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Young Adults and Online Drinking Identities

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Introduction

The meanings and functions of alcohol consumption depend upon the social and cultural environments in which it takes place (see Sect. 2). Factors such as age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and socio-economic status also work together to impact the meanings, functions and experiences of drinking alcohol (Day, 2012; Hunt & Antin, 2019; Lyons, McCreanor, Goodwin, & Moewaka Barnes, 2017). Alcohol has long been linked to creating and performing specific identities, particularly among youth and young adults. This chapter provides an overview of some of the research on young adults, alcohol consumption and identities, before turning our attention to the rapidly changing digital environment and social media. Social media are essential to consider in any work exploring young people's lives and identities, given that they are now the fundamental infrastructure for young people's social worlds in Western societies (Dobson, Robards, & Carah, 2018). The chapter also explores how social media have changed drinking practices and cultures, and the implications of this for young people's identities, focusing on gender identities primarily.

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Finally, the chapter considers social media platforms in terms of their recent mobility on smartphones, their diversity and their commercialised nature, drawing on recent research to show how they may open up new opportunities for youth to develop their identities around drinking.

Youth and young adults drink more alcohol, and drink more frequently, than other population groups (e.g. World Health Organisation, 2018). Recent surveys conducted in Western societies show that overall alcohol consumption is declining in teenagers (Livingston & Vashishtha, 2019), although this decline is apparent in younger teenagers rather than older teenagers or adults, suggesting there is a delay in starting to drink (Twenge & Park, 2019). Furthermore, even in younger teenagers there are some groups whose consumption levels have stayed the same or increased, including ethnic minorities and those with poor mental health (Fat, Shelton, & Cable, 2018). Subgroups of heavier younger drinkers have also not displayed decreased consumption levels, perhaps due to homogenous drinking groups where (heavy) drinking is normative (Caluzzi, 2019).

There has also been a global convergence of young people's drinking cultures. Gordon, Heim and MacAskill (2012) have argued that the dichotomy between 'wet' and 'dry' drinking cultures that has been such a feature of European drinking cultures in the past is no longer relevant (Chap. 7). This is due to a shift in many societies towards more liberalised alcohol policies, as well as multinational alcohol corporations and a globalised culture of social media. Many young people drink heavily, actively seeking intoxication and drunkenness, because it is fun, pleasurable and social (see Chap. 1). Researchers have conceptualised such drinking patterns using notions of 'determined drunkenness' and 'calculated hedonism' where young people actively aim to drink until intoxicated as a form of pleasure, excitement and self-expression (Measham, 2006, 2011; Measham & Brain, 2005; Szmigin et al., 2008). Research highlights a number of reasons why young people engage in drinking to intoxication with groups of friends. These include providing ways to challenge or escape (albeit temporarily) social roles and societal expectations (Bannister & Paicentini, 2008; Haydock, 2016), as well as to build friendships and collective forms of belonging (Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, 2013; Szmigin et al., 2008). They also use alcohol to explore, create and perform their identities (Lennox, Emslie, Sweeting, & Lyons, 2018).

Young Adults, Alcohol Consumption and Identities

Much of the research in the field of alcohol and identities has focused on gender, and particularly masculinities and femininities. Traditionally, consuming alcohol in public, and drinking beer, was a male past-time linked to masculine identities (Lemle & Mishkind, 1989). Research has shown that drinking to intoxication has been a way for young men to demonstrate hegemonic masculinity in Western societies (Campbell, 2000; Hunt & Antin, 2019; Peralta, 2007; Willott & Lyons, 2012). With changes in drinking contexts, such as an increase in women's drinking, greater diversity in places to drink and a greater choice of alcoholic products, there are alternative masculine identities available in relation to alcohol consumption and drinking practices (Emslie, Hunt, & Lyons, 2013; Mullen, Watson, Swift, & Black, 2007; Thurnell-Read, 2011). Some young men also use alcohol to engage in alternative masculine identities, such as portraying particular class identities through specific products (e.g. drinking 'craft' beer vs. lager; Lyons, 2009; Lyons & Gough, 2017; Mullen et al., 2007). Furthermore, alcohol has been found to provide a way for men to transgress notions of dominant (heterosexual) masculinity by allowing behaviour that is not associated with masculinity, such as sharing and displaying emotion to other men (Emslie et al., 2013; Peralta, 2008) and engaging in homosexual behaviour (Peralta, 2008).

