

From Blue Rinse to Hedonism? Drinking in 21st Century Bournemouth

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INTRODUCTION

In Britain in the early 21st century there is a focus by media, government and academia on young people's consumption of alcohol and how this should be understood and regulated, often using the term 'binge' drinking. The government has produced a raft of documents on subject, including two 'Strategies' and a number of consultations, at the same time as apparently liberalising licensing laws so that alcohol can be sold legally 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Previous academic work on this topic has tended to focus on the way in which the actions of government and the alcohol industry have structured young people's understandings of drinking and therefore their practices. These arguments frequently understand 'binge' drinking as an expression of a consumer identity characteristic of a post-industrial, consumerist society. In this way, the emphasis has tended to be on the similarities across young people's drinking practices. Such research has tended to be located in 'post-industrial' cities such as Manchester, Newcastle, Sunderland, and Bristol. This paper looks at drinking from a different perspective, considering the potential differences in how young people behave and think about drinking. It is based on ethnographic research with drinkers in Bournemouth. Bournemouth developed in the nineteenth century as a seaside resort for the middle classes and invalids, and can thus be contrasted with other resorts more oriented towards pleasure and indeed the working class. However, in recent years Bournemouth has gained a reputation for being a destination for stag and hen nights and heavy drinking, with the mayor describing it as a place where 'blue rinse' and 'hedonism' live side by side. In this paper I argue that this characterisation of the night-time economy as hedonistic does not tell the whole story, drawing on theories of taste and distinction familiar from Bourdieu's (e.g. 1984) work. Some drinkers employ ideas of responsibility and decorum that echo dominant discourses familiar from government and media discussions of alcohol use and might be familiar to the refined residents of nineteenth century Bournemouth.

I will begin by outlining a brief history of Bournemouth, and relate this to the situation in Bournemouth today, before discussing previous academic research on this topic to show how my ethnographic approach and the setting of Bournemouth offer an interesting contrast. I then discuss the discourses employed by some of the drinkers I spoke to, before finally suggesting how these may fit with the history and development of Bournemouth.

HISTORY OF BOURNEMOUTH

There has been human activity for thousands of years in the area around what is now Bournemouth. There were prehistoric settlements at Hengistbury Head nearby, and Christchurch and Poole were established and significant towns either side, but when Lewis and Henrietta Tregonwell completed their house in 1812 it was the only permanent dwelling in the area (Sherry, 1978: 4-5). Even by 1841 there were still fewer than 30 houses in the town (Walvin, 1978: 76). Bournemouth therefore grew up as a holiday resort in the Victorian period. It was known for catering to what one historian has called the 'more opulent section of society and also for invalids' (Sherry, 1978: 1), and Walvin (1978: 138) notes that it was seen as a health resort, and had high concentrations of old people and nursing homes.

Bournemouth was variously described by nineteenth-century commentators as a 'garden city' and a 'paradise for wealthy invalids', but was not universally liked, with some seeing it as 'elegant, genteel, moneyed, but stuffy and dull' (Edwards, 1981: 114). The early residents opposed the building of a railway, as it was thought this would lead to 'trippers' coming to the town and spoiling its atmosphere and reputation (Rawlings, 2005: 66), and Walvin (1978: 88) has stated that this allowed Bournemouth to maintain its 'social aloofness' and reputation as a resort for 'a better sort'. Such dreariness led a domestic servant employed by a London family to complain in 1840 that 'there is nothing to be seen here but woods and trees and we shall not be able to go Donkey riding for there is no Donkeys to be had . . . its [sic] a very Prettley [sic] place to look at but not to stay at there is a sermon every other Sunday [sic] morning' (quoted in Edwards, 1981: 39).

This view seems to be accepted by historians, with F.M.L. Thompson (1988: 293 & 294) put it, 'What the late Victorian middle classes found agreeable and acceptable at Bournemouth remained more polite, refined, and sedate than anything the working classes fancied', and 'trippers bound for Bournemouth [were] a good deal more subdued and deferential than the Blackpool crowd'. Walvin (1978: 138), similarly, has drawn the contrast with Blackpool, referring to the 'quiet restfulness' of Bournemouth.

