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'Defending' 'Contesting' and 'Rejecting' Formal Drinker Categories: How UK University Students  
Identify As 'Light' or 'Non-drinkers'

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Defining drinker 'categories' (e.g., 'light drinkers') is often assumed to be relatively straight-forward, but these definitions typically ignore the role of self-identification involved in drinking practices. To explore this, we presented self-identified 'light' or 'non' drinkers with official formal definitions of 'light' and 'binge' drinking as found in public health and academic research. A qualitative design was adopted. Semi-structured interviews with ten 18-27-year-old UK University students self-identifying as non-/light-drinkers were analysed using critical discourse analysis. A primary data pattern saw participants working to defend and maintain self-identified 'light drinker' status in the face of contradictions to such claims. Formal definitions could undermine identity claims and created an ideological dilemma for participants. Another ideological dilemma involved participants working to reject and distance themselves (or other students) from disavowed and stigmatised categories relating (e.g., alcoholism). Participants were invested in how formally defined drinker categories connected with recent personal drinking practices. Our data helps explain why units-based drinking guidelines may be poorly understood. More nuanced use of 'drinker categories' in units-based drinking guidelines could strengthen the visibility and credibility of alcohol health messages or could be drawn on in digital interventions designed to encourage moderate consumption behaviour by delivering personalised feedback.

**Keywords:** alcohol; binge drinking; drinking guidelines; critical discourse analysis; university students; young adults

Word count: 8,610 words

## Introduction

Time series data has demonstrated, among UK-based 16-24-year-olds, overall declines in alcohol consumption and increases in numbers of alcohol abstainers in 2017 relative to 2005 (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2017). Occasion-specific 'binge drinking', defined as exceeding threshold intake recommendations for women (>6 UK alcohol units) and for men (>8 UK alcohol units), is of particular concern in this demographic (UK Government, 2012) (one unit equates to 10ml or 8g of pure alcohol). Excessive alcohol consumption is closely linked with significant personal and community level costs (e.g., Anda et al., 2014; Gell, Ally, Buykx, Hope, & Meier, 2015). Given these costs, ONS data from 2017 demonstrating that alcohol units consumed on heaviest drinking days remain high among 16-24-year-olds, relative to other demographic groups, is concerning. Many individuals in this demographic are university students who are known to typically consume more alcohol than same age non-students. These patterns represent health preventative challenges to address but are also trends to explore in greater detail; young people, including students, appear to drink less, and abstain more, than previously, despite a persistent culture of intoxication in university campus environments.

Few studies focus on young adults who drink alcohol moderately or who abstain from alcohol consumption (Banister, Conroy, & Piacentini, 2019b). This is surprising given the sizable residual (36%) of young adults who routinely drink alcohol in moderation (ONS, 2017). Interview research with younger adults in South-East England shows how moderate drinking can be viewed as a positive, proactive choice (Graber et al., 2016). However, other work has implied that social non-drinking as part of an overall moderate drinking lifestyle contains important downsides including a sense of "missing out" and of social awkwardness (Conroy & de Visser, 2018). Several qualitative studies have investigated how 'categories' of drinker (e.g., non-drinkers, light drinkers), experience social occasions and account for deciding to drink little or no alcohol (Conroy & de Visser, 2014; 2015; Herring, Bayley, & Hurcombe, 2014; Nairn, Higgins, Thompson, Anderson, & Fu, 2006). However, focusing on 'non-drinkers' or 'light drinkers' in research risks treating such drinker 'categories' as fixed and enduring constructions of drinking practices; indeed, such individuals may actively dis-identify with drinker categories/types, rejecting their personal meaningfulness and relevance (Banister, Piacentini, & Grimes, 2019a). These studies have steered empirical attention toward a more context-sensitive, nuanced account of young people's drinking behaviour in a way that may guide more effective health promotion policy and practice.

The common use of drinker categories in alcohol research reflects a broader tendency to frame understandings of drinking behaviour using categorical language which is also evident in media depictions, lay understandings, and health promotion policy. Formal definitions of drinker categories used by social scientists, clinical practitioners and policy makers are mainly based on number of units reportedly consumed – plus other criteria such as how often people report being 'drunk' within a

given time period. Formal definitions of binge drinking (see above) are accompanied by formal criteria for 'light drinking' which has been defined as consuming 2 UK unit (for men) and 1 UK unit (for women) *as well as* reporting not being drunk in the previous two months (Herring et al., 2014). These formal definitions are commonly drawn on in public health guidelines to develop awareness around what constitutes lower risk alcohol consumption, among other health behaviours. However, evidence demonstrates that presenting individuals with guideline recommendations offers no certainties of success from a health promotion perspective. Lovatt and colleagues (2015) found, in interviews with a community sample of 19 to 65-year-olds, that formal units-based definitions of 'low risk' and 'binge' drinking did not match lay understandings of these terms. In related work, motivation to adhere to alcohol guidelines have been linked to perceived realism of the guidelines, and the extent to which guidelines are perceived as useful (de Visser, Conroy, Cooke, & Davies, 2021). These findings underscore the potential difficulties of using units-based categories as a basis for self-monitoring and regulating personal alcohol consumption.

