

“Seeking the pleasure zone”: Understanding young adult’s intoxication culture

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Abstract:

While drinking in moderation is preferred, the reality is that many young people are deliberately engaging in hedonistic drinking where the ‘buzz’ effect of alcohol has become an important commodity within the contemporary leisure culture. Drawing on qualitative research, this paper analyses young adult’s narratives surrounding ‘excessive drinking’ to elucidate the importance of alcohol as an essential ‘pleasure’ commodity within the experience economy. Findings demonstrate alcohol is largely conceptualised as a pleasure state, with pleasure valued as either a state of ‘happiness’ or as a state ‘annihilation’. Seeking alcohol-induced pleasure operates within temporal, spacial and social consumption limits and occurs within a framework of rational cost-benefit analysis. Greater understanding of the impact of pleasure on young adult’s alcohol consumption experiences opens up the possibility for creating relevant, realistic, targeted harm reduction policy and practice. To produce an effective policy mix promoting sensible drinking among young people, harm reduction models need to consider the cultural entrenchment of young adult’s alcohol consumption and the way they manage their alcohol experiences.

Keywords: alcohol, pleasure, excessive drinking, young adults, culture

Introduction

Consuming alcohol for pleasure is not a new phenomenon. What is different from previous generations is the extent and frequency of excessive drinking among young adults in contemporary society. Young people in contemporary society are characterised as operating within a culture of hedonic consumerism which prioritises leisure and the pursuit of pleasurable experiences through heightened states of intoxication (Measham, 2004). Drunkenness and the process of getting drunk is not only an accepted aspect of youth leisure culture but has gained a level of unprecedented cultural importance acting as a powerful device in the articulation of social relationships, aspirations and values (Measham, 2004; Sande, 2002). For many, a drunken state of being is deliberately sought in the aim to experience the intensity, joy and euphoria of intoxication; where experiential pleasure is central to the pursuit of an alternate state of consciousness (Duff, 2008). As Brain (2000) argues intoxication and the process of becoming intoxicated is not only about the search for psychoactive pleasure, but is implicitly intertwined with the corporeal and symbolic pleasures associated with consumption.

The pursuit of pleasure in society is not unbounded. Once social limits are exceeded, acceptable pleasure is recoded as 'disreputable' (O'Malley and Valverde, 2004).

Similarly, dominant alcohol prevention approaches constrain 'pleasurable experiences' of consumption within a framework of civilised enjoyment and moderated consumption.

Once alcohol is rendered problematic, so too is enjoyment (O'Malley and Valverde, 2004). Individuals either drink moderately within a public health framework of sensible drinking, or engage in excessive drinking coupled with potential risks and harms (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, 2006; Room, 1998). Consequently, prevention

frameworks analyse the functional risks and benefits of consumption where ‘benefits’ are associated with moderate use and ‘risks’ are associated with excessiveness (Moore, 2008). Implicitly this construction dichotomises drinking within a discourse of ‘responsible, desirable’ behaviour or as an ‘excessive, undesirable’ behaviour (Measham, 2004).

The fact that alcohol and the excessive levels of consumption play an integral component in young adults’ pursuit of pleasure and excitement raises an important issue regarding the interrelationship between alcohol consumption, pleasure and harm to self and others. Despite the comprehensiveness of prevention frameworks in terms of functional risk/benefit analysis of alcohol consumption, they fail to describe the corporeal and sensory joys experienced through enhancement of sociability, closeness or confidence (Duff, 2008). What is overlooked is an understanding of how young people are ‘consuming alcohol’ within a shifting market-space where leisure is commodified through designer drinks and the re-configuration of the night time economy, and where bodily pleasures are valued (Measham, 2004). Without consideration of pleasure and enjoyment as genuine benefits within public health frameworks of intoxication, it becomes difficult to interpret the repeated and deliberate pursuit of ‘drunkenness’ by young people beyond irrational, problematic and undesirable’ behaviour (Measham, 2004). This paper seeks to partially redress this imbalance within an Australian context by analysing young adult’s narratives surrounding ‘excessive drinking’ as an essential pleasure commodity within the experience economy.

