral workers the city environment had a significant impact on the levels of binge-drinking. A large number of bars and clubs in a relatively confined geographical area, it was felt, increased incidents of antisocial behaviour particularly at peak ‘throwing out’ times.

Competition between venues was also linked, by some police and bar managers, to irresponsible promotions and discounting practices.

“Binge-drinking. All you have to do is look at the huge blackboards outside pubs comparing their prices with those of other pubs around.” – Bar manager

Other environmental issues have also come into play, influencing patterns of binge-drinking and antisocial behaviour.

“Nottingham is such a small city and most provincial pub-clubs have closed down, everyone piles into the city centre. Along with this (because Nottingham is straight off the M1 and easy to get to) you get all your stag and hen parties of all age groups travelling to Nottingham for a night out. Combine this with a surge of students during term time and you get drink-aggravated violence etc as so many groups converge on to the city centre.” – Custody Officer

Consumption – types of alcohol involved in binge-drinking

The most frequently reported drinks associated with binge-drinking were lager, shots, pre-packaged spirits and vodka, particularly when served with Red Bull. A big night would often involve mixing drinks and there was evidence of a binge-drinking routine; periods during the ‘session’ where certain types of drinks were consumed at certain points of the evening.

“If people are going to get hammered, they tend to start on beer then move on to shots” – Bar manager

“The shooters are always popular with students” – Bar staff

“People tend to start on pints or halves early on then after 10.30 move on to more spirits like tequila slammers before heading off to the nightclubs.” – Bar manager

Media has predominately focused on the role of alcopops in binge-drinking and antisocial behaviour. Judging by the responses of the majority of those interviewed, this focus is probably not misplaced. One bar manager, however eloquently dismissed the media and the government’s pre-occupation with these products.

“The media and the government always seem to bang on about alcopops. I think that’s a bit blinkered. They regard binge-drinking as a new problem and therefore they tend to blame new products for it. I don’t think either is correct or helpful.” – Bar manager

Interviews with bar patrons and bar staff indicated that wine did sometimes play a role in binge-drinking episodes, all be it a minor one.

“Wine does not really come into the binge drinking picture.” – Bar manager

In only a few interviews was wine reported to be the only alcohol involved in instances of binge-drinking. It was generally reported to be just one of a number of drinks consumed over the course of an evening or a 'session'.

"I'll maybe have a glass of wine to get me in the mood before I go out. I don't generally drink it that much when I'm out." – **Customer**

Influences on alcohol type

The types of alcohol preferred in the context of binge drinking appeared to be largely influenced by gender, time of day, social group, location, price and alcohol content.

Gender

Individual preferences for particular alcoholic drinks showed marked differences between the sexes. In general terms it was reported by the respondents that men tended to opt for lager, shooters and other shorts. Women were more likely to consume pre-packaged spirits and wine. Women were also, according to a number of reports more likely to be adventurous with their choice of drink. There was a consensus among those interviewed that mixing drinks significantly influenced states of drunkenness.

"If men are going out to get hammered, they tend to start on beer, then move on to JD or rum and coke. Women are more likely than men to try different drinks over the course of an evening, and so tend to get a bit more drunk due to this mixing." – **Bar manager**

A few bar managers suggested that the consumption of pre-packaged spirits, by men, was on the increase, and this was gradually replacing the 'traditional' pint as the drink of choice. Advertising, it was claimed may have had a role to play in this shift.

"More men are drinking pre-mix bottles etc and other non-pint drinks...PPS marketing focuses more on individuals than on groups, which means that it caters for a wider range of tastes." – **Bar manager**

Conversations with women customers highlighted other motivations for drinking pre-packaged spirits. Pre-mixed drinks in bottles were felt to be more convenient and practical, particularly in 'vertical' drinking establishments. On a number of occasions safety was mentioned as reason for choosing these drinks. The rise in the profile and prevalence of drug rape has led some women to be guard their drinks more vigilantly. Some female respondents said that the 'beauty' of bottled drinks was that you could put your thumb over the bottle when you were not drinking and were less likely to leave your drink unattended.

"The bottles are good. You can wander around the pub with them." – **Customer**

The involvement of wine in a 'big night out' was largely seen as the preserve of women. Observational work, conducted in three cities confirmed this view.