In the study described in this article, we were interested in investigating young people's identification of themselves or others as 'categories' of drinkers. As Lovatt et al (2015) have demonstrated, units-based definitions of different drinker categories do not necessarily correspond to lay understandings of these terms. We aimed to move beyond Lovatt and colleagues' research to explore potential contradictions between lay understandings and formal definitions of 'light' and 'binge' drinking among young people who self-identified as 'light' or non-drinkers. Light and binge drinking are culturally visible categories relating primarily to a given *volume of* alcohol consumption. These particular categories were of focal interest as rhetorical 'poles' around which talk about self-identified 'drinker category' membership could be investigated. We aimed to recruit university students who self-identified as light- or non-drinkers as these individuals could be understood to hold stake (i.e. to have concern/investment in how something is talked about) in the construction of drinker categories within accounts. Issues of stake were particularly acute in this group given that heavy drinking is pronounced among UK-based university students (Dantzer, Wardle, Fuller, Pampalone & Steptoe, 2006; Davoren, Demant, Shiely & Perry, 2016). The study was designed to explore matches and mismatches between how these individuals understood their self-identified drinker category (e.g., 'light drinker') in relation to formal definitions of drinker categories employed in public health and academic discourse.

We adopted a form of critical discourse analysis (CDA, Wetherell & Edley, 1999) as a framework for identifying the rhetorical activities of participant accounts of drinking categories. Discursive readings of text permit insights into stake management and broader cultural discourses within speakers' accounts (e.g., Willig, 2008) and can also suggest dilemmatic facets of claiming (or denouncing) association with specific drinking identities where conflicting values underlie particular identity claims (Billig et al., 1988). CDA offered a framework for addressing our key research

question: 'How do 'light' and non-drinking student young adults provide accounts of their drinking status in response to formal definitions of drinker categories found in official guidelines?'

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

Our sampling approach, as discussed above, involved recruiting university students who self-identified as light- or non-drinkers. This meant that interviews could be conducted with individuals who, as self-identified 'light' or non-drinkers, could be understood as invested (i.e., holding stake) in how a personally relevant category of person was defined and talked about. Consistent with our sampling approach, our recruitment advertisement contained the simple question: "Do you identify as a light or non-drinker?". Additional study inclusion criteria required that participants were students studying at a UK university aged 18 years or older. Potential participants were recruited purposively via a Facebook advert hosted on the second author's profile page and on an institutional Fresher's fair recruitment advert in late October 2015. Our participants were a diverse group with regards to their historic and current drinking behaviour. Most had previously consumed alcohol excessively, some had previously consumed little alcohol and now abstained, others consumed less than before but still sometimes drank to excess. All participants reported drinking little or no alcohol without having a culturally acceptable/recognisable reason, an approach taken in a previous study of non-drinkers (Conroy & de Visser, 2014). Twenty-five eligible individuals indicated interest via email. The first thirteen individuals were screened and eleven were identified as eligible; two individuals were excluded on the basis that they had a culturally sanctioned reason for light- or non-drinking (e.g. religion, physical illness). We report illustrative extracts drawn from semi-structured interviews with a final sample of ten participants. Details of participants' self-identified drinker category and their drinker category as identified by formal definitions are presented in Table 1. Notably, eight of the ten participants self-identified as 'lighter' drinkers than their classifications based on formal definitions would suggest (for example, Shaun self-identified as a 'light drinker' yet would be categorised as a 'moderate drinker' using formal definitions).

<Please insert Table 1 about here>

### ***Procedure***

The study received ethical approval from <MASKED> Psychology Department Ethics Committee. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted in private rooms on university campus with the second author. All participants were consented prior to interviews. The interview began with open-ended questions concerning experiences as light-/non-drinkers. Participants were then asked about their own drinking behaviour including how often they drank, how much they drank within sessions and when they had most recently been drunk. As a final part of the interview schedule, participants were presented with formal definitions of 'a light drinker' followed by 'a binge drinker'

and, in turn, were asked what they thought of each definition. A binge drinker was defined as someone drinking double the recommended daily consumption levels on a single occasion (men = >8 units; women = >6 units, UK Government, 2012). This definition will be referred to as the 'formal definition of a binge drinker' from this point forward. A well-recognised academic article was used to define light drinkers as individuals who drink less than once a week, drinking below specific thresholds during drinking occasions (men =  $\leq 2$  drinks; women =  $\leq 1$  drink) and not having been drunk in the previous two months (Herring et al., 2014, p. 102). This definition will be referred to as the 'formal definition of a light drinker' from this point forward. The interview schedule was piloted with two individuals leading to minor changes to question phrasing and sequencing. Interviews were conducted in private rooms on the university campus and lasted 26.5 minutes on average (Range = 13-36 minutes). Interview audio-recordings were anonymised and transcribed verbatim.