Pleasure as a commodity

Contemporary culture embraces the pursuit of pleasure within a market economy that packages its image as cool, desirable, exciting and fashionable. Although the quest for pleasure has been a topic of interest since the classical era, the context surrounding its pursuit has evolved. Pleasure has transformed from a pursuit permitted as a result of hard work, to one demanded as a part of everyday activities across social classes (Gabriel and Lang, 2006). Consequently pleasure seeking lifestyles have become a universally accepted norm enshrined within a culture of experiential hedonic consumption (Hirschman, 1992). Experiential consumption centres on the search for happiness, meaning and fulfilment which is completed through the symbolic use of products (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992). Experiencing the sensorial, fantastical and emotional transforms the act of consumption towards a subjective state of consciousness.

The contemporary pursuit of youth-related pleasure has emerged alongside regeneration of urban centres that has actively sought development and expansion of a 'symbolic' experience-orientated economy (Jayne *et al.*, 2006). Integral to the emergence of a youth centric experience culture is the provision and liberalisation of attitudes towards alcohol, and the development of 'drinkertainment' leisure environments based around drinking attractions. Alcohol products have been re-commodified into designer beverages (up-market beers and alcopops), prevalence of mixed drink 'shooters or shots', and relaxed alcohol licensing laws have led to a proliferation of 'drinking venues' (pubs, clubs, themed bars and cafes) which, in turn, has influenced the emergence of a night economy (Lindsay *et al.*, 2008). Measham and Brain (2005) argue

that it is precisely this shift in commercial market activities that has leveraged a post-modern culture of intoxication where alcohol acts as a conduit for pharmacological induced pleasure. They suggest the social transformation of urban space and corporate success surrounding the way in which drinking plays an important role in leisure pursuits has normalised alcohol use within a new psychoactive consumption style where altered states of intoxication reflect leisure 'time out'. Nonetheless, normalisation of alcohol within youth culture is not to say that alcohol use is normal, but rather that alcohol has shifted into a position where it is an accepted and integral aspect of cultures and contexts young people inhabit (Taylor, 2000).

Reframing excessive alcohol consumption

An emerging discourse surrounding young adults' contemporary intoxication reframes alcohol consumption within a larger intertextual web of culture where meanings are constructed to perpetuate dominant interpretations of cultural practices (Goulding *et al.*, 2008). Rather than a form of 'let it all out' experience and total abandon, it is suggested that young people's pursuit of alcohol pleasure is a rational, calculated and strategically managed process (Szmigin *et al.* 2008; Measham, 2004; Brain, 2000). As Featherstone (1991) articulates, the dominant relationship towards pleasure is one of 'calculating hedonism' in which an individual strategically moves in and out of control, enjoying the thrill of controlled suspension of constraints. The term 'calculating hedonism' represents a post-modern capability of individuals to strategically control their emotions, to open themselves to a range of sensations, and to enjoy the transference between the pleasures of attachment and of detached distance (Szmigin *et al.*, 2008; Featherstone, 1991). Central to a young persons search for excited stimulation is their

ability to separate the consequences of their actions from experiential pursuits, and their strategic capability to move within states of intoxication and between non-intoxication and intoxication (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007).

Brain (2000) interprets young people's intoxication culture as one of 'rational hedonism' based on a form of economic rationalism. Within this intoxication framework the central aim of consuming alcohol is to get drunk. The utility of alcohol as a product is reflected by its psychoactive properties to facilitate a state of altered being. Yet, drunkenness is not entirely uncontrolled nor is it entirely unconditional. Coinciding alongside the rational 'let's get pissed' perspective, Brain (2000) also argues that the process of getting drunk involves a form of 'bounded hedonism'. In this instance, young people are cognisant of limits to drunkenness and undertake a cost-benefit analysis for fitting alcohol within leisure time activities. This rationality towards drinking suggests young people engage in the parallel needs of integrating psychoactive 'time out' with the capability to be responsible for life's obligations (eg: work, study, sports). Such influences instil a self-controlled limit on behaviour suggesting the nature of drinking and drunkenness is bounded by formal, complex structures of institutional interdependence. The interconnections between the various institutional structures influence the ability to 'take time out' which, as a consequence, implicitly limits capability to indulge in alcohol pleasure (eg: when to drink, who to drink with, where to drink and how much to drink). Thus, although boundaries are placed on the act of consumption, the pleasure of drinking is not forfeited with consumers actively moving across life-worlds (eg: work and social) to engage in the symbolic display of intoxication.