This atmosphere and approach affected the nature of the alcohol industry in the town. There were pubs and inns, but these tended to be concentrated in the areas outside the town centre which had grown up as homes were required for the working class, and even then were not particularly numerous (Edwards, 1981; Popham & Popham, 1985). In 1915, Lloyd George altered the licensing laws because of his stated belief that drink was doing more damage to the war effort than the Germans and Austrians combined (Van Emden & Humphries, 2004: 235). At this point, Bournemouth had the lowest number of on-licenses per head in England and Wales, boasting just 5.82 on-licensed premises for each 10,000 inhabitants, compared with a national average of 18.27 and a figure of 245.20 in the City of London (cited in Dudley Herald, 1916). The figure for the City is particularly high partly because there were relatively few residents compared to the number of people who worked there and therefore wanted to drink there, or visited for entertainment which might include a drink – but the same might equally have applied to a tourist resort such as Bournemouth. That it did not is testament to fact that Bournemouth was a quite different resort, and suggests if there was consumption of alcohol, it was confined to the private sphere.

BOURNEMOUTH TODAY

This reputation of Bournemouth's being 'stuffy and dull' continued through most of the twentieth century as it became known not only for being a holiday resort, but also as somewhere that attracted retired people. The 2001 Census showed that 20.97 percent of the population in Bournemouth was aged 65 or over, compared to the average for England as a whole of 15.89 percent (Office for National Statistics, 2001). To put this in context, Blackpool for instance had a similarly high figure of 19.58 percent, Brighton, another south-coast resort but with a reputation from the eighteenth-century on for being a 'liminal' space of transgression in contrast with Bournemouth (Shields, 1990), stood at 16.32 percent, while Manchester was 13.24 percent.

Despite this age profile, Bournemouth is now also frequently represented as a resort that attracts young people who want to get drunk. On his inauguration, mayor Stephen Chappell described this juxtaposition neatly, saying: ‘Bournemouth happily sees blue rinse and hedonism existing side by side’ (quoted in Bailey, 2008) – the title of this presentation.

Keith Rawlings (2005: 144), a local historian, has explained this apparent emergence of hedonism as the result of two developments: first, the authorities were apparently told in the 1990s that some visitors would, in his words, prefer to go to a pub rather than drink in the ‘solemnity of our hotel’, and the growth of the university in the town – which in the 2007-2008 academic year during which fieldwork for this study was undertaken, comprised 16,193 students, of whom 11,054 were full-time undergraduates (Bournemouth University, 2009). The overall population of the unitary authority was 163,444 at the time of the 2001 Census (Office for National Statistics, 2001), suggesting that students could account for almost 10 percent of the local population. It may also be worth noting the growth of the financial services industry in Bournemouth. In ‘Banking, Finance and Insurance’ accounted for 21.56 percent (14889 of 69073) of the jobs in the town (Bournemouth Borough Council, 1999), and by 2007 this had increased to 26.64 percent (20700 of 77700) (Bournemouth Borough Council, 2007).

Alcohol is certainly important to the local economy of Bournemouth. There is now space for 35,000 people in the on-licensed premises in Bournemouth, and the ‘night-time economy’ is said to be worth £125 million per year, and support 4,000 jobs. The council has stated that the borough has ‘the greatest concentration of night-time activity outside London’ (Bournemouth Safer and Stronger Communities Forum, 2008). Neil MacBean, police inspector with responsibility for the town centre, has stated: ‘We have a night-time economy reliant on alcohol – there are virtually no alternatives to pubs and clubs in the town centre’ (quoted in Vass, 2008). The night-time economy coordinator echoed these sentiments. His post is funded jointly by the council and the town centre on-licensed venues, with the purpose being to coordinate action across the town and develop the night-time economy in order to improve Bournemouth’s reputation. He told me:

If someone said tomorrow, ‘Right, we’re going to ban the sale of alcohol in Bournemouth because it’s causing too many problems,’ er, that would be the end of Bournemouth. There would be nobody to stay in the hotels, there would nobody, erm, you know to actually participate in the town, we wouldn’t have any visitors, we wouldn’t have anybody living here.