### *Analytic approach*

Textual data was explored using a critical discourse analysis framework as introduced in the previous section. This approach permitted an integrated understanding of participants as both subjects of and agents in their rhetorical activities and accounts of drinking categories. This meant exploring social, cultural and historical forces invoked in participant accounts (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Willig, 2008), but it also meant exploring how participants acted as stake-holders of 'drinker categories' and, accordingly, involved a careful examination of the rhetorical activities involved in their accounts (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Several recent studies focused on young adults' drinking behaviour have adopted a discursive approach. This is apparent in work that has explored how drinking responsibilities are positioned in alcohol policy documents (Hackley, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Mistral, Szmigin, & Tiwsakul, 2013), and in research suggesting how accounts of university student non-drinkers may be constructed in unfavourable terms (e.g., as unsociable) among students who do drink alcohol (Conroy & de Visser, 2013). Transcripts were read and re-read to provide familiarity with patterns and emphases in each interview and in the dataset overall. Data was coded where text suggested broader relevant discourses and where text indicated rhetorical patterns involved in accounts of binge/light drinking. The final narrative account of data patterns and emphases was checked by second and third authors to provide an independent check of how discursive activities within the text had been understood and substantiated.

### **Results**

The analysis is presented as three inter-related patterns in the data. A first pattern saw participants working to defend and maintain their self-identification as 'light drinkers' in the face of challenges to this self-identification emerging from both discussion of their recent drinking practices and from challenges to self-identified 'light drinker' status when individuals were presented with formal definitions of 'light drinker' and 'binge drinker'. These formal definitions appeared to undermine light drinker identity claims, creating an ideological dilemma for participants. A second pattern reflected

participant challenges to the rigidity and legitimacy of formal drinking categories. A third, less substantial, pattern witnessed participants' rhetorical work to hold at bay or reject disavowed drinking categories such as 'alcoholic'. This reflected another kind of ideological dilemma in which participants distanced others (or their own) excessive drinking from stigmatised drinker categories such as these. These three rhetorical patterns – 'defending drinker category membership', 'contesting drinker categories' and 'rejecting category association' are presented in turn below. Each extract is followed by information in parentheses including (1) participant pseudonym; (2) participant age in years; (3) self-identified drinker category; and (4) the participant's drinker category based on formal criteria/definitions requiring information about self-reported alcohol consumption and experiences of drunkenness (e.g., Ellie, 18, *Light drinker*; Moderate drinker).

***'Defending drinker category membership': activity to justify credible identification as a light drinker***

In the first pattern participants, where presented with formal definitions of light drinking and binge drinking, worked discursively to produce credible accounts of binge drinkers and light drinkers as categories which were substantive/legitimate and consistent with their own self-defined light drinker status. Material here provided sometimes striking evidence of participants' personal investment in drinker categories as identity positions and rhetorical tools. This was evident in talk suggestive of how drinker category definitions could act as explicit challenges to participants' self-definitions as light drinkers by opening up (and closing off) particular subject positions and practices available to individuals. Relevant material to this pattern also involved participants in a kind of ideological dilemma (Billig et al., 1988). Participants appealed to a scientific repertoire when referring to the feasibility of formally defined drinker categories, yet also constructed (often recent) excessive personal drinking as exceptional and therefore congruent with self-defining as a light drinker. These rhetorical activities served to stave off potentially troubling constructions of personal drinking behaviour as excessive. This was apparent in Ellie's account at a point in the interview before formal definitions had been presented where she spontaneously referred to her self-identified drinker category:

Int: Okay, so can you tell me about a typical night out that you've had recently?

Ellie: Erm yeah it was mostly just freshers' week, like I did go out on Monday but that wouldn't really count as light drinking. Like I am normally a light-drinker, but that one night I drank quite a lot. Erm so it depends really on which night out you want me to tell you about?

Int: And when was the last time that you felt drunk?

Ellie: Monday [laughs]. But that was completely out of my character.

Int: Okay [laughs], so before that when was the last time you felt drunk?



Ellie: Mmm, the last night of freshers, so like over a month ago. (Ellie, 18, *Light drinker; Moderate drinker*)

Ellie acknowledges recent relatively high levels of drinking during a social occasion (“wouldn’t really count as light drinking”). Rhetorically, this acts as a disclaimer – this drinking behaviour constitutes an exception to the norm concerning her drinking behaviour (“normally I am a light-drinker”). Here we have a sense of the ideological dilemma described above. Ellie is careful in this extract with footing, ensuring that rhetorical pressure is on the interviewer to be clear on which drinking occasion is being asked about (“depends which night you want me to tell you about?”). This is followed by a more direct account of an occasion involving relatively high levels of alcohol consumption (“quite a lot”) by positioning this as “completely out of character”. She works again to substantiate her credentials as a light drinker by reporting that this occasion where she was last drunk was “over a month ago”. Ellie's extract illustrates how potential contradictions between identity claims (to being a light drinker) and reported drinking behaviours (which may contradict identity claims) are managed and reflects a tendency among participants to strive to maintain their self-identification as 'light drinkers' whilst acknowledging drinking practices that would potentially undermine that claim.

