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**Young Adults and ‘Binge’ Drinking:
A Bakhtinian Analysis¹²**

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First author:

Chris Hackley Professor of Marketing, School of Management, Royal Holloway University
of London

Co-authors

Andrew Bengry-Howell PhD, Research Fellow, ESRC National Centre for Research
Methods, University of Southampton.

Christine Griffin, Professor of Social Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of
Bath

Willm Mistral PhD, Manager, Mental Health R&D Unit, University of Bath.

Isabelle Szmigin PhD, Professor of Marketing, Birmingham Business School, University of
Birmingham.

Rungpaka Amy Tiwsakul PhD, Durham Business School, Durham University

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² Co-authors are listed in alphabetical order.

Abstract

In this paper we use Bakhtin's theory of carnival in a literary analysis of young peoples' accounts of the role of alcohol in their social lives. Bakhtinian themes in the focus group transcripts included the dialogic character of drinking stories, the focus on parodic grotesquery, ribald and satiric laughter, and the temporary subversion and reversal of social norms and roles in a world turned 'inside out'. We suggest that our analysis of the UK's drinking 'culture' hints at a previously untheorised complexity and force, and points to a deep contradiction between young peoples' lived experience of alcohol and government policy discourses based on appeals to individual moral responsibility. We conclude that the carnivalesque resonance of drinking is such that the UK's alcohol problem will continue to worsen until the availability and cultural presence of alcohol is subject to stricter controls.

Introduction

Bill ...he was just drinking beer (.) he wasn't drinking spirits or anything (.) He'd had about five beers (1) I couldn't find him outside the club (1) went to meet him at three o'clock in the morning (.) to try and find him (1) He woke up outside an alley (.) then he woke up a second before he can remember he was three quarters of the way down Seatown Beach (.) where he woke up (.) and he had no shoes on and he was up to his (.) his chest in sand (.) and then he was (.) he didn't know where he was (1) so he er (.) he started walking up (.) all he could see was the lights (.) (yeah) (.) so he started walking up to the sea front and he passed out again (.) and he got woke up by two Japanese people trying to mug him (.) (laughter) with their hands in his pockets (1) so he woke up (.) obviously he came around and saw that (1) and then they both started jumping on him and he put (.) he smacked one of them over the sea wall (.) and the other one ran off (.) and then he phoned me up convinced that he had his car still in Seatown (laughter) and he was gonna drive home (.) and I was like "well you're drunk and your car's at my house (1) so there's no way you're gonna go" (1) It turns out he got his drink spiked and he didn't know what was wrong with him (.) he comes over my house the next day shaking (.) not being able to do anything (.) and it was just like a nightmare (...)ⁱ

Twenty-one year old Bill's story above (related in a focus group of six white males of a similar age) reflected several themes which emerged from our interviews and focus groups with 89 young adults of mixed ethnicity, class and gender aged 18-25 in four geographical locations in the UK between 2006 and 2007. Without prompting, individuals would relate sometimes quite lengthy narratives to the group (most, but not all of whom were friends) around experiences of extreme drinking (Griffin et al., 2009a). The stories would be received with rapt attention, affirmative interjections and excited laughter. Aspects of these accounts,

seen as narratives, had a dialogic character in that the meaning of the stories seemed located in the interaction between speaker and audience. There were a number of common themes to the staging and content of these narratives. The stories often retold events which were dangerous, reckless, irresponsible or potentially highly incriminating for the subject's reputation for controlled or responsible behaviour, yet they were invariably greeted with warm, affirmative and collegiate laughter which, we felt, had an element of Bakhtin's (2009, 1984) folk and carnival humour which stands in opposition to the official conventions and mores of the day. The laughter seemed essentially parodic of official discourses of work, self-control and sensible conduct, reflecting the often self-parodic elements in the stories themselves, and the counter-cultural tone of Bakhtinian carnival (Lachmann et al., 1988-89). The story above stood out for its sense of movement through urban space which had been transformed by alcohol into a surreal theatre of spectacle. But this is a theatre without a proscenium arch - the subject can at any time become an actor rather than a mere spectator in the drama. This and many other stories related incongruous and bizarre juxtapositions of events, relations and objects, along with a sense of alcohol as the leveller that creates free inter-actions between people who would normally be separated by different social milieu. In this particular story the cameo of the Japanese seaside muggers represents the darker side of this free-flowing sociality, and the exposure to risk and the danger of assault when drunk. Other stories also related the debasement of bodies, the profane, the comic, the comically profane and, in the post-binge exhaustion of sobriety, a sense of a cycle of symbolic death through alcoholic self-obliteration, and consequent renewal. It seemed almost as if the extreme drinking and the subsequent subversion of bourgeois norms, had a therapeutic element, cleansing the person of the absurdity of normal life for a time, by means of a ritualistic and collective wallowing in the subversive absurdity of drunken life. We suggest that reading these interview transcripts in the light of Bakhtin's theory of carnival can begin to open up a cultural perspective to the topic that has been lacking in many previous analyses.

