

Jemma Lennox, University of Glasgow: 'You want people to say you have a fun life': The role of alcohol in young adults' identity creation on Facebook.

**SHAAP/SARN 'Alcohol Occasional' Seminar
Thursday 31st October 2013, The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh**

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network (SARN) are proud to support the lunchtime 'Alcohol Occasional' seminars which showcase new and innovative research on alcohol use. All of the seminars are run in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. These events provide the chance for researchers, practitioners and policy makers and members of the public to hear about new alcohol related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice. The current theme for the seminars is "Alcohol and Young People". Briefing papers, including this one, aim to capture the main themes and to communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is fully responsible for the contents, which are our interpretation.

Lennox started by explaining that 91% of 16-24 year olds in the UK use Facebook. Her research is concerned with how alcohol drinking occasions are used by young people in the West of Scotland in an attempt to create a social identity. She asserts that they create such an identity in a noticeably classed and gendered manner. As well as this, the identities portrayed on social networking sites, often with the alcohol industry's participation, influence young people's drinking behaviours.

Lennox had recruited 21 discussion groups, with four to six participants in each of these. Participants were aged

between 18 and 29 years old and came from varied social and cultural backgrounds. She had also carried out 14 Facebook interviews.

These young people use Facebook to organise drinking occasions and other parts of their social lives. For example, they use Facebook to get invitations for nights out and they also post messages on it while they are out. Lennox also found that young people are constantly attempting to portray the image on Facebook that they are out partying all the time.

Lennox also found that many young people also feel compelled to have a drinking image and behaviour which is perceived as appropriate to their gender and class. This informed drinking behaviours; for example, she talked about how young men drink using pint glasses, which they hold in a manner considered as masculine. They said that they would vary their 'masculine' demeanour by perhaps drinking rum, but that they would avoid drinking wine; above all they would not drink it in a wine glass, which they considered 'feminine'. Young men also indicated that they would display their masculinity in dressing for a night out in a way which looked 'effortless', e.g. just a shirt and chinos. They would also not pose for photos, since this is also sensed to be feminine, but they would not care if Facebook photos showing them drunk emerge on line. They also put up photos of other male friends on Facebook to make fun of them.

As for young women, Lennox found that they also consume specific kinds of alcohol beverages and in specific ways. These were affected both by gender and class. For example, working class women would drink half-pints because a whole pint was deemed 'masculine', whereas middle-class women would drink in whole-glass pints. Working-class young women described a strong pressure to put an effort into their appearance, for example, by dressing in a way which was deemed 'feminine', e.g. mini skirt, high-heel shoes and make-up. Working-class young women did not want to be photographed in a way that they looked drunk. Rather, they wished to look pretty and glamorous.

Lennox also argued that middle-class young women exhibit different, possibly more casual versions of 'femininity' depending on the occasion, e.g. they would allow themselves to wear jeans on a night out. However, although the middle-class young women included in the study asserted that they did not care very much about their appearance, they also admitted that when they are approached by a professional photographer in a club, they pose for the photos in an attempt to look attractive. It was also felt to be socially acceptable for middle-class young women to be photographed by each other in a way that they looked drunk, because they found it humorous.

The alcohol industry has been active in understanding and influencing young people's identity construction.

Lennox described alcohol promotions carried out by pub and club venues on Facebook, which used photos of actual costumers, presumably based on the premise that seeing friends attending clubs motivates others to go out to join them. This photographing was welcomed by the young people. They broadly felt that even though the venues are getting free advertising, costumers like to see themselves in nice photos. In any case, the images shown are precisely the types of images they wish to portray online. The Facebook posts by the venues also offer drinking promotions and motivate young people to organise their night out drinking in their establishments.

Issues raised in the discussion:

- Lennox had not specifically sought to analyse alcohol identity-related identity construction related to either ethnicity or sexual orientation as a
- Several people commented that Lennox's findings were relevant for learning for health promotion activities, emphasising that a 'one-size-fits-all' alcohol education campaign would not work. For example, going on these findings, a campaign telling people not to drink so they will not look drunk might have little impact on young men and young middle-class women.
- Having frequent (constant?) alcohol drinking featured on social media as acceptable and fun has implications for drinking awareness campaigns. It

central focus of her work. However, she had noted that a group of Greek men did not put photos online as this would breach their 'masculine' code. She also found that some drinks were favoured more by specific groups; for example, drinking Guinness seemed to be associated with an Irish identity.

was suggested that health promotion interventions in this field can be difficult, not least because people drink for a range of diverse reasons at different times. Moreover, in the context of 'fun' identity constructions, it is possible that young people do not allow themselves to talk about the negative effects of alcohol and their drinking behaviours; Lennox noted that her research participants did not mention being anxious about this.

- It was noted that the alcohol industry invests heavily in marketing to young people using social media. Although young people might believe that they are independently creating their identities online, this activity is highly influenced by others, including the alcohol industry, who promote drinking as central to the construction of a confident and outgoing social personality.



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SHAAP/SARN Alcohol Occasionals

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network (SARN) are delighted to announce the start of a series of lunchtime 'Alcohol Occasional' seminars to showcase new and innovative research on alcohol use.

All the seminars will be run in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and will take place from 12.30–14.00 at their historic premises at 9, Queen Street Edinburgh, EH2 1JQ. Lunch will be provided.

These events will provide the chance for researchers, practitioners and policy makers and members of the public to hear about new alcohol related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice.

The theme for the first year of the seminars is "Alcohol and Young People".

There is one seminar remaining on the calendar for December and uptake is expected to exceed capacity to book early to avoid disappointment.

The role of attitudes in shaping alcohol consumption and violent behaviour amongst young people in England and Wales

Dr Carly Lightowers, John Moores University, Liverpool, 19th December 2013

RSVP by 06.12.13: If you would like to attend this event, please email Anne-Marie Barry on shaap@rcpe.ac.uk to confirm. Lunch will be provided.