Shaun’s extract below sees similarly dextrous arguments being invoked when presented with a formal definition of a light drinker:

I guess (light drinking) would be more often than once a week ‘cause I think you could have one drink on two nights of the week, and that’s still pretty light. And also that would make me a light-drinker, and I consider myself to be a light-drinker [laughs]... so yeah, it’s a bit general I think. And I think being a light-drinker is more of an attitude really, so like what people think is light drinking, and whether or not you identify yourself as a light-drinker. It’s not necessarily just about how much you drink. (Shaun, 27, *Light drinker; Moderate drinker*)

Shaun “considers (himself) to be a light drinker” and suggests that light drinking could/should be understood as “more of an attitude really” than a coherent, objective category based on the amount of alcohol reportedly consumed during a given occasion. Through these accounts, Shaun constructs his self-identification as an individual matter of ‘attitude’ which positions him as justified in refusing to acknowledge general formal definitions that apply to the public as a whole and definitions that are based solely on the quantity of alcohol consumed. He concludes with an explicit statement to this effect: “it’s not necessarily just about how much you drink”. Here, detail counts. Shaun's "just" bestows expert status, allowing him (or someone) to legitimately refer to themselves as a light drinker if they uphold or identify with a particular attitude regardless of recent alcohol consumption levels. This is in sharp contrast to the way in which formal definitions of being a ‘light drinker’ are developed and deployed and illustrates the importance of relativity in terms of how an individual might, strategically but not incoherently, contextualise personal drinking practices. Importantly, this

discursive formulation enables individuals to socialise within a heavy drinking culture while still identifying as a light drinker. The effect of this might be two-fold: it provides a framework for justifying limited drinking behaviour to self and others, but it also means that drinking behaviour itself (which might contradict a 'light drinker' identity) can remain congruent with the heavy drinking culture typically experienced for a university student.

Unlike Shaun, Sophie self-identified as a non-drinker but would be defined as a light drinker using formal definitions. Sophie's extract below is notable for how the construction of light drinkers seems to reflect considerable faith in distinctive drink-related categories as terms that, perhaps with the addition of caveats, possess a fairly unambiguous 'realness':

Int: Okay, so how would you define a light drinker?

Sophie: A light drinker is someone who only drinks once in a while, and when they do drink they don't get drunk. So erm actually I think I've changed my mind. I think if you always drink lightly then you should have never been drunk, 'cause if you're drunk then you're obviously not drinking lightly. So yeah I think to be a light drinker, you shouldn't drink very often, like maybe once a month or something, and you should never get drunk 'cause that would mean you're drinking too much. Unless it was like completely out of character, and you just had much more than you usually would, that would be okay. (Sophie, 22, *Non-drinker*; Light drinker)

Sophie's extract indicated the multiple possible dimensions involved identifying as a light drinker, speaking from the position of someone who has never been drunk. Sophie constructed tight definitional requirements for qualifying as a light drinker – “you should have never been drunk” – though this was softened to “you should never get drunk” shortly afterwards. However, this was contradicted in subsequent talk which indicated that getting drunk would be consistent with being a light drinker if this were “completely out of character”. This extract evoked a prominent discourse concerning binary thinking around drinking behaviour; drinkers are either actors enjoying justifiable leisure time activities (“relaxation purposes”) or making alcohol a central feature of their social activities, perhaps in line with normative expectations (“drinking to get drunk”).

We suggest that material discussed above could be understood as ideologically dilemmatic. Participants were recruited as self-identified light drinkers or non-drinkers, but the interview process presented them with formal definitions at odds with their own understandings of these terms. Participants' recollection of (sometimes recent) heavy drinking could challenge the legitimacy of their self-identifications as light or non-drinkers.

***'Contesting drinker categories': challenging the rigidity and legitimacy of formal drinking categories***

Shaun and Sophie's extracts in the previous section illustrate how rhetorical efforts to defend self-identified status (and broader identification by other people) as a light drinker sometimes required challenges to the coherence and value of formal drinker categories presented to them during the interviews. Other interview material presented more explicit illustrations of participant efforts to demonstrate flaws and contradictions in formal category definitions (in which they held stake). Data extracts reflecting these challenges are presented and discussed in this section.

Drinker categories were partly contested with appeals to exceptions to criterion-based rules governing drinker category definitions. These challenges were partly apparent where participants referred to personal drinking behaviour in the context of drinking behaviour within the broader student community. Participants could appeal to normative definitions of what constitutes 'high levels of alcohol consumption' among university students as a way of framing legitimate exemptions to formal criteria. For example, this could involve appeals to 'step-up' occasions involving consumption levels which, though normally classifiable as binge drinking, were exempt when recent (consistently medium-high) patterns of personal alcohol consumption were taken into consideration. This activity was apparent in Lauren's interview:

Erm I think that (definition of a light drinker) is probably accurate for a normal person, but I'm comparing myself to what I used to be. And also because it's a recent change, it obviously hasn't been two months since I was last drunk, but I don't think that that means I'm not a light drinker now. Erm I guess the rest of it probably is right, 'cause like you need to drink less than like the daily recommended units, 'cause that's like the normal amount of drinking for an average person. But I do think you could probably drink twice a week, 'cause especially when your friends at uni are drinking like three, four times a week, then compared to them drinking like one beer twice a week is really low... and I think you need to talk about the rest of their behaviour with drinking, 'cause if they're having like one glass of wine every night and then on a Friday night they have two or three glasses of wine, then I wouldn't really say that was a binge, I'd just think she's having another glass 'cause it's a Friday. (Lauren, 21, *Light drinker*; Moderate drinker)