Historically, women's drinking was considered non-respectable and unfeminine (Ettore, 2004), associated with lower- or working-class women (Lindsay & Supski, 2017). This has changed in recent years with women's increased economic and social freedoms (Lyons & Willott, 2008). Most women engage in particular forms of drinking, drinking particular products, and drinking in particular ways, to produce idealised notions of femininities. However, while a drinking femininity is acceptable, a 'drunken femininity' is not (Hutton, Griffin, Lyons, Niland, & McCreanor, 2016). The 'ladette' culture of the 1990s and 2000s in the UK saw young women challenging gender stereotypes around alcohol by engaging in patterns of drinking and behaviour traditionally associated with young men ('lads'). This included drinking beer and drinking excessively in public, behaving boisterously, assertively, drunkenly and outrageously. Such behaviour drew severe criticism of young—particularly working-class—women in the UK press, where ladettes became the 'figurehead of the British tabloid newspaper portrayal of the so-called binge drinking epidemic' (Watts, Linke, Murray, & Barker, 2015, p.220). Media accounts portrayed these young women as lacking

self-control and self-esteem, thus transgressing social norms and expectations around femininity. This led to moral panic about women's drinking (Day, Gough, & McFadden, 2004), highlighting ongoing gendered double standards around alcohol consumption and drinking patterns.

Young women's drinking has also been linked to broader theorisations of neoliberal imperatives that individuals should be actively engaged in continual self-transformation and improvement, performing authentic feminine identities in the night time economy (Goodwin, Griffin, Lyons, McCreanor, & Moewaka Barnes, 2016; Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, & Mistral, 2013). By engaging in cultures of intoxication, young women have been drinking in more traditional masculine ways, transgressing ideal femininity, although many—particularly middle-class women—are also feminising these practices (Lyons & Willott, 2008). They are drinking heavily, but drinking more 'feminine' drinks, such as sparkling wine, drinking in glamorous places, such as clubs and bars, and feminising their appearance through make-up and clothing. In whatever ways they engage in cultures of intoxication, women face contradictions in creating their identities as they are expected drink heavily but at the same time maintain a hypersexual and attractive appearance (Griffin et al., 2013; Lindsay & Supski, 2017).

More recent research has explored the role of social practices around alcohol consumption for both sexual and gender identities (Hunt, Antin, Sanders, & Sisneros, 2019). This work highlights the importance of safe and comfortable spaces where hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity are absent or less dominant for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people to socialise and engage in identity performances involving alcohol consumption (Hunt et al., 2019). Other work also demonstrates that people consume particular drinks to convey or express specific sexual identities and to challenge dominant preconceptions about gender (Emslie, Lennox, & Ireland, 2017). Gender also intersects with class in creating particular identities (e.g. Bailey, Griffin, & Shankar, 2015). Thus research suggests there are many ways in which alcohol consumption is linked to creating identities in young people. In recent years this has shifted, as it has extended into new digital environments with the proliferation of new technologies and social media platforms.

Alcohol Consumption, Social Media and Creating Identities

Young people have enthusiastically embraced emerging digital technologies, particularly social media platforms. Social media are digital technologies that allow people to interact, share and consume online content. They have become increasingly diverse and include social networking sites that tend to have profiles, feeds, comments and can be public, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WeChat and Twitter, as well as social media platforms that allow communication and sharing of digital content with others—both individuals and groups—such as WhatsApp, Snapchat and Viber. The latter were developed primarily for use on mobile devices; some social networking sites have their own mobile messaging platforms, such as Facebook Messenger and WeChat Messenger. Social media platforms are central to young people's processes of identity construction (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), allowing them to express, explore and experiment with their identities (Gündüz, 2017). They can be viewed as 'identity-making toolboxes' for young people (Doster, 2013, p. 267). These platforms now play a key part in many young people's drinking practices, and in their associated identity practices and displays (Lyons et al., 2017).