Our intention, we stress, is not to underplay the personal and social consequences of damaging patterns of drinking. We note that, in the story above, the speaker claimed that the drinker had not consumed an amount of alcohol which would be considered heroic by common standards (five beers, or some 10-15 units of alcohol) but nevertheless had suffered severe memory loss, confusion, and periods of collapse. We heard the drink 'spiking' claim so often that we became somewhat sceptical. We felt that, given the very high norms of alcohol consumption that were reported, it was more likely in some cases that people simply

lost count of the drinks they had consumed in a session. As we shall see below, the UK's patterns of drinking, especially but not exclusively among young people, do give cause for concern. We suggest that insights into extreme drinking as a cultural phenomenon should be a necessary part of policy engagement with the issue. This must go beyond simplistic calls to 'change' Britain's drinking culture and must, rather, engage in nuanced ways with that culture in order to generate policy which connects with the role alcohol plays in consumers' lived experience.

We will firstly review extant research on alcohol and policy before explaining our method and analysing selected extracts from our interview transcripts from a Bakhtinian perspective. We will then discuss policy implications.

Young people and the contemporary 'culture of intoxication'

Historically, drinking in the UK has been subject to complex and often contradictory attitudes. As Hailwood (2010) notes, since the seventeenth century there has been evidence of a distinction between the enthusiastic approval for (mainly male) alcohol consumption among elites as a social enabler and stimulus to civilised and intellectual discourse, and, on the other hand, acute moral disapproval towards the drinking of the lower classes which was seen as anarchic and morally reprehensible. Yet, among the lower classes themselves, there was a parallel distinction between the morally upright drinker who was generous in buying and consuming drink and was seen as an open and trustworthy fellow, and the feckless drinker who drank his family's economic security away and was seen as a threat to the patriarchal moral order (Hailwood, 2010). The positive association of consuming generous amounts of drink in good company were linked with an attitude that this was an acceptable transgression given the difficulty of life. Alcohol, consumed 'generously', seemed almost to act as a dual signifier as the working person's consolation and also as the act that signified a solid member of the working class.

We should note, in addition, that branding and licensing issues in alcohol consumption are far from new. As Duguid (2003) reports, alcohol advertising has been noted since the early sixteenth century while branding and availability became policy issues in the nineteenth century. William Gladstone passed an act of parliament in 1861 to allow grocers to sell alcohol, which had previously been distributed exclusively by wine merchants. The resulting

influx of cheaper French wines and a rising tide of alcohol fraud confused the public and branding was seen as the solution. According to Duguid (2003), the emergence of alcohol branding was framed by a complex of consumer, legal and competitive supply chain issues, and not simply by the entrepreneurial activity of major providers.

The historical perspective, even alluded to in brief, is useful in contextualising the more recent burst of research studies around rising alcohol-related problems. There has been much comment about a perceived change in alcohol culture not only in the UK but in many other countries including Spain, Italy, the USA and New Zealand (Martinic and Measham, 2008). Some authors have argued that there appears to be a new ‘culture of intoxication’ (Measham and Brain, 2005, p. 262) in which extreme sessional drinking levels have been normalised. It should be assumed that this normalisation of historically high sessional levels of alcohol consumption is relative - in medieval Britain ale was often the principal liquid refreshment for people of all ages because fresh clean water was unavailable.