Generally men, if they did drink wine, tended only to have the ‘odd glass’. A couple of bar managers, however, suggested that they had increasingly noticed men drinking wine, believing that this to be motivated by social aspiration.

“They reckon wine makes them look more sophisticated.” – **Bar manager**

In London, it was common for the “city boys” to drink wine and a some pubs had developed ‘quality’ wine list to cater for their tastes and budgets.

“[Drinking wine] is seen as a trendy ‘city guy’ thing” – **Bar manager**

Time of day

Observational work conducted suggested that the most common time of day for wine drinking was lunchtime and early evening. This seemed to confirm the comments made by respondents that if wine featured in a ‘session’ then it tended to do so early on.

Consumption of both wine and beer were largely used to “*get the night going*”. Shooters tended to feature more significantly later in the evenings before closing times or before moving on to different venues.

“Towards the end of the night there is a perceivable move towards spirits, especially with the cheap offers that are available.” – **Bar manager**

Reports from the respondents also made reference to two distinct types of early evening drinking behaviour – the post-work drinking and the start of a ‘session’. In most of the city bars and pubs it was common to have customers in that were ‘winding down’ after work. This type of drinking usually consisted of a few glasses of wine or “*a couple of pints*”, before going home relatively early and appeared to have little relevance to binge-drinking.

This was in marked contrast to drinking behaviour witnessed that was clearly motivated by the desire to get drunk. In these incidences there was an increase in the speed of drinking, mixing drinks and the prevalence of pre-packaged spirits.

Social group

The social dynamic within a group also significantly influenced the type of alcohol consumed. The women interviewed generally commented that when they were with other girl friends wine was often the drink of choice. A number of hen parties observed also started with bottles of wine before moving on to shots and pre-packaged spirits.

The male respondents also claimed that drinking habits changed according to the make up of the group. Men were more likely to drink wine when they were in a mixed group and more likely to drink lager when they were ‘out with the lads’.

Comments were made by bar staff and customers that linked certain types of drinks with specific social groups. While these are obviously broad generalisations that may involve a degree of ‘social prejudice’ their assessments, in the interest of thoroughness, are arguably worth noting.

“I generally don’t have much of a problem with binge drinkers, apart from groups of Chinese men who come in and ‘drink to death’. They like a lot of sweet drinks, shots and shooters. Students will sometimes ask what is your cheapest shot?” – Bar manager

“Shooters are popular with students, “chavs” from out of town will go for the alcopops. You don’t often see people binge-drinking on real ales. Mind you, I suppose you do get old men in pubs who will sit all day drinking real ale. As for wine – wine generally with a meal rather than part of a binge, there’s an emphasis on sharing with a group of friends, perhaps as a starter before going out.” – Bar manager

Location

Given that the interviews and observation work was conducted in city-centre bars it is unsurprising that these were the most frequently cited locations for binge-drinking. Big nights involving heavy drinking often started and finished in the popular city drinking circuits.

The most commonly reported location for drinking wine was in the home. In the context of binge-drinking wine consumption in the home often consisted of ‘necking a few glasses’ before going out.

Price

There was a consensus among the respondents that price significantly impacts on binge-drinking and the type of alcohol consumed. Reports of customers approaching the bar and asking for the cheapest wine, beer, shot etc. were common.

The patrons interviewed welcomed two-for-one offers, ‘buy two glasses of wine get the bottle free’ etc. and would often visit venues offering discounts and promotions to get the evening started.

“That’s just common sense – young people saving money” – Bar manager

Price was also regarded as a significant reason for drinking wine. In a number of venues that we visited a bottle of wine could be purchased for as little as £4.95. Up selling – from two glasses to a bottle for example – appeared to be a universally accepted and implemented practice. A number of establishments were also running special offers promoting wine: ‘1 bottle of wine and 4 plates of cheesy chips for only £9.95!’

Alcohol content

It would appear that the type of alcohol consumed during binge-drinking episodes has little to do with palatability. While cost is important, a more frequent motivation may actually be the strength or the feeling of drunkenness that a particular drink induces.