In constructing an understanding of a 'light drinker', Lauren positions herself as distinct from "a normal person" and rationalises her status as a light drinker in the context of her recent drinking behaviour ("comparing myself to what I used to be... a recent change"). She then changes footing noting that "compared to" her peer group her drinking is light. This creates greater flexibility to consume alcohol in a way that does not challenge her self-identification as a light drinker despite her high consumption levels, which seem to clash with formal definitions of light drinking. In the extract's final section, Lauren speaks in the third person ("their behaviour", "she's having"). However, the sense remains that she is a stake holder in efforts to construct the legitimacy of retaining 'light drinker' as a self-defined categorical label under conditions which are not consistent with the

drinking behaviour implied by a formal definition of 'light drinking'. Lauren rhetorically rejects the legitimacy of what might be understood according to formal definitions as an episode of 'binge drinking' in two ways. Firstly, Lauren appeals to the occurrence of daily drinking in preceding days ("having one glass every night") as relevant contextual information which de-emphasises the novelty of drinking intensity within the occasion itself. Secondly, she appeals to culturally normative standards about typical days when higher levels of consumption are more likely to occur ("it's a Friday"). Throughout this extract Lauren actively works to construct legitimate membership of a drinker category with which she identifies ('light drinker') in the face of formal definitions that appear to undermine her claim. Michael's extract below sees similar rhetorical efforts to contest the logic and (therefore) legitimacy of formal drinker categories in part to retain the congruence of his own self-identification as a light drinker when faced with a units-based formal definition that would position him as a binge drinker:

Int.: What do you think of this definition of binge drinking?

Michael: So is the eight units the recommended, or is that the double?

Int.: No, that's double the recommended daily units for a man.

Michael: Oh right, okay. Well that's quite surprising, because didn't we just say that I have eight units when I drink?

Int.: Yeah we did work it out as 8.4 units, yeah.

Michael: Mmm now that is interesting, 'cause I personally wouldn't consider my three drinks to be a binge-drinking occasion 'cause that would be spread over quite a few hours. And it's difficult to see that as binge drinking - I don't know if you can really put a figure upon the point, like people aren't drinking with a figure in mind of like, this is how much I need to drink to get drunk, they will drink until they feel drunk, regardless of how many units that may be. (Michael, Light drinker; Moderate drinker)

After checking his understanding of formal criteria as these relate to him, Michael queries the upper limit of consumption on a single occasion in a way that neutralises any possibility of being legitimately classified as a binge drinker ("that's quite surprising"). As with Lauren's extract above, avoiding recent drinking behaviour being classified (in identity-incongruent terms) as 'binge drinking' is crucial here. Michael adopts different speaking voices to achieve a cumulative rhetorical effect that distances himself from what could be identified as binge drinking. This is achieved initially by introducing fresh criteria to take into account when considering drinking behaviour that might be understood as binge drinking ("spread over quite a few hours"). But Michael then moves into firmer rhetorical ground, constructing formal definitions of drinker categories as provisional and subjective

("I personally wouldn't consider..."); as unlikely to stand up to scrutiny ("difficult to see"); and as ultimately illegitimate ("don't know if you can really put a figure").

***Rejecting association with drinker categories: positioning drinking practices away from disavowed 'problem drinking'***

A third pattern was evident where participants worked to rhetorically distance evidence of excessive drinking among university students (and by implication themselves) from (socially stigmatised) alcoholism or dependent drinking. As with the first pattern, material here reflected a kind of ideological dilemma in which participants fought on multiple rhetorical fronts, presenting accounts of themselves as legitimate (if occasionally lapsed) light drinkers while constructing episodes of excessive drinking involving themselves or other students as drinking practices distinct from alcoholism or dependent drinking. This was evident in Kelly and Lauren's interviews:

Int.: So are you saying that you think light drinking is different in the student population, compared to the general population?

Kelly: Yeah sadly. Yeah I do think that, 'cause I think that a student, if you put them in the outside world then they'd be classed as a binge drinker, like an alcoholic, they drink all the time. Not an alcoholic but you know, an excessive drinker. They drink constantly and every social event at university is associated with drinking, well not all of them, but the vast majority. (Kelly, 20, *Light drinker*; Moderate drinker)

During placement when I decided to stop drinking, two of my best girl mates from uni were really like unsupportive. And I had to be like to them, you're being so unsupportive, like I'm seriously concerned about myself and like getting upset from what's going on. And one of them in particular actually was like oh you're being so boring blah blah blah, it's fine, you don't have a problem, we all get fucked, it's just funny. (Lauren, 21, *Light drinker*; Moderate drinker)

Kelly takes care here to avoid any kind of association (however remote) with drinking behaviour akin to alcoholism or problem drinking. Rhetorically, this is evident partly in the successive movement from "classed as an alcoholic" to the more dilute formulation "not an alcoholic... an excessive drinker". As implied in other extracts, formal units-based definitions of binge drinking could be successfully overlooked when the context and circumstances surrounding *who* is drinking excessively are considered. Kelly represents students as set-apart from general societal values and expectations ("if you put them in the outside world"). Rhetorically, this helps to manage the potentially unsettling views of high levels of alcohol consumption among students should they be compared to public health definitions of 'light', 'moderate' or 'heavy' drinking. She associates 'binge drinker' with 'alcoholic' but moves away from this almost immediately ("not an alcoholic... an excessive drinker"). Lauren's extract, relaying the discursive activities of her university peer group, illustrates again how the

language of 'problem drinking' can be drawn on to position away from something potentially very serious ("don't have a problem") and towards something banal ("it's fine"), common ("we all") and as valued entertainment during social occasions ("it's funny"). Socially stigmatised aspects of drinking behaviour were implied in Alice's interview:

I think I agree with the (binge drinking) definition, but I think it's so broadly applicable nowadays. Like this is normal in my flat or the flat next door, like twice to four times a week. So even though I agree with the definition, binge drinking almost has connotations that if you are a binge drinker it's so rare, or it's only a minority of people, but I think with the drinking culture in Britain, like it's such a common thing that it should almost have like a lesser kind of name because, it's just not a rare thing, like if I showed someone in the flat next door they'd be like yeah, that's so normal. Whereas a binge means to me something that's like so rare and really quite negative, so like you'd look back and be like oh my god, how did that even happen? So, yeah. (Alice, 18, *Light drinker*; Light drinker)

Rhetoric here again sought to distinguish different types of drinking practice. Alice makes a distinction between "the drinking culture of Britain" and 'binge drinking'. The former is represented as commonplace and therefore broadly acceptable, whilst the latter construction contains extreme case formulation devices ("so rare", "only a minority of people") which serve to invoke an understanding of 'binge drinking', as an instantiation of drinking practice, as exceptional. Constructions of the actor engaging in binge drinking here hint at a socially stigmatized relationship with alcohol consumption not entirely dissimilar to alcoholism. Alice appeals for "a lesser kind of name" for binge drinking since the term evokes something "rare and really quite negative". These extracts hinted at how potential associations between 'binge drinking' and socially stigmatised forms of drinking practice (e.g., alcoholism) were sometimes visible as an undercurrent in participant accounts. Such moments suggested deeper costs of being positioned as a 'binge drinker': being understood in any kind of connection with socially stigmatised drinking practices as unequivocally disavowed drink-related categories.

## Discussion

The current study contributes to ongoing debates about the value and validity of unit-based definitions of drinking behaviour, focussing on young adult university students who identified as 'light' or 'non'-drinkers. Participants were clear stakeholders of these accounts. Recent heavy drinking (whether personal or friend's drinking) was constructed by our participants as exceptional and therefore not incongruent with self-defined 'light drinker' status. It was notable that only half (5 of 10) our self-defined 'light' or non-drinker participants met formal definitions for 'light drinking'. Indeed, some participants (e.g., Ellie, Kelly, see Table 1), recruited on the basis that they were self-identified *light drinkers*, provided information in their accounts about recent drinking practices which would have categorised them as *binge drinkers* according to formal drinker category criteria. However, from a

discursive perspective, contradictions between self-identified and definition-confirmed drinker category are to be expected. Analysis presented in the current study suggested how mismatches between self-defined and formally defined drinker categories could reveal evidence of participant stake held in self-defined drinker categories and suggested the identity-relevant discursive function that drinker categories could occupy for participants. We highlight how rhetorical distinctions between light drinker congruent and “completely out of my character” drinking practices (in Ellie’s recounting of recent relatively high consumption) helped resolve an ideological dilemma for participants stemming from talk about heavier consumption while self-defining as a light drinker.

The current study also helps make sense of recent UK-based interview data that has argued that university students lacked the knowledge and skills to adhere to unit-based guidelines (Furtwängler and de Visser, 2017). Evidence concerning the strategic nature of young adults’ interaction with drinking guidelines have been previously reported. For example, interview research conducted with Australian 22–24-year-olds has revealed how individuals viewed their drinking styles, risks, and responsibilities differently to how these might be imagined and articulated within health promotion programme materials and has underscored young adults’ strong motivations to drink alcohol in the pursuit of pleasurable and socially fulfilling lives (Harrison, Kelly, Lindsay, Advocat, & Hickey, 2011). In line with prior work, our findings suggest that a units-based approach to promoting moderate drinking among young people would be likely to face considerable challenges that might be difficult to inoculate against. Guidelines may be misunderstood or disregarded due to lack of motivation or skills but may also evoke a strong response as students strive to defend valued identity positions (e.g., being a ‘light drinker’), to challenge the legitimacy of criteria that may feel unjust or simply inaccurate, and to guard against pejorative implied identity positions (e.g., being defined as an ‘alcoholic’).

Qualitative research concerning non-drinkers and light drinkers has suggested strategies involved in making social spaces where heavy drinking may be normative more manageable and enjoyable (e.g., Conroy & de Visser, 2014; Herring et al., 2014; Piacentini & Banister, 2012). The current study questions drinker categories, and presents participants as actively resisting potentially undesirable and stigmatised drinker categories (e.g., binge drinker) and unambiguously undesirable and stigmatised drinker categories (e.g., alcoholic). Participants actively defended their identities as ‘light drinkers’ by deploying 'exception to the norm' arguments in inventive ways to maintain their identity claims. Such strategies involved reference to personal 'typical' drinking behaviour; cultural norms of heavy drinking amongst students, or interview sections where recent drinking episodes were presented as atypical in the context of (heavier) drinking practices when they were younger. In a discursive movement that reflected a further departure from drinker categories defined according to formal units-based consumption guidelines, being a 'light drinker' was constituted (by Shaun) as "more of an attitude".