There have been many studies in the health and addiction literature documenting increasing rates of liver cirrhosis among other damaging consequences of changing patterns of alcohol consumption, across all demographic segments in recent years (e.g. Leon and McCambridge, 2006; Matthews and Richardson, 2005; Matthews et al., 2006). The official response has often reflected a discourse of moral panic in which extreme drinking by young people is characterised in terms of a deficit of responsibility, maturity or good sense (Hackley et al., 2011). The popularity of the term ‘binge’ drinking in media coverage and its use in policy discourse around alcohol issues reflects an assumption that getting very drunk is an act of irresponsibility and hedonistic self-indulgence. However, young drinkers can be seen to be more calculated in their behavior than sensational ‘binge’ drinking media reports suggest (Szmigin et al., 2008). They are aware of, and often quite unashamed by, the way their behavior looks to authorities. There is a need, therefore, for a deeper analysis of extreme drinking as a consumer cultural phenomenon.

Moderate levels of alcohol consumption are associated positively with social bonding in many countries (Fox, 2000) but, in the UK, policy debate and media coverage around alcohol has focused to a considerable degree on the negative effect on young people and society of excessive ‘binge’ drinking (Engineer et al., 2003; Measham, 1996; Measham and Brain, 2005). Some studies have linked this change with increased levels of alcohol marketing and

advertising, as well as with changes in the licensing and planning laws around alcohol retailing (Casswell, 2004; Jackson et al., 2000). At the same time, these drinking practices are infused with a sense of risk and a frisson of rebellion against authority (Brain, 2000; Casswell et al., 2002). There is, then, a deep contradiction in discourses surrounding drinking, between its positive association with intimate social bonding and its negative association with personal risk, recklessness and social harm. But, as we have seen, this is not entirely discordant with the history of attitudes towards drinking in Britain.

Drinking culture is heavily gendered (Griffin et al., 2009a) though increases in risky levels of drinking are evident across the gender divide (Jackson and Tinkler, 2007; Nayak, 2006). This is not necessarily a case of females adopting more ‘laddish’ male behaviour but reflects a more nuanced process of gendering within re-framed norms of alcohol consumption (Griffin et al., 2009b). It should be noted that the putative ‘culture of intoxication’ has emerged while a prevailing neo-liberal discourse seems to have swept public policy in the UK. Neo-liberalism has been referred to in the marketing literature (e.g; Hackley, 2009; Witkowski, 2005) as a loose collection of assumptions around freedom of movement of capital and labour, individual moral responsibility and economic self-sufficiency, which are said to have driven policies of globalisation. Neo-liberalism carries with it an implication that citizens must regulate their emotions, attitudes and bodies in order to conform to the requirements of capital. Seen in this light, the idea that intoxication might bring a temporary sense of relief resonates with the counter-cultural tone of Bakhtinian carnival (Lachmann et al., 1988-89).

The manifestation of neo-liberalism in UK alcohol policy has been liberalisation around alcohol marketing and licensing, accompanied by the expectation that individual subjects should regulate their own consumption (Casswell, 2004; Szmigin et al., 2008). This liberalisation has even reached into town and city planning as alcohol has become the driver for heavily branded urban drinking spaces which are important to urban regeneration, yet which also entail massive costs in policing, hospital admissions and neighbourhood disturbance (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001; Measham, 2004). These spaces have become fragmented yet also unified sites of consumption in which branded venues and sub-cultural genres of music, fashion and dance are melded by alcohol into the unifying spectacle of nightlife and ‘going out’ (Hayward, 2004; Hollands, 1995; Hobbs et al., 2000). Among young adults, drinking spaces and drinking occasions are closely linked with night life, fashion, dance and identity, which have been researched as symbolic consumption practices in their

own right (Goulding et al., 2009; Paul and Caldwell, 2007) but without the element of alcohol which so often links them together in young adults' phenomenological experiences of social life and 'going out'.

Discourses of alcohol consumption emerge within an overarching discourse of 'going out'. 'Going out' is conceived in urban sociology as a 'spatial practice' (also see de Certeau, 1984, p.115) which has assumed particular resonance for young people's identity construction. According to Hollands (1995) "...the social significance and meaning of going out has been transformed from a simple 'rite of passage' into adulthood towards a more permanent socialising ritual for young adults...expressed in the night time economy, including group drinking rituals, fashion, music and dance and drug cultures..." (p.6). Hollands (1995) goes on to suggest that "...cultural consumption, especially in the use and appropriation of evening city space, is becoming a more central element in the production of youth identities" (p. 8). Alcohol and night life constitute a liminal zone of malleable identities and suspended order (Haywood and Hobbs, 2007).

