

Young UK Women and Wine: Pre-loading is Safe Drinking!

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper forms part of a larger PhD study at the University of Wales Institute Cardiff, entitled *Alcohol Related Attitudes, Cultures and Behaviours in Young Adults; Challenging Perceived Wisdoms*. The purpose of this work-in-progress paper is to investigate the reasoning behind pre-loading with wine amongst young UK females between the ages of 18 and 30.

Design/methodology/ approach – Two groups of young female adult alcohol consumers were identified. The participants in group one were aged between 18 and 30 and were either studying at degree level or had completed a degree; the participants in group two were aged between 18 and 30 and had never studied or completed at degree level. 650 questionnaires were completed, 325 in each sample group. Follow up focus groups will be carried out with representatives from each group.

Findings –The results suggest that pre-loading is not always an issue related to safe consumption habits, instead it may relate to the issue of personal safety and security. Furthermore, there are distinct differences of gender when the consumption of wine is considered within pre-loading and the public consumption arena.

Practical Implications – More, accurate information should be available if personal safety and security of consumers is to be increased within the public consumption arena. The perception that personal safety and security is more important than heavy wine-consumption may be leading to harmful behaviour on the part of young UK females.

Originality value – This paper produces new insights into current wine drinking behaviours in differing groups of young UK female adults aged between 18 and 30. Specifically it compares behavioural norms between graduate and non-graduate populations

Keywords – Young Female Adults, Education, Wine consumption behaviours, Pre-loading

Paper type – Working Paper

Introduction.

As Ritchie *et al.*, (2009a) identify, drinking habits are changing, particularly within the female population. One of the more noticeable markers of change is the increase in ‘pre-loading’; that is; drinking at home before an evening out. One of the emerging themes from this Ph.D study indicates that pre-loading by women, usually involving the consumption of wine (Ritchie 2007), is not carried out purely with the intention of getting drunk. Instead many women see it as being socially inclusive as well as a personal safety and security measure. Pre-loading allows for the consumption of alcohol/wine which relaxes and invigorates the women at the same time enabling them to enter the public consumption arena and consume only one or two more alcoholic drinks or, in many cases, to consume no more alcohol during the night out. When this issue was investigated it became apparent that this practice was not always intended to help women consume less. Instead often it was to ensure that their motor skills and judgement were not so impaired that they placed themselves at risk of attack from other revellers or from those in positions of trust such as taxi drivers.

When carrying out alcohol consumption related research, most previous studies (Broadbear *et al.*, 2000; Clapp *et al.*, 2000; Pincock, 2003) have concentrated on the amount consumed, looking for binge-drinking or anti-social drinking, rather than looking for ‘positive’ consumption patterns in differing areas. The research discussed in this paper is part of a Ph.D study investigating alcohol-related behaviours in young UK adults. A particular feature of the Ph.D is an attempt to develop more robust methodological approaches to address some of the data issues surrounding young adult populations. This paper introduces the results of the first round of data collection. Specifically it identifies issues of particular wine consumption behaviour in relation to personal safety and security by young female wine consumers in the UK which have not previously been identified.

Contextualising the Ph.D: Identifying gendered wine consumption behaviours

For several years the alcohol consumption habits of young UK adults has been a subject of interest for both the academic community (Graham & Wells, 2003; Hassan & Shiu, 2007; Burkett, 2007; Bellis *et al.*, 2010; Ritchie *et al.*, 2009a&b) and the wider worldwide media (USA Today 2010; The Mail, 2011; BBC News 2010). This type of research is partial (Goldacre, 2009) in that it concentrates primarily on the societal and medical harms brought about by anti-social drinking behaviours. It fails to fully consider the perceived positive outcomes identified by the young UK adult community especially in relation to wine consumption. Ritchie (2007, 2011) identified differing gender attitudes towards wine purchase and consumption amongst UK consumers, in particular those differences that affect young adults. Within the public consumption arena the choice of alcoholic drink and the amount consumed is usually related to the gender of the young consumer (Fox, 2004; Hunt *et al.* 2005). Wine is often seen as unsuited to the image of the young male consumer except where a sit down meal is being consumed (Ritchie, 2007, 2011). Females, however, have a much larger drink repertoire as they are able to consume both feminine (e.g. rose wine) and masculine (e.g. beer) drinks albeit traditionally in smaller quantities (Fox, 2004). Therefore, historically, females have been seen as the calming voice of abstinence in matters of alcohol consumption. Although Rocha-silva (1996:5) suggested that “*gone are the days when young girls used to cook like their mothers, nowadays they drink like their fathers*”, Ritchie (2009) and Pratten & Carlier’s (2010) work suggests that this is a rather simplistic view. The empowerment of women within the workforce may be impacting, not necessarily immoderately, on traditional pub drinking cultures, and may well be one of the reasons for the increased wine consumption in pubs/ gastropubs (Mintel, 2010). Other research (e.g. Ritchie *et al.* 2009b) suggests another factor in both increased wine consumption and potential

harms may be related to the size of glasses used and the ABV of the wine consumed. This is an issue that the wine trade has also taken on-board (WineAustralia, 2010; Wineanorak, 2011)

What is Safe Drinking?: The paradoxes of pre-loading.