Current study findings are interesting to consider in the context of evidence of a 'continuum of non-drinking' which can span relatively diverse behaviours from individuals identifiable as light or occasional drinkers to out-and-out alcohol abstainers (Piacentini & Banister, 2009). Similarly, findings connect with Banister et al's (2019a) work which has demonstrated how individuals who drink limited/no alcohol can actively reject being identified in amorphous, collective terms like 'non-drinker' where such terms carry little personal/cultural meaning. Relatedly, research conducted with 140 18-25-year-old Danish young adults has pointed to complex situational factors that might underpin narratives around drinking identities and has suggested how categorical drinking identities can be usefully understood as relative and negotiable rather than consistent and reliable (Frank, Herold, Schröder, Bjønness, & Hunt, 2020). According with prior evidence presented here, our study evidence reveals how participants questioned and challenged hard-defined drinker types yet, in contradictory style, were also seen to appeal to the integrity of drinker categories where stake and personal investment was invested in them (specifically, in being a 'light drinker'). Our findings also resonate in research with twenty-five older drinkers (41-89-year-olds) which has provided evidence of how varied discursive strategies (e.g., strategic vagueness; downplaying drinking as a mundane practice) can serve to rationalise alcohol consumption and to produce normalised accounts of drinking practices (Gough, Madden, Morris, Atkin, & McCambridge, 2020). Drawing on a discursive analytical framework, current study findings display evidence of young adults' close, identity-relevant investment with cultural categories relating to alcohol consumption (e.g., being identified as a legitimate, bona fide 'light drinker') might be an important starting point for considering how moderate drinking practices might be successfully and sustainably encouraged. In addition, our work also suggests that within relevant rhetorical dynamics, individuals can work to protect self-identified drinker category status where this is identity-relevant, or where it serves to distinguish personal drinking practices from (more excessive) drinking practices among peers within the university community.

Identity was also relevant to subtle assertions about personal drinking practices defined in terms of drinking behaviour (e.g., 'light drinking') and, differentially, discussed in relation to drinker categories (e.g., 'light drinker'). These 'behaviour' and 'category' options provided a distinctive mechanism in accounts that could serve to make allowances for discord between self-defined light drinker status and definition-contradicting drinking practices. Participant accounts strongly suggested that they were personally invested in avoiding potential mismatches between their self-defined drinker category (i.e., 'light drinker') and relatively high quantities of alcohol consumption on a given social occasion or over a particular time period that might contradict adopted self-definitions. The integrity of drinker categories is rarely questioned in the conventional alcohol literature. For example, prototype willingness model alcohol research tests associations between differing 'alcohol prototypes' (e.g., abstainer prototypes, heavy prototypes) and drinking behaviour among young adults (e.g., van Lettow,



Vermunt, de Vries, Burdorf, & Van Empelen, 2013). These quantitative methods can help identify at risk drinker groups for targeted health messages, but current study findings reveal clear limitations of assuming that 'the prototypical drinker' reflects something easily definable. Indeed, findings suggest that measuring perceived 'drinker prototypes' will mask understanding of how stake is held in identity-relevant, self-defined, chosen drinker categories.

### **Implications**

Our findings accord with research indicating that many drinkers do not conceptualise personal drinking behaviour in terms of units and can, consequently, easily disregard units-based drinking guidelines (e.g., de Visser et al., 2021; Lovatt et al., 2015). From this position, resources channelled into developing wider and more accurate knowledge of alcohol units seem unlikely to pay dividends from a health promotion perspective. Our study indicates the value of alcohol education initiatives that draw on the perspective of students who identify as non-drinkers/light drinkers. In addition, young adults who self-identify as light drinkers appeared to construct their drinking identities in relation to dominant drinking norms. Our analysis suggests that lay understandings of light and heavy drinking may be skewed among university students in that these individuals are immersed in cultures of excessive consumption. We found that university students may have difficulty applying units-based drinking guidelines to their own alcohol intake given that skewed norms within their immediate drinking culture may lead them to conclude that their consumption levels are not harmful or excessive. Study findings suggest that health promotion materials drawing on drinker type terminology such as 'heavy drinkers' or 'light drinkers' may be evaluated against contextual norms relevant to personal drinking behaviour and, consequently, may be understood as irrelevant or naïve.

Evidence reported here could be used to inform adapted versions of traditional social norms interventions; evidenced as effective, low-cost approaches for reducing alcohol intake (Berkowitz, 2005; Moreira, Smith & Foxcroft, 2009). Social norm interventions have been demonstrated as effective in reducing consumption levels UK university student via personalised social norm feedback with reductions lasting almost five months post-intervention (Bewick et al., 2013). Specifically, 'drinker category' social norms interventions could provide feedback on discrepancies between self-identified and formal guideline criteria identified drinker category membership to prompt changes in alcohol consumption patterns and practices. However, we acknowledge that inclusion of drinker categories in health promotion messages and interventions designed to promote more moderate alcohol consumption present opportunities but also difficulties. Health messages designed to introduce but then critique the stereotype that "all young adults/students are binge drinkers" may bolster moderate drinking motivations for some students but may be actively ignored or rejected by others where dissonance about personal consumption levels is evoked.