Contemporary online drinking cultures include a diverse range of content and activities, such as posting and sharing photos and videos of drinking occasions, organising social events, socialising online while preloading (see Chap. 13) in different locations, meeting up, hooking up, commenting and tagging on alcohol-related content, hashtagging and communicating about alcohol-sponsored events, taking up promotions and engaging in competitions (e.g. see Moreno & Whitehill, 2016; Ridout, 2016; Westgate & Holliday, 2016 for overviews). Research has explored the ways in which young adults use social media in their drinking practices and their drinking cultures more generally to perform and forge their identities (e.g. Goodwin & Griffin, 2017; Lindsay & Supski, 2017). This work highlights how identity is created through both offline socialising and online sociality, which is the crux of social media platforms. Drinking-related activities on social media function to reinforce and maintain young adults' friendships and social relationships (e.g. Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, 2015), solidifying bonds between people and creating identities linked to friendship groups and friendship practices. Young people share images and posts on social media of themselves and their friends engaging in drinking practices, representations that have become integral to drinking as a locus of identity for young adults. This online material gains a

lot of attention, and often gets circulated around networks as humorous and fun content within and beyond peer networks (Carah & Dobson, 2016; Lyons, Goodwin, Griffin, McCreanor, & Moewaka Barnes, 2016).

These practices take place within an online environment in which alcohol-related content is pervasive, and contributes to the normalisation of drinking and alcohol within young people's everyday lives (Cavazos-Rehg, Krauss, Sowles, & Bierut, 2015; Nicholls, 2012). According to Westgate and Holliday (2016), posting and engaging with alcohol-related online content affects perceived social norms and the creation of individual and group identities. Research demonstrates that the sheer amount of alcohol content on social networking sites affects alcohol consumption through influencing social norms (Ridout, 2016; Westgate & Holliday, 2016). Yet young people also exercise considerable agency in curating online individual and collective identities through alcohol consumption practices, sharing content, communicating, uploading photos and performing particular kinds of online drinking identities. Importantly, young people are encouraged, in both online and offline spaces, to perform a 'calculated hedonism' where conspicuous (and over-) consumption of alcohol are celebrated, although simultaneously bodily control and deportment are expected (Szmigin et al., 2008).

While these virtual spaces and practices provide important ways through which young adults craft and actively create their own identities, how this plays out—and the work involved—varies across social dimensions such as gender, class and ethnicity, and the intersectionality of these dimensions. Factors such as gender influence how young adults take part in and engage with online drinking cultures (e.g. Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Hutton et al., 2016; Moewaka Barnes, Niland, Samu, Sciasia, & McCreanor, 2017). As noted previously (Goodwin & Lyons, 2019), drinking and its online display is a way for young adults to exercise considerable agency as they narrate their own identities, but these practices can also reproduce broader power relations that limit, constrain or shape young adults' lives. This will be outlined more fully in the next section.

Masculinities and Femininities in Online Drinking Cultures

Within online drinking cultures, research suggests that societal expectations of appropriate and inappropriate masculinities and femininities are negotiated as young people display, share and comment on drinking photos on

social media (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Dobson, 2014). Social media platforms, and social networking sites particularly, have always been used as a way for users to construct and perform gendered identities (Cook & Hasmath, 2014). Generally, such performances reflect traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (e.g. Haferkamp, Eimler, Papadakis, & Kruck, 2012; Kapidzic & Herring, 2014). In an early study in this field, Mendelson and Papacharissi (2010) explored the photos on US college students' personal Facebook photo galleries, and found that women had more casual photos and photos that involved sexy and flirtatious posing. Men tended to have more formal photos that emphasised friendships and 'drinking buddies'. The researchers concluded that posting and sharing drinking photos enabled users to perform gendered identities (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010).