“I’ve noticed an increase in the use of strong lagers — Special Brew, Tenants Super — especially by young people. Also shots are commonly mentioned, particularly Aftershock, but also absinthe.” – **Alcohol referral worker**

With wine becoming increasingly cheap in pubs and bars, more people are turning to it as an economical method of getting drunk – described by one of our interviewees as the ‘bang per buck’ factor. Two bar managers independently reported bottles of wine being ordered with pint glasses on the basis that pound for pound drinking wine in this manner would get them more drunk than lager.

Occasions – particular events associated with binge-drinking

Binge-drinking was reported as being most prevalent at the weekends, when significant numbers of people converge on town and city centres. However, promotional nights during the week, targeting specific audiences such as students, meant that binge-drinking was not necessarily confined to the weekends.

“Binge-drinking occurs during main events [EURO 2004] as well as weekends, the middle of the week can be just as busy” – **Detainment Officer**

“It’s Freshers’ week next week. That’s usually quite eventful.” – **Alcohol referral worker**

Publicity surrounding the ‘lawlessness’ of city centres at the weekend has, in effect, exacerbated the perception among some sections of society that these places are ‘no go areas’. These people were therefore more likely to have a ‘big night out’ during the week.

“Thursday night is a big night for a lot of people as they don’t like the Saturday night culture” – **Bar manager**

A commonly reported theme was the extent to which the rise of hen and stag parties in city centres significantly contribute to incidents of binge-drinking. It is fair to assume that Nottingham, Manchester and the West End are reasonably representative of large UK cities as a whole, offering a wide range of drinking and entertainment opportunities which when combined with the ‘city buzz’ and cheap accommodation, are a natural focal point for these types of events. It is clear that the motivation behind stag and hen nights is different from the ‘average’ night out

“They’re here just to get pissed out of their brains.” – **Bar manager**

Stag and hen parties also draw in people who are perhaps less familiar with and arguably less able to deal with the multitude and variety of attractions available in the modern UK city. Being from ‘out of town’, as a number of respondents suggested, was like being issued a ‘license to misbehave’; the consequences of binge-drinking away from home were fewer.

Some bar managers speculated that the motivations for going out drinking had changed. Where previously social outings used to be for a specific celebration, young people went out now simply because they could.

“People have different reasons for drinking now, don’t reserve it just for weddings, birthdays or other celebrations.” – Bar manager

When asked to discuss their most recent ‘big night out’, bar patrons, predictably recounted quite varied experiences that reflected this perception of a change in drinking behaviour. Birthdays, hen/stag parties and general celebrations, as one might expect, were the most commonly reported occasions in which binge-drinking was likely to occur. Self reports among the more ‘hardcore’ binge-drinker invariably involved less tangible reasons such as ‘giro day’, ‘pay day’ and ‘because I can’.

Frequency of binge-drinking

The frequency of binge-drinking episodes reported by the bar patrons showed little consistency. Responses varied between ‘two or three times a week’ to ‘hardly ever’. The popular perception was that many young people tended to binge-drink every weekend. Although there may be some truth in this, anecdotal evidence from the individuals we interviewed did not support this claim. The respondents that we talked to reported drinking heavily far less often. There was a tendency for men to report more frequent binge-drinking episodes than women.

Motivations

The most frequent reason cited for binge-drinking was escapism. Among bar staff, patrons, police and alcohol referral workers binge-drinking was viewed as a method by which people could temporarily break loose from their personal and professional responsibilities.

“People drink to escape their own lives – the problem has been developing over thirty years, it’s a release for the working class to forget their hard monotonous jobs” – Bar manager

Getting drunk was seen, by many of the customers interviewed as their fundamental right; a reward for getting through another week.

“I work hard so I’ll play hard.” — Customer

“Binge Drinkers consider it ‘their right’. It’s a release for the working class to forget their own lives, and they’re interested in what they drink.” – Bar manager

Self-reports of the motivations behind binge-drinking were less considered, particularly among the younger age groups – 18-24 year olds. 'Getting wasted', 'letting rip' and 'having a laugh' were seen as the norm within their peer group. To some extent binge-drinking was also regarded as a rite of passage.

There appeared to be little consensus among the respondents as to whether binge-drinking episodes were largely planned or spontaneous. Obviously the big social gatherings — stag/hen parties, birthdays etc. — required a degree of organisation, but there was also significant reports of a 'few beers' turning into a large night out.