Our final pattern, concerning rejection of disavowed drinker categories, pointed to the risks, from a health promotion perspective, of associating individuals with the 'binge drinker' category, given its socially stigmatised connotations. Binge drinking is a staple, frequently used term in alcohol research and policy, despite attention drawn to its confused conceptual history and the sheer discursive force and variability of its application in everyday speech (e.g., as synonymous with "unruly youth") (Berridge, Herring, & Thom, 2009; Measham & Brain, 2005). Our findings attest to the importance of designing health promotion materials which can raise individuals' awareness of what constitutes 'higher risk drinking' without invoking stigmatised cultural categories. However, our findings suggest the magnitude of challenges likely to be faced in any scenario given speakers' inventiveness in terms of drawing on the language of 'problem drinking' to exceptionalise or excuse drinking behaviour in a given instance/context.

We note finally in this section that the extent to which the drinking practices of university students are comparable with those of young adults in the general population is debatable though prior research has drawn attention to the comparability of alcohol consumption among young adults who are, and are not, university students (Carter, Brandon, & Goldman, 2010).

### **Limitations**

Study limitations are acknowledged. The semi-structured interview research context meant that participants were exposed to and interacted with formal definitions of drinker categories within a relatively rigid/formal dynamic and it would be valuable to now replicate study findings with naturalistic data (e.g., obtained from student club/bar environments) to offset the well-exposed limitations inherent in the interview format (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). However, this does not discount the value of analysing this material given that these (or other) individuals would be likely to encounter public health messages which may challenge beliefs and/or evoke dissonance about personal drinking behaviour. One could argue that public discourse around alcohol (as responsible/light vs negligent/heavy) and also the culture of heavy drinking to intoxication actively produce this binary split. We note here that this binary division is also reflected in the research interview questions for this study (into accounts of 'light' and 'binge' drinking) and note that these restricted the emphasis and complexity of speakers' accounts of drinking behaviour. Our decision to explore talk concerning light drinking and binge drinking categories provided focus on terms which were relatively accessible and visible in the UK vernacular, yet which could be meaningfully defined via discrete criteria (e.g., UK alcohol units consumed, episodes of experiencing drunkenness within a defined period). However, alternative potential categories could have been explored including categories explicitly referring to alcohol-related harm 'hazardous drinking' (i.e., consuming >14 UK alcohol units and <35 units for women and <50 units for men, respectively) or 'harmful drinking' (i.e., consuming  $\geq 35$  or  $\geq 50$  UK alcohol units for women and men, respectively) (National Institute

for Health and Care Excellence, 2010). Exploration of rhetorical activity around these harm-related categories would present a valuable avenue for future investigation using discursive methods.

## Conclusion

Drinker categories such as 'light drinker' or 'binge drinker', alongside the drinking guidelines used to operationalise such categories, are likely to be responded to in active, rhetorically engaged ways among young adults given that they have a vested interest in how these categories connect with recent personal drinking behaviour. Current study data suggests that use of drinker categories and units-based drinking guidelines in health policy messages should be more selective and nuanced than is currently the case if they are to be perceived as credible and in order to be strategically effective.

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Table 1. Sample details

Demographic details				Recent drinking behaviour <sup>a</sup>				Self-identifies as <sup>a</sup>	Implied drinker category based on formal definitions <sup>b</sup>
Name	Sex	Ethnicity	Age and year of study	No. days drank alcohol in typical month	Drinks per occasion typically consumed	Ever been drunk?	Weeks since last drunk		
Alice	F	White Irish	18, Year 1	2	1x glass of wine	No	n/a	Light drinker	Light drinker
Ellie	F	White British	18, Year 1	4	4x single spirits + mixer	Yes	1	Light drinker	Moderate drinker
Hannah	F	Chinese	18, Year 1	2	1x pint of cider	No	n/a	Light drinker	Light drinker
Josh	M	White British	18, Year 1	0	n/a	No	n/a	Non-drinker	Light drinker
Kelly	F	White British	20, Year 3	4	5x single spirits	Yes	4	Light drinker	Moderate drinker
Lauren	F	White British	21, Year 4	4	2x pint of beer	Yes	4	Light drinker	Moderate drinker
Michael	M	White British	21, Year 1	2	3x pint of cider	Yes	4	Light drinker	Moderate drinker
Shaun	M	White British	27, Year 4	8	2x pint of peer	Yes	16	Light drinker	Moderate drinker
Sophie	F	White British	22, Year 4	0	n/a	No	n/a	Non-drinker	Light drinker
Tyler	M	Black American	18, Year 1	0	n/a	No	n/a	Non-drinker	Light drinker

*Notes.* <sup>a</sup>Details taken from responses to semi-structured interview questions. <sup>b</sup>Individuals were categorised as light drinkers if they had consumed alcoholic drinks less frequently than once per week, had consumed <2 drinks (female) or <3 drinks (male) per occasion or had last been drunk three months ago or more. Otherwise categorised as moderate drinkers. In theory, individuals could have been categorised as binge drinkers if they had consumed double the recommended daily consumption levels on a single occasion (men =  $\geq 8$  units; women =  $\geq 6$  units, Office for National Statistics, 2015) but in practice no participant met these criteria.