The integration of ideology and space is exemplified in 'drinking spaces', not only the traditional spaces of bars and pubs but also in the heavily branded urban drinking venues located, planned and policed specifically as spaces representing leisure (Hollands, 1995; Lefebvre, 1976). For Fox (2000), drinking spaces offer opportunities for "cultural remission- a structured, temporary relaxation or suspension of normal social controls" (p.89) which is enabled by alcohol and entails the often ritualistic suspension of normal social roles. The topography of these drinking spaces is artfully designed through the inter-action of town planners, police and local authority regulators, club and bar owners, bearing in mind flows of human traffic and the different trajectories through the space of different consumer segments (Brain, 2000). Many of these drinking places are highly branded experiences, owned and managed by national or international chains (Casswell, 2004). The conduct of bodily control and behaviour within these spaces, then, potentially becomes a site of ideological control and resistance.

Recent research has responded to policy discourses in two main ways. One has been to focus on the experiences and strategies of young people who try to resist the prevailing culture of intoxication (e.g. Fry, 2010; Piacentini and Banister, 2009). The other has been to seek a more culturally-informed understanding of contemporary drinking practices. For example,

Griffin et al. (2009a), in an earlier publication from the data sets used for this study, examined the role of drinking stories in producing and reproducing friendship ties and gendered identity. Alcohol appeared to be seen as a key accessory of fun and social life and normalised levels of extreme drinking were a major resource for group bonding and friendship. Other studies have focused on the more ritualistic aspects of extreme drinking in a contemporary context. For instance, Thurnell-Read (2011) examined the constitution of masculinity around drinking in ‘stag’ celebrations where transgressions of normative control over the male body facilitated by heavy alcohol consumption acted to reinscribe the cultural norm of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (p.1).

In this review we have made use of a range of literature from the marketing and management, health, addiction, sociology and policy fields in order to contextualise youth extreme drinking as a consumption practice which has a long, contradictory and deeply rooted tradition in British social life. This contextual approach suggests that Government calls for greater individual responsibility and moderation in alcohol consumption lack connection with the complex lived experience of young peoples’ social engagement with alcohol. What is more, it can be seen that the implied moral stance taken towards extreme drinking by Government reflects a historical tension in the UK between drinking that is constituted negatively as feckless and irresponsible, and drinking that is constituted positively as civilised and sociable. The distinction between the two can sometimes fall along class lines. The review indicates our key point, which is that a policy discourse of moral responsibility around extreme drinking tends to distract from the complexity of the very culture that policy is seeking to change. We will now outline the data collection method before introducing our literary analysis.

Method: Data Gathering, Bakhtin and Carnival

The study from which the present research is drawn sought to understand the role of alcohol in the social lives of young (18-25) young people in the UK. A preparatory phase was undertaken in which 216 broadcast, print, outdoor and Internet alcohol advertisements were examined by the research team to identify how different types of drinks, and different categories of young drinkers, were represented. The sample of advertisements was not exhaustive but represented a cross section of the major drinks brands. Analysis was informed by a meaning-based (Parker, 2003) approach. We worked under the assumption that

meanings would be culturally, socially and historically imbued. Following the initial analysis a subset of 20 advertisements were analysed in greater depth. These were judged to be representative of the key themes identified: gender, fun, identity, sexuality and social cohesiveness. The research team also analysed current government advertising and websites. During 2007 the code of practice of the Advertising Standards Authority with respect to alcohol advertising was modified, reflecting a rising moral panic in media and government circles about drinking, often focusing on youth drinking. This resulted in a moderation of the sexualised tone in much UK TV alcohol advertising, with increased resources moved into non-advertising alcohol promotion.

As noted above, the fieldwork entailed interviews and focus groups with 89 young adults aged 18-25 in four geographical locations in the UK. The participants included a range of gender, class, ethnicity and occupation. Participants were asked to discuss their social lives, and the interviews were carried out by research assistants who were much closer in age to the participants than the authors. Discussions focused on going out, and alcohol consumption emerged as a central feature. At the end of each group discussion participants (some of whom were non-drinkers or moderate drinkers) were shown a range of alcohol advertisements and asked to discuss them. The final part of the research involved 5 observational case studies of young people's drinking activities in the 3 locations, followed by 8 individual interviews. The observational case studies, recorded in field notes by the research assistants, enabled the research to be informed by first-hand experience of the drinking spaces, marketing activities and young people's drinking practices.