According to Flatley *et al* (2010), the number of young women in the UK reporting being attacked after a night out has almost tripled from the 2000 figures. These attacks (both physical and sexual) most commonly occur in night-time venues and on the journey home. In response, as Hassan and Shui (2007) and Ritchie (2011) discuss, pre-loading is often seen by women as a safe drinking behaviour in relation to personal safety. Although the consumer is euphoric, has achieved the “buzz”, (Olsen *et al.*, 2007; Ritchie *et al.*, 2009a) when they enter the public arena, by drinking very little subsequently they reduce the risks associated with being drunk in a late night venue. Additionally the social inclusiveness of wine (Ritchie 2009, 2011), the sharing of a bottle, means that many women see the consumption of wine before an evening out as a friendship act, ensuring that they enter the public arena in company: drinking wine/ sharing a bottle is simply a rationale for gathering. As Ritchie’s (2009, 2011) studies have shown, young male adults in Britain typically pre-load on beer rather than wine. Therefore reflecting the work of Olsen *et al* (2007) and Ritchie (2011), pre-loading by young women, particularly via wine, is to share, to reduce social inhibition but also to increase the personal; safety of the participants (Ritchie *et al*, 2009b).

This behaviour generates two paradoxes. The first is that wine is increasingly seen as a social drink; but in late-night situations given the increase in ‘spiking’ (Glendinning & Kane, 2004) it can be seen as dangerous to share a bottle /pour into glasses and so young women drinkers substitute wine for single unit alternatives which can be carried about safely. This leads to a separation in the way that wine is perceived: at one point it is a social activity, not a ‘drinking’ one; the ‘drinking’ occurs later. This attitude reflects the duality that Ritchie (2009) identified in relation to buying wine with the grocery shop; Kreft and Ritchie (2009) found a similar effect in ‘Nordic’ immigrant communities, where beer was a social tool and ‘drinking’ meant hard liqueur such as spirits. It may be that wine bought to pre-load is a not-buying, not-drinking private activity. The second paradox is that ‘safety’ is interpreted as largely a matter of personal safety. Although pre-loading may lead to immediate and future alcohol consumption harms, this is rarely if ever considered. A pilot study (Ritchie *et al.*, 2009a (same methodology)) showed that there was almost no recognition of the medical risks being taken; on the contrary women were much more likely to believe that there is ‘plenty of time to be healthy later’. These two paradoxes of perception are themes which are being investigated in much greater depth in the PhD thesis.

Methodology

This Ph.D aims to build on the pilot project, taking the results of the pilot onboard in both questionnaire and focus group design. The purpose is to investigate in depth the perceptions and attitudes of different types of young UK adult populations towards alcohol consumption using both quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative methods (focus groups). Corbetta (2003), Greene *et al* (2005) and Saunders *et al* (2008) all suggest that using a mixed-method approach to social inquiry can generate a deeper understanding than a single-method approach. If used correctly both methods of data collection complement each other and give validity to the end results ensuring production of a comprehensive study supporting the theories and recommendations developed.

In understanding drinking cultures there is a need to understand the individual's motivations, needs and wants concerning their own consumption and how this may impact upon the research process. Coolican (1999), when discussing an individual's likelihood of giving honest responses to personal questions concerning drug/alcohol use, indicates that the need to lie and or under-estimate their real usage of certain substances may over-ride any intrinsic predisposition to honesty. However, when considering alcohol consumption, Mason (2004) and Hunt *et al* (2005) suggest that young people are more likely to over-estimate their consumption. It is considered that a benefit of multi-stage sampling is that it assists in identification of inaccurate reporting. If it has taken place action can then be taken to compensate for this. Pragmatically, it is accepted that it is not possible to eliminate all inaccuracies. The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS whereas the qualitative data analysis will be supported by a computer based programme such as NVIVO. Results from the pilot study were partially reported in Ritchie *et al.*, (2009 a&b). As previously noted these initial results were used to inform the design of the main survey; in particular, ensuring adequate coverage of the study groups. The focus remains on gender differences and attitudinal and consumption variances between student and non-student populations. The population sample for the questionnaires consisted of 1250 young adults aged between 18 and 30 within the UK of whom 625 were female. Within this sample there are differing social networks. These networks are based upon employment commitments, level of education, level of personal life responsibility and disposable income. The selection method used within the quantitative research was non-probability sampling using the purposive sampling system (Denscombe, 2005). This is defined as identifying suitable places where it is likely possible respondents would be located, such as universities and large employers. To ensure balanced data, student and post graduate respondents were limited to 25% each of the overall respondents, the other 50% of respondents were aged 18 to 30 in work with no academic Higher Education qualifications. Due to the personal nature of some of the questions it was felt that the use of electronic questionnaire systems, such as checkbox, was not appropriate.

The first set of data collection, the administration of the questionnaire, was carried out in September 2010 within six locations throughout the UK: Plymouth, Oxford, Cardiff, Aberystwyth, Manchester and Newcastle, with an even sample distribution within each location.. This will be followed up via qualitative data collection (focus groups) convened from a sample of the participants of the quantitative data collection phase (multi-stage sampling) (Saunders *et al.*, 2009) Preliminary results will be available in July 2011.

Summary

This work has identified the dual paradoxes of wine drinking amongst women: the perception of drinking/not drinking, and the consideration of safe/not safe. This is an important topic as government guidelines are based upon some of these same (mis)conceptions. The wider research, of which this is a part, shows that there is a need to better understand the paradox of perceptions of sophistication and the actuality of heavy wine usage particularly amongst the UKs' young female adult population. The research to date also shows that there is a need to better understand perception of alcohol consumed, actual alcohol consumed and safe levels of alcohol consumption amongst the whole young adult population. Developing more robust research methodologies, deeper understanding of current consumption habits and the psychological reasoning behind such behaviours will lead a more accurate understanding of alcohol related cultures within the young adult population of the UK. This will enable the development of effective strategies by governments and the wine trade to support the development of moderate drinking cultures and behaviours in young adult populations.

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