Measham (2004) views the youth's culture of intoxication as one of 'determinedness' where the aim of a big night out is to drink to get drunk and to get drunk as quickly as possible. For young adults socialisation and drinking have become intertwined to such an extent that drinking is viewed as an end in itself. The centrality of instant gratification and pleasurable consumption by means of psychoactive transformation suggests young adults are deliberately engaging in hedonistic drinking where the 'buzz' effect, or hit value of alcohol, has become an increasingly important commodity in the contemporary leisure culture of young adults. Measham (2004) agrees with Brain's (2000) notion of bounded drinking styles, yet argues the motivations for a 'controlled loss of control' behaviour cluster around concerns for avoiding risk situations such as personal safety (capability to get home), health (minimising hangovers), security (capability to defend oneself) and financial limitations (limiting money for drinking at start of evening). Thus, the pursuit of determined drunkenness is controlled within an implicit framework of managing the intoxication process to achieve a balance between desired and actual states.

While Brain and Measham differ in their interpretation of motivations for engaging in a culture of intoxication, they collectively interpret drunkenness as a 'spectrum of possible positive and negative consequences for the user, their associated networks and wider society' (Measham, 2004: 316). Although alcohol consumption may appear as a form of total abandon, there is a dimension of personal and social control to the act of consumption that operates within a pleasure seeking framework. These interpretations of intoxication and associated discussions are particularly useful to comprehend the

wider impact of culture influencing young peoples' consumption of alcohol and pursuit of a pleasurable state of intoxication.

Research and methodology

This study applies a narrative theory approach to understand young adult's pleasure seeking intoxication behaviour. Narrative theory posits individuals recall salient moments in their relational lives, organise these thoughts, and make sense of these experiences through story telling or an organised telling of experiences (Fisher, 1987). The narrative surrounding the performance plays an important function as young adults establish meaning for the self with wider social cohesion of peers, and solidify these meanings as social practices (Carey, 1989). As individuals construct their identities and self-narratives from building blocks available in common culture, above and beyond their individual experience, self-generated stories act as a conduit for situating social action into a specific construction of social reality (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998). Examining the use of everyday language to create the story affords a deeper understanding of the socially available descriptions and explanations for drinking behaviour.

Purposive sampling was conducted in regional and metropolitan centres on the east coast of Australia. Young people were recruited through friendship networks and represented a mix of gender, socio-economic representation and employment status (student versus working). One-to-one semi-structured interviews ranging from one and a half hours to two hours were conducted with 102 young adults aged 18 – 25 years. Selection criteria required informants to self-report their drinking behaviour. The majority of respondents (n = 65; males n = 35; females n = 30) characterised themselves

as 'going out to get drunk' at least two to three nights a week. During the pre-drinking or '*loading*' phase prior to entering the commercial night time leisure zone individuals, both males and females, were likely to report consumption of alcohol at high risk levels. It was common for individuals to articulate alcohol consumption within parameters of '*at least 7 beers*' (Male) or '*I can easily drink a bottle of wine before I go out*' (Female) or '*at least half a bottle of vodka*' (Female). There was confusion surrounding standard drink knowledge, as participants were unable to equate consumption in terms of standard drinks. It was much easier to equate consumption in terms of bottles (wine or beer) or glasses (wine or spirits). For these individuals, drinking continued within the night-time leisure economy. The remaining respondents (n = 37; males n =20; females n = 17) identified they had previously engaged in reckless drinking behaviour, however had modified their behaviour to some degree as a result of work/life balance. For these individuals weekends facilitated the space for intoxication within the leisure economy.

Interviews were led by three age-relevant researchers in the aim to put participants at ease when talking about their drinking behaviour. Interviewees were given extensive instruction and training in interpretive research methods, had previous experience in collecting qualitative data, and were closely supervised by the senior researcher.