The very fact that this post of night-time economy coordinator exists is testament to the change in Bournemouth. It is funded jointly by the council and the on-licensed venues in the town centre, with the purpose being to coordinate action across the town and develop the night-time economy but at the same time improve Bournemouth’s reputation, since not everyone agrees with the Mayor’s rosy picture. The *Lonely Planet*’s first guidebook for Devon, Cornwall and Southwest England makes the same comparison, but in less favourable terms: ‘The former preserve of the blue-rinse brigade is now a hedonistic paradise of stag-and-hen party hell’, and states that sometimes ‘it parties so hard it’s a nation’s drinking problem personified’ (quoted in Magee, 2008b).

MEDIA, GOVERNMENT AND ACADEMIC CONTEXT

This idea of there being a British ‘drinking problem’ is widespread in media discussions of alcohol as shown by reports with headlines such as ‘Binge Britain’s Night of Shame’ (Daily Express, 2008) and ‘Victims of Binge Britain’ (Daily Mail, 2008). This perception of alcohol as a problem is not restricted to the media. The government has released numerous documents and campaigns on the subject of alcohol. For example, the passage of the 2003 Licensing Act led to the formulation of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England (Cabinet Office, 2004), to deal with how potential negative consequences of the introduction of the act could be managed. It would appear that this strategy was based on government commissioned research published the previous year (Engineer et al., 2003), and an Interim Analytical Report produced by the Strategy Unit in the Cabinet Office (Strategy Unit, 2003). The 2004 ‘strategy’ led to the publication of a set of government proposals on ‘drinking responsibly’ the following year (Department for Culture Media and Sport et al., 2005). This document declared that what was desired was ‘a fundamental change in attitude’ towards alcohol, noting the ‘problems’ that ‘binge’ and ‘underage’ drinking can produce. An updated strategy (HM Government, 2007) was then published in the wake of the introduction of the Act in 2005, entitled ‘Safe, Sensible, Social’. This then, as with the previous strategy, led to a further general consultation (Department of Health, 2008) and a specific consultation on the sale of alcohol (Home Office, 2009). 2008 also saw the publication of a review of the 2003 Licensing Act, commissioned by the Home Office (Hough et al., 2008).

There is also a growing body of research on young people’s drinking practices, and the understandings that structure these. Much of this work, mirroring media discourses, follows a narrative of change, seeing the current drinking culture as new – as ‘more than simply a reinvention of the long-standing “problem” of British drunkenness’ (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007: 444). Kevin Brain (2000) has referred to ‘the post-modern alcohol order’ – or ‘new culture of intoxication’ in his work with Fiona Measham (Measham & Brain, 2005) – which is contrasted with the sort of ‘traditional’ drinking outlined by Gofton (1990). This ‘traditional’ drinking was based on working-class masculinity, workplace ties and community pubs, and valued ‘holding’ one’s drink as opposed to intoxicated. Brain argues that alcohol has been ‘re-commodified’ as a ‘psychoactive’ product by the industry, in the wake of the ‘rave scene’ and ecstasy culture of the late 1980s, with the introduction of what he calls ‘designer drinks’, for example – extra-cold lagers, white ciders, alcopops, spirit-mixers and ‘buzz’ drinks. This is echoed by Fiona Measham’s (e.g. 2004) work, which links the decline in ecstasy use with the rise in ‘binge’ drinking. This has led to young people increasingly valuing alcohol on the basis of its ‘hit value’, as part of a ‘search for pleasurable consumption and instant gratification’.

Brain describes this approach to drinking as ‘bounded hedonistic consumption’, but notes that some young people do not succeed in keeping within such bounds – they are out-and-out hedonists. As a final caveat, he acknowledges that not all young people may drink with the ‘big hit’ consumerist approach to drinking that his analysis focuses on, but he maintains that this is the dominant style. Similar arguments can be found in the work of Hayward and Hobbs (2007: 441 & 442), who state that ‘over the last ten years urban Britain has been dramatically transformed by significant increases in the sessional consumption of alcohol’, and tie this to the fact that ““traditional” pubs that cater for a wide age profile have become increasingly rare, replaced by

national chains of youth-orientated venues, stripped of such unnecessary encumbrances as tables and chairs, in a bid to maximise capacity', which in turn is linked with the development of the sort of 'designer drinks' described by Brain.