Binge-drinking locations

Self-reports of the location of binge-drinking episodes largely focused on the respondents' experiences in bars, pubs and clubs. Given that the interviews were conducted in town centres on Fridays and Saturdays this is to be expected. Very few admitted excessive drinking at home.

Interviews with police and alcohol workers revealed the prevalence of binge-drinking in the home and its role in incidents of domestic violence. While the public profile of binge-drinking focuses on antisocial behaviour in town centres, the view expressed by the police was that domestic incidents resulted in a significant proportion of the people being detained as a consequence of binge-drinking. It was in this context that wine was most significantly implicated. According to police and alcohol referral workers, wine was often involved in a significant number of domestic violence incidents, particularly those involving middle class families.

Profile of the binge-drinker

Age

The dominant perception of all of the respondents was that binge-drinking was most evident among young people. Although the 18-24 year age group is also most commonly cited by government bodies and the media, the results from our qualitative research indicated that 25-34 year olds were almost as likely to binge as their younger counterparts.

“Binge-drinking covers a wide age group.” – **Detainment Officer**

“It's not just the 18 – 35 age group, there are groups of 40-something men who regularly do the Sunday circuit of cheap pubs” – **Bar manager**

“Sometimes the thirty something stockbrokers can be as bad as teenagers, or in fact worse because they are more aggressive.” – **Bar manager**

“My customers are usually in a higher age bracket which means they have more money and an ability to drink for a longer time” – **Bar manager**

Gender

While the majority of respondents believed that binge-drinking was primarily a male preoccupation, reports of women being increasingly involved in this activity were common. When asked to comment on trends in drinking behaviour, respondents from the police and alcohol workers cited the increase in female detainees as one of the most significant changes in recent years.

“Women are just as much a problem We see more drunk women now than ever before. We have had to adapt to that. The way you deal with women is different, in some respects it’s more difficult. Women tend to get quite ‘gobby’ and end up getting themselves arrested.” — **Custody Sergeant**

Social class

Results from the qualitative research suggest that binge-drinking spans all social groups. Interviews with police revealed that representatives from most professions had been detained at one time or another for incidents related to alcohol. On occasions descriptions of binge-drinkers were quite defamatory

“Binge-drinkers are young, 18-25 male football fans with no social skills.” – **Bar manager**

“They’re townies that can’t handle their drink.” – **Bar manager**

These perceptions may arguably reflect social prejudice more accurately than they reflect the true social make up of the binge-drinker, but comments from bar managers tended to support the view that binge-drinking was more common among the working classes.

Some patrons’ perception of their own drinking behaviour was different from their perception of other people’s drinking habits. They went out on a big night, had a few beers etc. It was other people, not them that got involved in binge-drinking. The respondents offered simple and quite insightful definitions of binge-drinking which were remarkably consistent, but when it came down to descriptions of their own patterns of consumption this term was rarely used. Perhaps this illustrates the social stigma attached to binge-drinking and the fact that binge-drinking is associated with a loss of control. Either way it would appear that binge-drinking was not a popular way of defining one’s *own* drinking behaviour.

Strategies to confront binge drinking

Bar managers and bar staff in all three locations were asked to describe their strategies to confront binge-drinking. None of these respondents believed that binge-drinking was a problem that they experienced in their own establishment. The consensus was that they were always able to identify problem drinking and drinkers before the situation got out of control.

“We’re very strict on keeping a tight eye on people deliberately drinking more than they can handle.” – **Bar manager**

“There is always a point at which you stop serving – there tends not to be any real problem in throwing people out of the pub as I never let them get too wasted.” – Bar manager

This level of vigilance was widely regarded as the most effective method of confronting binge-drinking. Bar staff also suggested that they had to be particularly conscientious in light of the publicity surrounding binge-drinking and the government’s high profile clampdown.

Other bar managers had adopted techniques in an attempt to discourage binge-drinking and the types of people most associated with it.

“I have deliberately cleaned up and brightened the pub to attract female drinkers – there is now a fairly mixed crowd.” – Bar manager

Certain events were thought to encourage or exacerbate binge-drinking. Some pub managers preferred to shut up shop on these occasions if they had that level of autonomy.

“I did not open the doors on May Day as this would have caused a lot of bother” – Bar manager

Nearly all the bar managers relied heavily on professional door supervisors to screen customers and pre-empt problems associated with binge-drinking. Their ability to remove ‘trouble makers’ quietly and effectively was thought by many bar staff to be essential.