Participants were informed they were involved in a project examining their social leisure activities. Interviews were conducted as casual conversations in the aim to replicate settings where drinking stories are initiated. Interviews were transcribed verbatim from audio-tapes, with identifying names or references to individuals erased to maintain anonymity. The transcripts were imported into NVivo to facilitate identification of key themes and patterns of meaning to illuminate personal

manifestations of intoxication. Analytic strategies outlined by Huberman and Miles (2002) and Lofland *et al.* (2006) were utilised to draw out connections between themes. In total, two meta-narratives relating to how young adults consume alcohol in relation to notions of pleasure emerged: *pleasures of intoxication* and *intoxication as a signifier*.

Analysis: Pleasures of intoxication

Being drunk signified socialisation, enjoyment, fun and pleasure, with anticipated excitement felt prior to the consumption event and ‘war stories’ discussed post-consumption. Socialising in the night time economy was a euphemism for ‘having a good time’. In turn, ‘having a good time’ was a euphemism for drinking to excess. The act of intoxication was not solely described as intoxication *per se*. Rather participants discussed their approach to getting drunk as ranging across a continuum of pleasure states. Intoxication was valued as either a state of ‘happiness’ or alternatively as a state of annihilation. Each of these valued states prioritises the psychoactive effects of alcohol, its ability to alter the sense of self, and the search for the ‘hit’ value of alcohol. In turn, the psychoactive effects were crucial for stimulating an overall sense of ‘fun’, ‘joy’ and ‘socialisation’; suggesting the objective of over-indulging in alcohol is to obtain a sense of bodily pleasure.

‘It doesn’t matter if you’re going out for a big one or just doing the usual... it’s about having a good time... that sense of relaxing is blissful ... it’ why I like drinking’ (F-worker)

“I never really thought about why I drink .. but I do like it and it takes me away... like I can escape from things I have to think about... drinking gives me a high and I like that .. i often have chasers .. red bull and vodka .. gets the buzz going’

The pursuit of intoxicated happiness was valued as an integral component of socialising within the night time leisure economy. Participants were cognisant of the distinction between pleasurable intoxication and annihilation intoxication; implying a sense of calculated hedonism varying in degrees of controlled loss of control. Drinking to be 'happy' was considered as positive, socially inclusive and fun.

'I would consider that I drink to be happy... happy is where you want to be. I wouldn't feel as if I'm enjoying myself if I'm not happy... I'm pretty much a happy drunk and like to own that badge.' (F-worker)

'Well I don't get plastered all the time... only once and a while.. but I'd generally drink about 8 pints and that would get me happy... that's a good night with no hangovers.' (M-worker)

For those who expressed an 'all or nothing' attitude to drinking the deliberate intention of the leisure activity was to get drunk. These individuals viewed alcohol as a means to an end where 'being very drunk' was the objective; otherwise there was no point in consuming alcohol. Participants typically described this approach to intoxication as 'getting wasted', 'getting plastered', or 'going out for a big one'; rationalising their behaviour quite simply as:

'Drinking – it's just what you do. You meet up with friends and you drink... that's it!' (M-uni)

'If I'm out with friends I don't monitor how much I'm drinking ... I just drink till the night ends. I don't see the point of only having a few drinks... what is that all about!' (M-worker)

'At least once a week I get plastered.. .it's about socialising with friends and ... well its good harmless fun' (F-worker)

Consuming alcohol for the purpose of annihilation was generally viewed as an extreme point of intoxication, yet not necessarily considered destructive. While annihilation was described as negating the 'need' for social interaction, consumption was typically

undertaken within group contexts. Annihilation was interpreted as an extreme form of pleasure, operating with others, but primarily individually.

'I think about the times when I'm totally out there ...I know I'm with others but the feeling is totally with me. I'm floating through the night ... not taking pills.. just on alcohol... and I'm just having good fun... I get more active .. can't stay still.. I like the feeling of being totally blitzed...' (M-uni)

'Going to nightclubs, parties... you just want to be out of it..totally out of it .. completely gone... to enjoy the music.. dancing and well just for the rush' (M-worker)

Participants viewed commercial 'drinkertainment' environments as the primary leisure context for having fun, socialising and enjoying a state of intoxication. Pre-drinking at home facilitated functionality of drinking, specifically for minimising alcohol-related financial costs and to speed-up drunkenness. The pursuit of intoxication as a facilitator of happiness or annihilation varied across contexts – places where the choice to get drunk occurred, situations justifying the 'need' for drunkenness, and time designated for drunkenness. Traditional celebratory events such as end of exams, birthdays and schoolies were considered mandatory alcohol events.