The in-depth interviews permitted more detailed investigation of key themes outside of the friendship group environment. The final data set consisted of 29 transcribed documents, affording a multi-perspective insight into the social lives of these young people. In the analysis for this paper, data mainly from two of the focus groups were used to aid narrative coherence and continuity. The direct quotes used are examples of themes which emerged across our analysis of all the contextualised data sets. The focus on alcohol emerged and was not directly prompted.

The initial data analysis was conducted within an interpretive textual frame (Thompson, 1996) and we sought key phrases, metaphors and patterns of meaning in order to reach a consensus on emerging themes. Themes from all the data sets were compared, discussed,

contested and synthesised as discourses (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The current paper is a development of the study which seeks to theorise the counter-cultural and carnivalesque elements of the interviews through a theoretically informed literary analysis of selected extracts from the interviews. Literary analysis has become relatively familiar as a method in marketing and consumer research since the 1980s (e.g. Belk, 1994; Brown, 1999; O'Donohoe, 1997; Stern 1989a, b). Brown et al. (1999) took an explicitly Bakhtinian approach to their gendered analysis of advertising texts.

Bakhtin is perhaps best known for his theory of the carnivalesque. Carnival for Bakhtin had its origins in medieval street culture but it has many literary manifestations. Bakhtin felt that carnival represented something fundamental about the social psychology of mankind with its 'deep roots in the primordial order and the primordial thinking of man' and its 'extraordinary life force' which has an 'undying fascination' (Bakhtin, 1984, p.122). Central to the carnivalesque is a temporary subversion of norms of social propriety and structure through degradation, ribald laughter, and grotesque exaggeration and parody. As Brown et al. (1999) suggest, Bakhtinian carnival is a place where "kings turn into commoners, the sacred is profaned, [and] authority is subverted" (p.13). Elements of the carnivalesque include 'scatalogical liberties' (Bakhtin, 2009, p.147) being taken, both verbal and literal, with passers-by. Bakhtin (2009) refers to the role of defecation in the European medieval 'feast of fools' celebration (along with other historical and literary antecedents of carnival) in which passers-by are doused with excrement and urine. For Bakhtin (2009) the 'grotesque debasement' (p.147) of carnival using lower bodily excrescences is not merely the expression of a frank exuberance but is linked more broadly with a sense of 'birth, fertility, renewal' (p.148) which carnival time unleashes. Crude 'Billingsgate' language and satirical carnival laughter represent 'the death of the old and the birth of the new world' (p.149). In Rabelais, the grotesque is expressed as 'exaggeration, hyperbolism, [and] excessiveness' (p.303), especially in connection with the body.

Importantly, for Bakhtin, Rabelesian satire is not merely focused on individual injustices but must be seen as a "negation of the entire order of life (including the prevailing truth), a negation closely linked to the affirmation of that which is born anew" (2009, p.307). The element of carnival as a source of renewal and opposition to the crushing oppression of feudal life seems to resonate with the carnivalesque tone of many of our drinking stories, yet in a contemporary cultural context. Bakhtin likens carnival to Roman Saturnalia: carnival is

a lived spectacle which expresses an essence of freedom. “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (Bakhtin, 2009, p.7). It is a mass experience and represents the power of the group to touch a transient and ephemeral sense of freedom, within a world ‘drawn out of its usual rut’ and ‘turned inside out’ and upside down (Bakhtin, 1984, p.122).

The presence of these themes in a text hinges on Bakhtin’s dialogism, the notion that meaning occurs in a dialogic relation which Bakhtin expressed in different contexts as polyphony, heteroglossia or carnival. In Dostoevsky’s novels, for example, Bakhtin (1984) argued that meaning is created not solely by the truth of the author but through the mutually constructed truth of the polyphonic voices of reader, characters and author. Bakhtin (1984) described the unified truth of the polyphonic novel by analogy with Einstein’s theory of relativity, a theory from which Bakhtin also derived his notion of the chronotope, the time-space in which dramatic representations occur. Heteroglossia is a broader concept than polyphony, referring to a multiplicity of languages and worldviews. Carnival is a concept in which multiple voices, languages and worldviews collide on an equal footing, creating a liminal zone in which time and the normal social order are suspended. It is significant that much of Bakhtin’s work was produced under the Stalinist purges of the 1930s - his personal experience seemed to influence the idea of a cultural resistance to the oppressive conformism imposed by state and church which runs through much of his work on carnival (Zappen, 2000; Vice, 2007).