“We always have four door staff on duty – there are never any problems in the pub” – Bar manager

To some, high visibility policing and a large police presence offered an extra level of reassurance. Pubwatch schemes and radio links between other venues and the authorities were also perceived to be of significant value in reducing problems associated with binge-drinking.

“We have a high police presence here and a direct line to the police if we should ever need them urgently” – Bar manager

The majority of the pubs and bar visited also displayed prominent notices notifying customers of their intention to check for a valid ID. Given that a number of bar managers were of the opinion that young people were less likely to be able to handle alcohol, this appears to be a sensible and necessary cautionary approach as well as a legal requirement.

Social acceptability of binge drinking

There was some suggestion among the respondents that getting drunk had become more socially acceptable. On the basis of this rather modest sample it would probably be a little unwise to conclude that this is actually the case. Indeed, one bar manager believed that attitudes to alcohol were actually passed

down through the generations. In his experience individuals often adopted the drinking behaviours of their parents.

One bar manager drew comparisons between the social acceptability of binge-drinking with that of drink driving.

“Just a couple of decades ago, a few drinks and driving weren’t seen as too bad, now it’s totally unacceptable. Government seems to be pushing same way with binge-drinking. I don’t know, perhaps it will be seen as totally unacceptable in a few years.” – **Bar manager**

What we can conclude with some degree of certainty from the anecdotal evidence is that ‘excessive’ alcohol consumption among women has increased in the recent years. Women out drinking – sometimes heavily – it would appear is now the norm rather than the exception.

“There are definitely more drunk women around than he used to see. Most drink ready to drink pre-mixes (Reef etc) and then move on to shots. There is broader mix of people, 50/50 sex divide.” – **Bar manager**

“There has definitely been an increase in women drinking. More women drink in this pub than at his previous pub. They are sometimes “worse than the blokes”, can be very noisy, putting off other customers in for a quiet drink.” – **Bar manager**

Conclusions

The most frequently implicated types of alcoholic drinks in incidents of binge drinking were pre-packaged spirits, shots and lager. This is perhaps what one might expect. There was an over-riding perception that a single binge-drinking episode often involved more than one type of drink, and indeed reports of deliberately mixing drinks were common. To some, binge-drinking was actually defined by this criteria.

“Binge-drinking is drinking too many lethal combinations all at once.” – **Detainment Officer**

While generic terms were often used for these drinks, a few were singled out by the respondents in the context of binge-drinking – most notably Aftershock and Tenants Super. Both shots and ‘super-strength’ lagers were linked to binge-drinking precisely because of their high alcohol content and the type of consumption patterns they were seen to encourage.

Issues surrounding pre-packaged spirits were slightly more concerned with notions of taste. An opinion expressed by some interviewees was that pre-packaged spirits simply did not taste alcoholic. They were seen to be most popular with women and young people who had a ‘less developed palate’ for alcohol. Packaging and promoting drinks that contained alcohol but were easy to drink was seen, by some, as irresponsible.

According to the majority of the respondents wine was not significantly implicated in binge-drinking. Where wine did feature it rarely did so in isolation and usually involved the consumption of other alcoholic drinks. Wine was generally more likely to be consumed by female or mixed groups at lunchtime or at the beginning of the evening.

Discounts and promotions were frequently cited as exacerbating binge-drinking and anti-social behaviour. While balancing commercial interests with social responsibility has its inherent difficulties, it is arguably in the context of marketing that the industry is most likely to find itself at loggerheads with members of the health profession and the police.

In-house promotions deployed in many pubs, bars and clubs offer tempting value for those with the intention of getting drunk. To an alcohol referral worker antisocial behaviour was the price society paid for these practices. 'Shooter girls' and up-selling shots at the table were viewed as being particularly irresponsible, especially when they targeted groups. Prominent in-house displays of Aftershock and other brands of shots were evident in many of the establishments visited and posters and leaflets advertising their presence were liberally scattered throughout the venues.

In some venues wine was also subject to generous discounts. While this may drive up consumption it may also result in wine being more significantly implicated in binge-drinking. Buy two glasses get the rest of the bottle free, discounted wine and food combinations and up-selling from two glasses to a bottle all occurred with varying frequency in the bars that we visited. The up-selling was a particularly reported and observed practice with regards to wine.