'Drinking takes different forms depending... well who you're with. Sometimes you don't mean to get totally out of it but it just happens... and well you're having too much of a good time. Schoolies, end of exams, birthdays... they're definitely times to really have a good time... I don't remember much of the night on those occasions. Then there are times when you just have a good night... yeah I'd think I'd be definitely over the limit but not drunk... just really happy... just having a good time... that's what life is all about.. isn't it?' (F- uni)

Rather than complete abandon, participants expressed 'putting on the brakes' to their drinking behaviour. The notion of limiting consumption ranged from health, sporting responsibilities, maintaining a sense of dignity to drinking, and general life responsibilities. These limits suggest a form of bounded hedonism where participants fit life's obligations with taking time out for psychoactive pleasure. In this context,

participants are capable of strategically moving in and out of the intoxicated environment, engaging a cost benefit analysis for when to let loose and when to maintain greater sense of control.

'You wouldn't drink every night the body just couldn't handle it' (F-uni)

'Now that I'm working I don't go out drinking like I use to anymore... I have to have my wits about me at work.. so I usually just go out drinking on weekends..' (F-worker)

'midweek – you'd drink generally one night usually a Wednesday..otherwise you're too tired but weekends are free for all... whatever goes. Friday is usually a bit of a ritual ..' (M-uni)

'I typically don't drink when I'm studying for exams or when I want to get up early and go surfing... you have to have it together... and surfing with a hangover .. barfing in the surf is rough.' (M-student)

Intoxication as a signifier

While pleasure seeking was a key theme for justifying excessive drinking, young people identified that 'doing alcohol' extended beyond mere consumption. Discussion emerged about how alcohol use acted as a sign or a marker that influenced how these individual's view their bodily self and maintained their identity within the consumption process.

Participants were cognisant they were transitioning from adolescent to adulthood where alcohol was viewed as a badge of adulthood, along with voting, working, or attending university. Consuming alcohol alongside parents signified a change in self-identity, symbolising 'belonging' to the adult world and recognition of this transition within the family structure.

'... the first experience ... I felt grown up ...it was a nice memory of celebrating a birthday in the family that has stayed with me....I felt grown up' (F-uni)

Alongside this 'rite of passage' participants identified that part of being a young adult was to fulfil a general expectation of 'getting the most out of life', which in turn legitimatised experimental behaviour (including both licit and illicit drug use). Excessive consumption of alcohol was considered a transitory phase in their life trajectory. Participants considered that they would naturally grow out of this lifestyle of 'excessive consumption' and evolve a 'sensible' drinking style once they took on the responsibilities of adulthood (ie: children, marriage, mortgage etc). Yet when asked to identify 'what is a sensible drinking style?' most participants were unsure; were likely to report '*something less than what we are drinking now*'; and did not use the term binge drinking to refer to their own drinking style.

'Once I get older, get a job and have kids.. well I'll have to not drink as much... that's the life of a responsible adult' (M-worker)

'My life is all about experiences... I want to experience everything... but not stupid things... I figure that once I've done a little exploring, travelled and am ready to be serious I'll probably refocus how much I drink..... but until then this is what you do... it's part of how we socialise' (F-uni)

Participants strongly identified between drinking and non-drinking. This sense of separateness, dependant on the symbolic notion of the functions of drunkenness, permitted formation of in-groups and out-groups. Drinkers clearly perceived non-drinkers as 'not cool' and considered they were missing out on the fun of life.

'I find if I'm not drunk then I kind of feel a bit out of it and I'm not as inclined to get up and dance ... I'm just not on the same level so I feel a bit left out ... I want to have a few more drinks so I can catch up.' (F-uni)

'Going to nightclubs and not drinking is crap... I've done it as a designated driver .. but never again... being drunk is about being with others... having a good time that's where you want to be.. not drinking is not having a good time.' (M-worker).