These changes are frequently linked with consumerism, which is argued to structure young people's cultures and identities as work loses any meaning beyond providing the means for consumption. Brain (2000), for example, argues that the 'post-modern alcohol order' is symptomatic of 'post-industrial consumer society'. Hall and Winlow (2005a; 2005b) lament the loss of stable class-based identities and the passing of 'traditional' drinking, and claim that, amongst other things, friendships based on drinking these days are much less close and deep than those of the past, and are a means to an end (providing somebody to go out drinking with), rather than being an end in themselves. They state that 'traditional forms of friendship and community are being radically transformed' as 'advanced capitalism' gains sway (Hall & Winlow, 2005a: 32). Hayward and Hobbs (2007: 442 & 446) sum up the approach of much of this research in their acknowledgement that the changes in drinking environment and practices can be found in 'ex industrial city centres particularly', and draw the contrast with a particular period: 'The [contemporary] NTE [night-time economy] offers something very different from the clustering of Victorian and Edwardian public houses that dominated the industrial city'.

Given this sort of statement, it is important to note where the key studies have been undertaken. Hobbs et al. (2003) and Measham and Brain (2005) have conducted research in Manchester, while Chatterton and Hollands have variously done work in Newcastle, Bristol and Leeds (Chatterton & Hollands, 2001; Chatterton & Hollands, 2002; Hollands, 1995). Winlow and Hall (2006) disguise the locations of their research, simply referring to the 'north-east' of England, but are primarily concerned with city-centre drinking, and Winlow's (2000) PhD research was based in Sunderland. One could sum this up by saying that most of the research that has focused on young people's own understandings of drinking has been based in city centres, and if we look at the sort of cities these are, they could be described as (formerly) industrial cities.

This tendency has recently begun to be balanced by recent studies that have considered drinking in a variety of locations. Griffin et al. (2008) have conducted research with young people in Weston-super-Mare, Trowbrige and Birmingham, understood as a seaside town, a small market town, and a large city. This research is relatively similar to my own, but in a different setting, and with a slightly different analytical focus, primarily concerning itself with how young people related to alcohol advertising. Valentine et al. (2007) have also investigated drinking outside of city centres, basing their research in Penrith and nearby towns and villages in the Lake District. They suggest that the dynamics and understandings surrounding young people's drinking are quite different from the picture painted, at least in media and government discussions, of city centre 'binge' drinking. Both these studies suggest that the relationship between drinking and locality should be further investigated, and, given the history and its recent evolution into a 'Sin City' (Magee, 2008a), Bournemouth offers an interesting case study distinct from both the city-centre locations of much previous research and indeed the locations of both these studies.

DRINKING AND DISTINCTION

Methodology

My own research entailed ethnographic work with drinkers themselves and related professionals, as well as a detailed reading of government and media discussions of alcohol. I chose this approach in order to gain a closer understanding of drinkers' own thoughts and practices relating to alcohol consumption.

This entailed conversations with a total of 113 drinkers over 13 sessions of participant-observation totalling more than 18 hours in addition to my preliminary observations totalling approximately 27 hours. I conducted one individual interview of 50 minutes, and three group interviews of 35, 54 and 57 minutes, as well as two open-ended surveys conducted via email. It should be noted that the level of involvement from participants varied considerably. Some participated in taped interviews, others had extensive conversations with me as I made 'jotted notes', while others said only a few words, either on their own, or as part of a larger group where other members did most of the talking.

In terms of professionals, I conducted interviews with the 'club chaplain'¹, four youth work professionals, two drug and alcohol professionals, one bar manager, five bar workers, one door supervisor, the two MPs for Bournemouth and the night-time economy coordinator. In addition, when I initially spoke to the night-time economy coordinator and the bar manager, who was chair of Town Watch, the local trade organisation, also present were two other venue managers, who were the co-chair and treasurer of the organisation.

