

Addiction



ESRC SCHOOL BRIEFINGS

Alcohol: the spirit of friendship

Young women can't win when it comes to alcohol. If they drink to excess they're seen as unfeminine and risk-taking; if they don't they may be accused of 'drinking like a girl'. Nevertheless, in recent years, heavy drinking has become increasingly common and expected among young women.

This is part of a worrying picture presented by a group of researchers from the University of Bath and the University of Birmingham who studied young people's social drinking habits and how alcohol is marketed to them.

Excessive drinking has become a normal part of a 'good night out' for many young people, and these consumers are the target of extensive marketing campaigns by drinks manufacturers. Public drunkenness, including urinating and vomiting in the street, is an increasingly common sight.

New kinds of drinks, such as alcopops, designed to appeal to the young, are now popular, while the strength of traditional beverages such as wine and

beer has increased. Promotions aimed at young drinkers have brought prices down.

The Young People and Alcohol project set out to present a systematic and in-depth examination of young people's own accounts of the part alcohol plays in their lives. Researchers also analysed 216 typical alcohol adverts.

Participants views reflected the fact that, for many young people, drinking to excess is not only normal but also socially imperative, as it plays an important role in group identity formation, the study indicates. Getting drunk is seen as a group activity, in which the 'fun' of drinking to excess is considered compulsory.

The study shows that telling stories about drinking helped to bind groups together in a shared sense of adventure and entertainment. Furthermore, telling stories about getting very drunk and passing out provided 'a situation in which young people no longer appear responsible for their own actions.'

The researchers find it worrying that alcohol is shown in many adverts as 'the very glue that binds their friendship groups together'. This, they say, 'is far more insidious and difficult to legislate against than adolescent humour in



alcohol adverts'. Adverts also showed men and women differently, with women in fantasy settings and men in every day environments.

The researchers conclude that to be effective, health education programmes need to recognise the central importance of alcohol in young people's social lives. Interviewees saw the official 'safe' levels of consumption as laughably low, and campaigns built around these 'safe' numbers of units are unlikely to make much impact.

They say government policy needs to tackle the issues of price, availability and marketing of increasingly strong drinks. They believe this would be more effective than putting the sole responsibility for cutting consumption in individual young people.



Further information

Contact: Professor Christine Griffin
University of Bath

Email: C.Griffin@bath.ac.uk

Telephone: +44 (0)1225 385293

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