Drinking identity was reinterpreted in the post-consumption phase through story telling of the previous night's adventure or previous drinking events. Communicating the consumption experience functioned to illustrate the fun associated with drinking. Many drinking narratives centred on incidents that would be considered risk outcomes of excessive drinking. Rather than considering these events as risk-orientated, young people, particularly males, viewed the outcomes of excessive drinking as symbols of valour. Vomiting, hangovers or 'not remembering the night' were viewed as important signifiers giving testimony to a 'good night out'. Importantly, story-telling reinforced the value of the drinking experience beyond the individual's experience creating a greater sense of cohesion, intimacy and bonding with peers. It would seem that story telling post hoc was just as important as experiencing drinking in that the narrative allowed the intoxicated pleasure zone experience to be enhanced, repeated and solidified.

Discussion

Rather than simply problematising intoxication, this paper has contributed empirical support for understanding why alcohol is an essential commodity within young adults' contemporary experience economy. In contemporary society, the pursuit of pleasure and achievement of a pleasure state are essential in the articulation of a young person's social relationships, aspirations and values. For many young people, alcohol has become an essential 'pleasure' commodity within the night-time experience economy. In this way, 'pleasure' is re-configured by young people for young people as a commodity object, rather than designating an emotional state.

Extending the interpretation of pleasure beyond a problematic over-indulgence, participants view pleasure as devoid of risks or harms. Intoxication was rarely considered an outcome of drinking. In line with previous research, alcohol was consumed primarily to serve a utilitarian functionality of psychoactive transformation (Brain, 2000; Measham, 2004; Szmigin *et al.*, 2008). The ‘buzz’ effect facilitated the search for an excited state of mind, which in turn facilitated a higher order value state of pleasure. Participants’ interpreted alcohol infused pleasure across two dimensions: as either a state of happiness or a state of annihilation. The psychoactive effect of alcohol was crucial for stimulating an alternate sense of self within the search for transformational bodily pleasure. Despite annihilation conjuring images of complete destruction, participants perceived a state of annihilation as a heightened form of pleasure seeking; akin to seeking the ultimate buzz! Intoxication clearly illustrated a mode of determined drunkenness (Measham, 2004), combined with elements of what Brain (2000) refers to as ‘rational hedonism’. The central aim of consuming alcohol was to get drunk, yet achieving an intoxicated state within the confines of pleasure or annihilation, both of which set out to achieve differing states of altered being, for the most part was a pre-determined decision.

Consuming alcohol pleasure, via intoxication, also operates within temporal, spatial, social and consumption limits suggesting an applied rationality towards drinking.

Individuals in this study clearly moved within the leisure economy, yet were simultaneously able to manage their leisure ‘time out’ with their broader responsibilities of life (e.g.: exams, sport interests, work requirements). Alcohol consumption is not necessarily an act of spontaneous total abandon, but rather is simply one of uncontrolled

abandon to the sensuous pleasures of indulgence (Brain 2000). Contemporary young drinkers mark out the space (home and drinkertainment venues), time (weekends) and social situation (celebratory events) to enact intoxication suggesting intoxication is a bounded or calculated form of hedonistic consumption. Young people in this study consciously separated life responsibilities and consequences from their experiential pursuits by strategically moving within states of pleasurable intoxication and non-intoxication.

It is well established young people have a short-term view of the world. In relation to alcohol, this study supports previous research identifying young people when intoxicated are likely to dismiss harm outcomes (Sheehan and Ridge, 2001) and subsume harm for pleasure. Participants acknowledge alcohol-induced pleasure extended beyond material gratification, to act as a symbolic signifier of identity. Consuming alcohol symbolically marked a lifestyle (drinking for fun, key facilitator for socialising), identity (being an adult) and status (group inclusion, not being left out). Importantly, young people perceive excessive drinking as a life phase, mandatory for youth, yet a behaviour that can be abandoned when life responsibilities are adopted. This further suggests excessive drinking is bounded by life events, contextualised within a time of youth, and yet abandoned once life responsibilities are adopted.