The Carnavalesque and the Everyday

I found that employing two ideas of 'drinking styles' made sense of the variety of ways in which people talked about drinking to me – referring both to their own and other people's practices. The two styles can be understood as the 'carnavalesque' and the 'everyday'. The carnivalesque, following the theories of writers such as Bakhtin (1984a; 1984b), Stallybrass and White (1986), and Featherstone (1991), implies a world of altered norms of behaviour and social interaction. The everyday in contrast stresses the continuity with standard societal norms. To give an example, funny stories of being drunk such as Hannah's tale of emerging from a pub toilet with her trousers and underwear still around her ankles are celebrated in the carnivalesque approach to drinking, whereas they would be considered embarrassing or degrading – or at least undesirable – according to the everyday approach. Although a detailed discussion of the concept of the carnivalesque is impossible in this paper, one important point is that as well as the idea of a dissolution of everyday hierarchies and norms, the sense of public display and community associated with the carnivalesque moves it beyond simply 'hedonism' which has associations with individualism and immediate, sensory pleasures. Moreover, where participants almost universally distanced themselves from the figure of the 'binge' drinker, the idea of the carnivalesque is a more ambivalent concept which can be embraced or rejected on the basis of cultural, aesthetic approaches.

Unusual Behaviour, Funny Stories and Determined Drunkenness

The carnivalesque can be understood most simply as the application of an alternative set of norms from everyday life. This can be seen clearly in some of the behaviour I observed when I conducted my fieldwork. The kind of unusual behaviour I am referring to is best illustrated by recounting a number of incidents from Chris'

birthday party, when he went out drinking with friends. As it was coming up to closing time in the pub, Sienna complained that she would never finish the bottle of wine she and Emily had bought to share if Emily was going to spend all her time outside with people who were smoking. Chris jokingly offered to help her out, and started to drink straight from the bottle. Sienna clearly did not appear to approve of this behaviour, as she ostentatiously wiped the rim of the bottle before topping up her own glass. When Chris later decided he could not finish his own pint of lager in time, he put it into Emily's handbag, hoping he could carry it out and drink it on his way to wherever they would go next. Earlier, Bradley, who seemed to me to be quite drunk, shouted 'Cunt, cunt, cunt' and later, 'Sex, sex, sex' – as if trying to provoke a shocked reaction from staff or other customers – recalling Bakhtin's (1984b: 16-17) discussion of carnivalesque 'profanity'.

This apparent shift in norms is frequently understood as being amusing, as when Hannah told me the story of her walking out of the toilets naked from the waist down. This was frequently directly to the consumption of alcohol. Ollie, for example, explained how 'unusual' events were the main attraction of going out, as these made a night 'legendary' – it generated stories that could be told again and again. He told me that alcohol was essential to such nights out because without alcohol people would not behave in the 'unusual' way necessary for these stories.

However, not all participants celebrated this shift in norms. Other participants told stories that might be considered unusual and therefore funny (such as being vomited on) in a disapproving or outraged manner. Correspondingly, therefore, they did not embrace the idea of 'determined drunkenness' as Measham and Brain put it. David was very clear in his disapproval of such behaviour when he emailed me stating: 'Don't like to see the completely drunk people who have no self-mastery and have lost their respect of other people'.

It could be argued that, as in Measham and Brain's formulation, going out in order to get drunk can still have limits – and so when David rejects *completely* drunk people he is not condemning all forms of drunkenness, or even deliberately seeking an altered state of mind through alcohol. However, there is something more to the rejection of determined drunkenness than the condemnation of objective behaviour, or a state of pharmacological intoxication, and this is where the concepts of the drinking styles are helpful. These 'styles' are not objective descriptions of practices – they are *ways of understanding* drinking. For example, I spoke to Andrew, who told me that he had already drunk 6 pints that evening and who stumbled over a bar stool on his way to the toilet (much to the amusement of his friends). He might therefore be seen as a 'binge' drinker, but he quite clearly presented his practices in the everyday style, telling me that he was a 'moderate' drinker, and saying that he did not miss the sort of drinking he had done as a student, preferring the 'structure' and 'responsibilities' of his life now. In a similar way, Simon told me, 'I enjoy a drink, rather than drink to enjoy myself', and 'I drink and have a laugh' contrasting this with those who drink *in order to* have a laugh. He explained that, for him, drink *is* involved, but for most other 'people today' drink *has* to be part of their night out. Rather than *determined* drunkenness, then, Simon's approach to alcohol might be considered *unplanned* drunkenness.