In this brief review of key themes from Bakhtin’s (2009, 1984) ideas on carnival we have tried to capture some of the elements we seek to connect with our transcripts of young peoples’ reported experiences of going out drinking. In short, our data sets can be understood to carry a literary character which is inflected with carnivalesque themes. In order to add purchase to our analysis we will focus mainly on three of Bakhtin’s concepts: the grotesque body, parodic carnival laughter, and the world turned ‘inside out’.

Analysis: Bakhtin and Narratives of Extreme Drinking

As we note earlier, the discussion groups were initially told that the study was investigating young peoples' social lives rather than the role of alcohol, and the data extracts we reproduce below evolved naturally from the group conversations. In the following extract Sheila is candid about her alcohol consumption (all names used are pseudonyms):

Sheila =okay (laughter) (1) I'll go out and I'll have (.) a few drinks and then I'll realise I'm not drunk so I'll drink Tequila (.) and then I get slashed and then I'm so drunk I don't even know (laughter) what I'm doing or who I'm with (yeah)...I was sick everywhere cos (laughter) I was so drunk and I can't remember a thing (.) I just drink til I black out (1) so I don't drink very often (no) so (laughter)

Sheila, a twenty-one year-old, claims that she doesn't do this 'very often', but whether this means twice weekly or twice yearly is hard to tell. What does seem clear is that the experiences related are considered amusing and perhaps mock heroic by the friendship group, judging from the appreciative laughter from the group. The putative 'culture of intoxication' in the UK has not sufficiently normalised this behaviour to denude it of its transgressive frisson - the story is received with laughter because it is transgressive. The transgression of bodily control is most striking, with vomit, self-induced unconsciousness, ('black out'), memory loss and complete loss of orientation prominent. Bakhtin was struck by the contrast between closed, distant and controlled classical bodies in Renaissance art, and the bodies in popular festivity with their open orifices, protrusions and incongruities (Stallybrass and White, 1986). The grotesque body is vividly represented in our narratives:

Rob the first time like he came round (.) he just walked in my Mum and Dad's room and had a piss up the cupboard (loud laughter) (1) he was he was (.) he just woke up and he was like (1) he thought he was in his own house like and he pissed in the cupboard (nice) (2) my mum and dad were like (continued laughter)

Tiffany Nice to meet you

Rob He wasn't invited round for a few weeks (laughs)

Events such as this were by no means exclusively male.

Molly When I um first got with Dan we went out for a drink (mmm) and I got really drunk and I stopped round his (.) and I pissed on his radio (loud laughter) not the toilet (2) he just stood there (laughter)

Thurnell-Read (2011) observed that men on ‘stag’ events got very drunk and indulged in incidents of nudity, public urination and vomiting in acts of apparent self-parody which at the same time celebrated a form of assertive masculinity. These acts were transgressive since they overstepped normative boundaries of bodily self-control (within the ritual setting of a stag celebration) yet in so doing they reinforced those very norms and boundaries, and reinscribed the idea that men do this, because that is what men do. In our extracts, both men and women celebrate the transgression of bodily self-control. There is a dialectical character to transgression, which reinscribes the norm or taboo that is being transgressed (Bataille, 1962). The taboo is necessary to, and fulfilled by, the transgression. Grotesque bodily performances might constitute a rejection of norms of bodily control and gender ideologies, for either gender. It seems clear that feminine ideologies of deportment and rectitude are subverted and, yet, re-iterated by the grotesqueries of extreme drinking. The transgression gives these acts their resonance.