The main goal of alcohol policy is to promote public health and social wellbeing. Policies that regulate the environment in which alcohol is marketed (for example: alcohol availability and commercial communications) have impact on reducing alcohol related harm. Yet, it is also evident that regulated, economic orientated strategies alone

are not sufficient in stemming the tide of intoxication among young people (Anderson *et al.*, 2009). The cultural embed of alcohol within contemporary consumer culture, particularly within the consumer culture of young people, requires greater understanding of the interplay between the individual, practice and culture of risky drinking practices. This is an area not well evidenced within the Australian context. Contemporary alcohol policy (UK Department of Health, 2007; Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2009; Australia's National Alcohol Strategy, 2006; National Preventative Health Taskforce 2009) advocate, in addition to harm reduction strategies, the creation of safe drinking cultures. Significance of advocating safer drinking cultures is acknowledgement of culture as a central element of alcohol consumption. Within this context, understanding of the centrality of alcohol to young people's desired and actual intoxication experiences is integral to the role of the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure within the night time leisure environment. In line with Measham's (2006) articulation of the direction for future alcohol policy, it is necessary to understand the lived experiences of young people's drinking, their processes of consumption and how consumption of alcohol is socially and culturally bounded in order to enable a better understanding of the relationship between individual self-regulation, social regulation and institutional regulation. This requires a shift from individual analysis of harm reduction to an understanding of the socio-cultural influences impacting the relationship between supply, demand, harm reduction strategies, leisure environments and policy enforcement. While the notion of excessive alcohol consumption is a form of calculated hedonism or bounded hedonism (Brain, 2000) may seem somewhat unusual, it does offer an explanation as to how the process of achieving an '*altered state of being*' can be simultaneously rational, disciplined and pleasurable. The perceived normality of

intoxication among young people is a complex social issue that cannot be addressed with a single solution. Rather than ‘only’ subsuming the pleasures of alcohol under the focus of harms and risks, contemporary alcohol prevention strategies need to integrate the fact that intoxication is a successfully managed and pleasurable state of being for many drinkers, and as such consider the nexus between pleasure and alcohol and how this fits in to the social world of the drinker.

Conclusions, limitations and future research

This study contributes to empirical support for a more subtle understanding of pleasure as related to intoxication. Importantly, the aim has been to digress from the traditional risk and/or harm discourse by examining influences that drive consumption motivation beyond the physiological experience of the product itself to include the dimension of ‘experience’ as influencing young adults’ pursuit of alcohol-related pleasure. The literature discussing experiential consumption as a means of seeking happiness, meaning and fulfilment is well established as related to consumer culture. Yet, exploration of experiential consumption as a potential factor shaping alcohol consumption behaviours is only emerging. Contextualising the lived experiences of young adult’s excessive use of alcohol aims to understand consumption from the consumer perspective.

Proposing that pleasure has a place when describing excessive alcohol use is in opposition to public health policy and prevention perspectives. Despite this oppositional approach, disentangling the repeated and deliberate pursuit of drunkenness by young people requires consideration beyond the irrational, problematic and undesirable.

Identification of pleasure as key ingredient in youths drinking behaviour helps to shift the focus of prevention away from addressing drinking patterns *per se* to that of understanding experiential drinking cultures. Integrating ‘experiential culture’ as it relates to alcohol and socio-cultural perspectives may illuminate new mechanisms to create relevant targeted prevention strategies. Implicitly contemporary prevention strategies need to open a space for young people to narrate their own accounts of how they use alcohol. Opening up a space for young people’s voices to be interpreted and analysed allows ‘new insight’ and opportunities, alongside science and public health perspectives, for integrating new knowledge in relevant, targeted and culturally appropriate prevention strategies.

Sample size is a limitation of this study. In general, the nature of qualitative research negates the capability of wider generalisation to the Australian population. Future research is required to extend our understanding of intoxicated pleasure using a more representative Australian sample. Recent national trend data highlights contemporary young adult women are at higher risk for alcohol-related disease and injury, than previous generations (Collins and Lapsley, 2008). As such, a need for future research to examine the impact of gender on alcohol-related pleasure seeking is also called for.

Evidence from the UK (Brian, 2000; Measham, 2004), Europe (Jarvinen and Room, 2007) and the US (McDonald et al., 2008) indicates a universal nature to young people’s excessive drinking, styles of drinking (eg: two phase approach to a big night out) and pursuit of an alcohol-induced pleasure zone. This apparent convergence of youth drinking suggests the existence of a homogeneous drinking culture devoid of

geographic boundaries. Future research should be directed towards considering cross-cultural impacts, country-specific issues that impact intoxication attitudes and motivations.

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