Sam clearly echoed this distinction in outlining three possible drinking styles. He claimed that people in the pub where I met him could be (a) out to ‘get bollocksed’ (i.e. extremely drunk), (b) non-drinkers, or (c) simply looking to have ‘a few drinks with friends’, like him and his friends. He is not out to get drunk, but rather to talk with friends. Initially, the idea of getting ‘bollocksed’ might seem to indicate a pharmacological notion of drunkenness. However, Sam’s underlying thinking was revealed when he argued that the concept of a ‘binge’ (understood to be based on quantity of alcohol consumed) is a ‘stupid’ way to think about drinking. He and his friends had been drinking in the pub since 12.30pm and it was now about 7.30pm but he told me they were not about to ‘kick off’ (become violent or abusive) – they were probably the ‘sanest’ people there, certainly more so than some ‘eighteen-year-olds’ who had had ‘a couple of pints of Stella’.

The Drinking Environment

Sam’s idea of going out and chatting with friends led to an association with a particular type of venue. Ellie drew a clear contrast between what I would call a carnivalesque and an everyday drinking venue. She described a recent night out when she had been to a major chain bar and complained that it was: ‘Absolutely full and horrible of lots of people and very, um, intense, not a lot of space and not a comfortable drinking space’. She stated that it was ‘very loud’ and explained: ‘And perhaps that’s what you like when you’re younger but I don’t know but I like to be out, either sit down or be able to stand round and actually speak to [Claire: Yeah] my friends, now’.

Similarly, Holly described how she liked the Slug and Lettuce in Bournemouth because it is ‘airy’, you can sit down, and the music is quiet so you can have a conversation. Revealingly, she linked this with having a good selection of wines. She was surprised that she liked this bar, because she has found other branches of the chain in London to be smoky and ‘packed’ with people. Brendan also said that he went out for conversation, and agreed with Ken that frequently the music could be too loud for this to be easy, while Joey approvingly described one pub as ‘a nice place to have a chat’.

Steve told me that Bournemouth needs more places for ‘people like us’, explaining that he was referring to venues with ‘leather sofas’ where you could ‘sit and chat’. He contrasted this with current venues in Bournemouth, which ‘cram’ people in and ‘whack up the prices’, particularly in the summer when there are many hen and stag groups visiting the town. Samir expressed this as the town needing a ‘higher class’ of venue. Rachel, similarly, said that Bournemouth needed places with more ‘couches’ for people to sit on.

Chris and Joey mentioned that they enjoyed going to the sort of venues where you could have a ‘chat’ with the bar staff. This idea of a relationship with the bar staff was also mentioned by university lecturer Ken, who described a good night out as being when he goes to his local pub, where the bar staff and indeed everyone there knows him, for a quiz night and has ‘a few pints of good ale’.

‘Substance’ and ‘Purpose’

This statement of the preference for talking with friends over deliberately getting drunk can be seen, as an attempt to position oneself as different from those who are

primarily motivated by the desire to get drunk and act outrageously (or irresponsibly) in a loud, out of control environment, seen most clearly in Sam's account. However, distance from such practices was also expressed using ideas of 'substance' and 'purpose' familiar from the Kantian aesthetic as discussed by Bourdieu (1984), and the idea of a project of the self (e.g. Rose, 1992). In this way, the complexity of particular cultural tastes actively cultivated and acquired was emphasised in order to create an impression of distinction from an apparently unthinking mass or mainstream of 'binge' drinkers. Although there is not space to discuss it in this paper, this aesthetic can also be understood as associated with socio-economic class.

For example, Claire noted that the centre of Bournemouth, in terms of the night-time economy, was 'Just, well clubs really isn't it?' to which Ellie responded that it was not for 'thirty-somethings'. However, Claire pointed out that they did occasionally go to one particular venue in the town centre, which led to a discussion of how this venue was different from the others:

- Ellie There's bars along Bournemouth beach I would definitely go to but in the town centre...
- Claire We've been to *That Bar*² haven't you, which is kind of central.
- Ellie Oh yeah.
- Claire Yeah.
- Ellie I've been to *That Bar* quite a few times actually. That's actually...
- WH Okay.
- Ellie ...got a different vibe about it.
- Claire Yeah.
- Ellie Because it's usually you go there for, um, to see something like a comedy night or...
- Claire Mm.
- Ellie ...um, or a, a band night or something. So that's kind of got a different, that's got like a, a purpose. You're not just going to a bar.
- Claire Yeah.
- WH Yep
- Ellie You're going somewhere so therefore that's slightly different...
- WH Mm-mm.
- Ellie ...I think, um but that is in town.
- Claire Yeah.
- Ellie I never feel like I'm going in town when I go there.
- Claire Don't you?
- Ellie No I'm just going to *That Bar*.
- Claire Oh right.
- Ellie You know you're going to do a something.
- Claire Yeah.
- Ellie An event.