Bakhtin (2009) suggests that the grotesque body ‘protrudes, bulges, sprouts and branches off’, whereas the classical body is a façade that cannot be penetrated (Bakhtin, 2009, p.320). Grotesque representation is inherently transgressive as it ‘exaggerates and caricatures the negative, the inappropriate’ (Bakhtin, 2009, p.306). Some of the narratives not only epitomised a rejection of bodily control and an implicit subversion/re-inscription of ideologised gender norms, but also illustrated other features of carnival, such as the juxtaposition of incongruous situations and the levelling of social relations within a collapsed hierarchy in which the world was turned upside down and inside out:

Dawn =the really embarrassing thing I ever did was I went out to...with my mate Hayley erm (.) (1) from college (1) and she she’s a lesbian and she was in an under twenty one’s England female rugby team (right) so like all of (.) all of those girls were there and I was there and there was one other bloke (2) there was one bloke and one of my mates from college and I (.) that is I think the most drunk I’ve ever been in my life I got absolutely wrecked and then I got back (.) and I drank two bottles of red wine (laughter) and then somehow (.) you’re all my friends so I’m gonna say this (laughs) uh I like shagged this bloke three times (loud laughter) and I didn’t realise my mate was in the room (more laughter) my mate was in the room and then I was really confused and I walked I walked naked into my mate’s parents bedroom (loud laughter) I thought it was the toilet (continued laughter) it wasn’t as bad cos I was fifteen then so I would have been more embarrassed now and like (.) her dad just got up and took me to the toilet and then took me back again I was really really drunk (wow) (laughter)

The father stoically assists the incapable girl, neatly parodying the normal order of parental relations in that toilet assistance is generally ended by the time the child is perhaps six years old. He is the servant of the girls' debasement, while her own behavior, constituted in her story as actively and assertively sexual, reverses the gender norm of the male as the active sexual agent. Once again, the story is narrated to the carnival laughter of the friendship group, it represents a world turned inside out and released from norms of propriety and order by alcohol. Alcohol, once again, is the key to carnival experience, bringing it a legitimacy that could probably not be achieved any other way. It may be useful to speculate what the group's reception may have been to this story if the behavior described had been undertaken in a state of sobriety, or under the influence of hard drugs. We suggest that the reaction of the group may have been very different - indeed, it is hard to imagine such a story being retold without embarrassment at all, without the legitimating presence of extreme quantities of alcohol.

Other stories were focused on the comic potential of odd juxtapositions of a world turned into a surreal carnival playground, as opposed to more seriously transgressive behavior.

Tiffany	= and we were all off our faces and two of my male friends got in (.) in her bath together (laughter) and (1) then proceeded to be sick while I was in the bath (more laughter) (2) and then everyone just (laughter) (2) someone ended up sleeping in the dog kennels out the back (more loud laughter)
DC	With the dog?
Tiffany	With the dog yeah (.) and on the trampoline (laughter) and it was chucking down with rain...

This story was related as slapstick, and there is a sense that the laughter affirmed the joy of subverting the conventional and oppressive norms of work, school, college and the forces of self control. What seems celebrated here through comic parody is a carnival sense of freedom, in which the only rules are that rules should be subverted, situations parodied and life laughed at. It is all made possible through extreme alcohol consumption.

Concluding Comments: Bakhtin, Alcohol, and Policy.

The stories we were told by our participants, and there were many in a similar vein, on one level represented a normalisation of extreme levels of alcohol consumption, affirming the idea of a 'culture of intoxication' as a taken-for-granted aspect of social life for the young people we interviewed. They also represented a sense of purposive drinking which was far from mindless but performed a social function within the group, deepening friendship bonds

through shared experience, and shared self-parody. The narratives seemed to resonate powerfully with Bakhtinian carnival themes. The element of the carnival king or queen is present in many of the stories, with the central character presented in a mock-heroic light as a coruscating self-parody of the controlled, earnest and ‘sensible’ person demanded by the forces of neo-liberal conformity. There is bodily grotesquery and debasement which both subverts and re-inscribes ideologies of either gender, and also serves as rich comic material for subversive and parodic carnival laughter. In all these stories the world is turned inside-out as alcohol opens a door to participation as an actor in a spectacle of crazy situations and surreal juxtapositions, all serving to show a world in which the normal order is momentarily, and cathartically, suspended.