The practices involved in sharing drinking-related content on social media platforms are themselves gendered, highlight how these issues go beyond online representations of gender. Taking and uploading photos, checking, tagging and untagging during a night out drinking with friends have been found to be practices engaged in more frequently, and more intensely, by young women (Goodwin et al., 2016; Lyons et al., 2016). Women also engage in much greater self-surveillance during drinking practices than men, orienting to cameras and ensuring their appearance is appropriate, as well as checking, deleting and untagging photos on Facebook (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Hutton et al., 2016; Lyons et al., 2016). Drinking photos appear to be highly valued by both men and women, although the acceptability of the 'drunken' photo was much greater for men than women (Hutton et al., 2016). Unruly, unrestrained and carnivalesque-type behaviours are expected and also highly valued among young men during events that involve excessive drinking (e.g. Hubbard, 2013; Thurnell-Read, 2011); indeed, the loss of bodily control during these situations is 'condoned and encouraged within the strictures of hegemonic masculinity' (Thurnell-Read, 2011, p. 978).

In the UK, research has examined the Facebook photographs of white, heterosexual male university students and found over half of these photos involved alcohol, drinking and partying (Scoats, 2015). Many of the drinking-related photos involved displays of homosocial behaviours (e.g. men touching, kissing and dancing together), reinforcing previous findings that alcohol enables transgression of heteronormative boundaries (de Visser & Smith, 2007; Peralta, 2008). With the advent of social media, these transgressions can be captured and posted online. Although they may suggest there is a broadening of acceptable masculinities in certain circumstances, often gender transgressions are posted ironically by (privileged) young men in their identity performances, while dominant forms of masculinity are reinforced (Manago,

2013; Nagel & Mora, 2010). Such transgressions, therefore, can effectively function to reinforce heteronormativity by positioning them as a 'spectacle', enabled through (apparent) excessive drinking, and thus highlighting that they are not normally acceptable within the group.

While much of the research exploring identities within online drinking cultures has focused on gendered identities, some has examined how gender intersects with other aspects of identity, such as class and ethnicity. Little research work has explored sexuality, or forms of non-binary gender identities. Initial research has found that in the UK, class intersects heavily with depictions—and judgements—of women's drinking online (Bailey & Griffin, 2017). Here the concern for achieving respectable femininities while drinking on a night out, and ensuring online displays represent such respectability, is important for many young women. Working-class women drinkers are 'othered' and positioned in derogatory ways due to not meeting the standards of 'respectable' femininities (Bailey & Griffin, 2017; Lennox et al., 2018). The performances of femininities in online drinking cultures reflect the contradictory pressures young women experience in public drinking spaces (Lindsay & Supski, 2017).

Ethnicity is also important in processes of online identity creation, although again there has been little research in this field. Moewaka-Barnes and colleagues (Moewaka Barnes et al., 2017) explored young Māori, Pasifika and Pākehā New Zealanders' drinking practices and the role of social networking sites in their drinking cultures. They highlighted that cultural factors influenced social media use and representations of drinking online, while societal power relations meant that some groups were much more reluctant to engage in portrayals of drinking online. It is important for future research to consider intersectional identities, drinking practices and online drinking cultures, as these highlight social power relations that are often left unseen. The changing nature of the digital environment is also highly relevant to young people's identities within online drinking cultures.

The Shifting Social Media Environment: Multiple and Mobile Platforms

Although much of the previous research on young adults, online identities, drinking practices and cultures focused on Facebook (Boyle, Earle, LaBrie, & Ballou, 2017), the recent proliferation of social media has meant that young people now use multiple platforms that are more image-based (e.g. Instagram) with content that is not as permanent (e.g. Snapchat) (Anderson & Jiang,

2018). As young people manage multiple social media platforms, social norms and practices are evolving around what is acceptable and desirable to post on different platforms (and what is not; Boczkowski, Matassi, & Mitchelstein, 2018). These have implications for alcohol use and identity performances.