Ellie later discussed how it is 'a good example of um a place which eh has something going on . . . it's kind of um, it's just, it's got events going on'. The idea of entertainment and having a chat were somehow connected in Ellie's way of thinking about Bournemouth town centre, because she went on to discuss how she would not consider a particular pub to be 'town' because it is somewhere they would go with friends to sit down and talk, quite different from the 'intense' space that she associated with the town centre. We can understand the 'vibe' and perceived different activities, therefore, as characteristic of different drinking styles. The bar under

discussion in the extract above is not considered part of the town centre because of the ‘purpose’ to the evening beyond drinking – the same argument that runs for the other venue, which is not considered to be part of the town centre either, as nights there revolve around sitting and talking with friends.

As Claire put it in the same group interview: ‘you’re not just drinking are you?’ The point is that the activity is ‘different’ from most people’s perceived ‘binge’ drinking, or going to clubs, and also this something *more* than drinking – literally, as there is additional live entertainment, or ‘events’. This sentiment was echoed by Simon, when he contrasted his preferences on a night out with his colleague Frank’s, who he joked liked cheap drinks and getting ‘pissed’. Simon started off by saying he did not want to stereotype, but then stopped himself and said, ‘but I will stereotype’ and, after the qualifier ‘it sounds bad’, told me that he liked nights out with ‘a little more substance’. It was while discussing this that he made the comments about alcohol not being central to his nights out that were cited above, suggesting that drinking to get drunk was indicative of a lack of cultural refinement.

Similar ideas were also applied to forms of popular music. Oscar told me that he liked ‘rocky’ or ‘alternative’ music, though he might like a bit of ‘cheese’ if he was drunk enough. His friend Dean then stated that it was easier for them to go to a club and dance to ‘cheese’ than it would be for someone else to come to the sort of place that they might go to for music and dance or appreciate it there’. Their taste is, according to Dean, not as accessible as the mainstream (‘cheese’), and requires a conscious, long term investment in order to be appreciated.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the accounts quoted here that not all young people who drink on the ‘night-time high street’ (Hadfield, 2005) have the same understandings of drinking, or present their drinking in the same way. Although some participants emphasised the altered norms of going out drinking, others stressed that they did not go out to get drunk, and adhered to certain everyday norms, also invoking ideas of the Kantian aesthetic discussed by Bourdieu (1984) to suggest that their practices were more substantial and complex than the stereotypical ‘binge’ drinker.

In this way, I suggest, participants distanced themselves from the model of the out-of-control ‘binge’ drinker familiar from media and governmental discussions of young people’s alcohol consumption. Although it is not discussed here, participants’ discussions can be understood as gendered and classed, not only in terms of the backgrounds of those who expressed particular views, but also in terms of how the expression of particular views can be understood to constitute an impression of a gendered and/or classed self.

As noted above, researchers such as Valentine et al. (2008) have argued that locality can be extremely important in analysing drinking practices and understandings. Nayak (2006), for example, has argued that drinking practices in the north east of England should be understood in the historical context of the idea of the ‘Geordie’, and how this form of ethnicity and masculinity might now be fashioned through drinking rather than productive labour. Here, although the argument is only presented in embryonic form, I suggest that such forms are somewhat alien to Bournemouth, and its history as a middle-class, respectable tourist resort have contributed to the

prevalence of claims to respectability and responsibility with respect to drinking as outlined here.

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¹ This was a post for a youth worker to offer help to drinkers on the streets, particularly on Friday and Saturday nights, funded by a number of town centre churches.

² Ellie used the name of the actual bar, but I have anonymised this here for ethical reasons.