We see in these stories a paradoxical set of attitudes towards drinking which, as we noted earlier in the paper, have been present in the UK for at least 400 years, whereby drinking heavily is highly approved and indeed often essential as a social enabler and mark of the trustworthy and congenial fellow, but at the same time also retains a transgressive resonance, especially when it is constituted as the economically unproductive behavior of a low class rabble. Recent research in marketing has focused on the efficacy of government sponsored campaigns to promote a culture of self-control and moderate, ‘sensible’ drinking (Fry, 2010; Piacentini and Banister, 2009; Szmigin et al, 2011; Hackley et al., 2011). Studies have suggested that government campaigns are highly problematic because they fail to engage with the lived experience of young people who have to try to forge a sense of identity within a cultural environment with deeply conflicting values around alcohol. The opportunities for social life for young people in the UK are bounded by the fact that many city and town centres revolve economically, at night time at least, around alcohol consumption, such is the proliferation of (often branded) drinking venues. The ubiquity and visibility of alcohol in retail settings in the UK is striking, including stacks of discounted beer that are often placed at the entrance of supermarkets before shoppers can enter the food sections. Since the 1980s in the UK the quantity of alcohol brand marketing, advertising, sponsorship and non-advertising promotion has grown enormously. Much of it directed specifically at young people, and the emphasis has switched from the relatively slow growth on-sales in pubs and clubs to high volume retail off-sales. It is well-known that the alcohol industry is prominently represented on major government policy making and regulatory bodies, such is the influence of the income and jobs it represents.

Set against this, government campaigns that stress an individual's social and moral responsibility to drink 'sensibly', with sensible levels set by government limits expressed in an arbitrary measurement of alcohol units, and with as few as three drinks in one session sometimes categorised as a 'binge' (Hackley et al., 2010) seem problematic. At worst, they appear only to add transgressive force to the extreme drinking culture they are intended to counter. This contradiction can be seen as the wider cultural expression of an ambivalence which is deeply rooted in British attitudes towards drinking and drunkenness. Our Bakhtinian analysis highlights elements of this cultural contradiction by bringing out the transgressive pleasures of extreme drinking for many young people. It seems self-evident that the experiences our participants describe are not in themselves pleasurable: they are usually uncomfortable, unhealthy, expensive and embarrassing, not to mention troublesome to parents, police, club owners and other public services, and potentially carrying devastating risk which could damage the young person's future. The positive element to these experiences lies in their transgressive resonance as mass expressions of carnival, as counter-cultural expressions of putative freedom from social norms that are constituted as oppressive or lacking in fun and a sense of freedom. In the UK over the last thirty years, the liberalisation of alcohol licensing laws, the increase in the number of alcohol brands, the real terms reduction of the cost of retail alcohol, and the increase in the quantity and variety of alcohol brand marketing, have all acted to do two things. One is to closely identify alcohol with social fun to the extent that it is difficult for many young people to conceive of fun and social life without the leveling effect and dis-inhibition of being very drunk. The other has been to shift the bulk of alcohol consumption from pub on-sales to retail off-sales, thereby creating limitless opportunities for the carnival-isation of time and space. Street drinking, for example, is condemned in policy discourse, but has been made much easier to do by the huge expansion in the number and opening hours of retail alcohol outlets in the UK. The street is the historical location for carnival celebration, and the creation of highly concentrated urban drinking areas has turned many UK city centres, by night, into theatres of the carnivalesque.

To conclude, we suggest that our Bakhtinian analysis hints at the depth, complexity and resonance of the UK's drinking culture, in contrast to the superficial use of the term 'drinking culture' in policy debates, and indicates the deep disconnection between the theme of individual moral responsibility in official alcohol policy, and the lived experience of young drinkers. There is an inherent contradiction between government's liberal stance toward the alcohol industry, and its moral stance toward the aberrant drinker. We suggest that the

alarming statistics on alcohol-related harm will continue to rise until the availability and cultural presence of alcohol in the UK is reigned back. We also acknowledge that drawing normative policy implications from a critical social analysis could be seen as theoretically highly problematic. Bakhtin felt that carnival is universal but its manifestations are contingent on cultural and historical conditions. The medieval world may have been a simpler context for carnival counter-culture. Under contemporary Western capitalism, counter-cultural forces, and the forces of constitutive and structural power, play out in a dialectical relation. We would argue, though, that the spirit of carnival is not contingent on ubiquitous cheap retail alcohol availability.

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1. ⁱ Transcription conventions adapted from Potter and Wetherell (1987).

- = Indicates the absence of a discernable gap between speakers
- (.) A pause of less than 1 second
- (1), (2) A pause of 1 second, 2 seconds and so on
- (...) Some transcript has been deliberately omitted
- [DB laughs] Material in square brackets is clarifying information
- They A word or phrase underlined indicates additional emphasis
- [as you can Left square brackets indicates overlapping speech.