There is also some evidence to suggest that the alcoholic content of wine, when compared to its cost, represents a potentially attractive proposition to the binge-drinker. It was reported on a couple of occasions that wine had been ordered with a pint glass.

While wine escapes an association with binge-drinking 'out on the town' it is more significantly implicated in incidents of domestic violence, particularly involving middle class families.

Ironically, wine's appeal to the socially aspiring may be influencing less desirable patterns of consumption.

The bar managers and staff all categorically stated that they would refuse to serve individuals that had drunk too much and observational work within these bars confirmed that this indeed, was the case. It is clear, however that these individuals are getting drinks from somewhere. It may be the case that the less reputable establishments may be undermining this basic code of conduct. If so, this could negatively impact on the reputation of the industry as a whole.

About MCM

MCM Research Ltd has over 23 years' experience of research and consultancy in the field of alcohol-related disorder and violence and the operation and management of licensed premises.

On the basis of extensive research MCM have developed selection and training procedures in the management of alcohol-related conflict and violence for most of the major pub retail companies, consortia of regional operators and trade organisations such as the Brewers and Licensed Retailers Association and the Portman Group. MCM have also provided services in a similar capacity for major night-club companies. These programmes have been widely recognised for their effectiveness in reducing levels of violence and disorder and have attracted recognition in forms such as the National Training Award.

In 1992 MCM Research published *Drinking and Public Disorder*. This reports a two-year programme of research on alcohol-related disorder in town centres in various parts of the country. It is generally accepted as a balanced perspective on the issues and the best ways of tackling them. For this reason it is the only work of an independent company which is specifically considered in the government's recent White Paper, *Time for Reform: Proposals for the Modernisation of Our Licensing Laws*, where the key recommendations of the report are summarised in paragraphs 63 and 64. Substantial reference to this work is also contained in the Home Office publication *Alcohol and Crime: Taking Stock*, described as one of a series of documents "relevant to practitioners involved in crime reduction at the local level."

Following this MCM developed a guide to the prevention of alcohol-related disorder at local levels called *Keeping the Peace*. This is published by The Portman Group (now in a revised and updated form) and widely distributed to Licensing Justices, police forces, local authorities etc.

MCM have also conducted research on behalf of the Home Office and worked closely with a number of police forces on effective ways of reducing late-night street disturbances. Representatives from the company have given briefings on the subject to groups of MPs, parliamentary committees and to the Cabinet Office.

MCM have conducted comparative research on drink-related behaviour in a number of European countries including Holland, Italy, Spain and France. In Holland MCM also examined closely the impact of the deregulation of licensing hours, obtaining first-hand information from police officers, venue operators and from government officials in the Hague.

Further international work has been conducted in Australia, leading to the development of training initiatives for pub and bar operators which were launched by the Australian Minister for Health.

Recognising the company's extensive experience of the 'real-life' problems, MCM were approached by the Ministry of Defence to conduct a major programme of research to provide a basis for the Army's new Alcohol and

Drugs Policy. This involved detailed work throughout the UK and in Cyprus, Germany, Gibraltar, Croatia and Bosnia. The main findings and recommendations of my reports have now been incorporated into the MoD's policy documents and form the basis for new regulatory and educational procedures.

MCM have conducted a programme of research for the Portman Group which focused on the definition, recording and collating of information on alcohol-related violence and disorder. This was in response to the observation by the Home Office that "... there are no official statistics collected systematically making it impossible to gain a true picture of the role of alcohol in crime at a national level."¹¹ The report¹², published by the Portman Group in February 2002, makes a number of recommendations for obtaining greater accuracy and consistency in this area.

MCM have also undertaken research for Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) The principal aim of the study, Implications for noise disturbance arising from the liberalisation of licensing laws, was to assess the potential impacts of the proposed Licensing Act on noise disturbance related, directly or indirectly, to the operation of licensed premises. This was to provide a basis for the anticipation of possible noise problems, if any, and proactively indicates appropriate ways of tackling them.

¹¹ Deehan, A. , Home Office Briefing Note (9/00)

¹² *Counting the Cost: The Measurement and Recording of Alcohol-Related Crime and Disorder.*