Previous research into drinking cultures highlights how drinking photos have been a key part of young adults' Facebook content (Goodwin et al., 2016), and central to drinking cultures and identity performances across Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and WhatsApp (see Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016 for more detail). People have different expectations around the kinds of drinking photos and content that should appear on different social media sites, thereby potentially creating a range of identities—simultaneously—often for different audiences (Zhao, Lampe, & Ellison, 2016). In a study employing hypothetical, photographic vignettes of alcohol consumption, Boyle et al. (2017) found that young adults viewed Instagram as where they would likely see attractive and glamorous photos, and Snapchat as where they would likely see photos depicting the negative consequences of drinking. Other work has found that alcohol was positively and socially framed on both Facebook and Instagram, promoting young adults' drinking (Hendriks, den Putte, Winifed, & Moreno, 2018). Glamorous depictions of alcohol use 'fit' with Instagram, a space that is tailored to stylised self-presentations, while more negative depictions 'fit' with the temporary and more playful nature of Snapchat (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Boyle et al., 2017).

Evidence suggests that drinking cultures are 'airbrushed' on social media sites where content is more permanent (such as Facebook) to present positive, fun and enjoyable images and content about drinking with friends (Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, 2014), and desirable identity performances (Hutton et al., 2016; Lyons et al., 2016). By excluding explicit images or content about the negative outcomes of drinking events and practices, drinking cultures reinforce and normalise the view that drinking alcohol is always pleasurable without negative consequences, and always involves positive and desirable gender and identity displays. In contrast, as a platform in which content disappears after a few seconds, Snapchat is perceived to be appropriate to share more negative content around drinking (Boyle et al., 2017). This sharing may be important given that young adults often share and re-work their 'negative' drinking events into 'good drinking stories' that function to reinforce friendships and have a laugh (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009). Such sharing may also make it possible for young people to portray less conventionally desirable identity displays, and engage in a broader range of identity performances with friends. The temporary nature of Snapchat posts and Instagram stories may be particularly valuable for

drinkers who feel they could be marginalised for their drinking, so this provides a way to share with friends without the potential of disapproval from others within their broader networks with whom they do not want to share drinking photos.

The widespread availability and use of smartphones has also led to an intensification of social media use. Smartphones have become increasingly embedded within everyday life (Mackey, 2016), providing young people with access to ubiquitous virtual environments that are increasingly where social life is playing out (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Twenge, 2017). This allows for continuous access to 'mobile' social media platforms, providing an environment in which physical and virtual worlds are enmeshed. Mobile social media allow young people to micro-coordinate their social and drinking events (Bertel & Ling, 2016) and share their 'fun' drinking photos with friends in the moment, enhancing the pleasure they get from drinking with friends (e.g. Lyons & Willott, 2008; Niland et al., 2013). Furthermore, while getting ready to go out drinking with friends and/or while preloading (Chap. 13) prior to a night out, young adults can be, and are often expected to be, in continual contact with friends who are getting ready and preloading in other places (McCreanor et al., 2016). This intensification of social media use in drinking practices and cultures—used routinely and regularly on smartphones, and in different ways on different platforms—enables users more flexibility to construct their individual and collective identities through alcohol consumption. However, this intensification is occurring on platforms owned by corporations that have profit as their main goal.

The Commercial Nature of Social Media

Social media are commercialised platforms that operate through selling user-data to third parties. Alcohol companies and other commercial alcohol interests have been quick to use young adults' enthusiasm for sharing alcohol-related content on social media sites (Nicholls, 2012; Niland, McCreanor, Lyons, & Griffin, 2017). They use a range of sophisticated marketing techniques to promote drinking among young people, linking alcohol products to processes of identity creation (Lyons et al., 2017; McCreanor et al., 2013). The branded messages of corporate marketers are increasingly subtle, pervasive and tailored in real time to fit seamlessly with young people's identities and social practices (Carah & Angus, 2018; Niland et al., 2017). This makes it difficult to distinguish between user generated and commercial content on social media (Lyons et al., 2017).

The new marketing practices of alcohol corporations are more covert than 'offline' practices, mimicking user cultures, drawing on users' everyday identity-making processes and sociality and recruiting users to do free work for their brands. Young people's social activities while drinking reinforce individualised, branded identifications with drinks, venues and practices. Instagram influencers are sponsored to create user-generated branded content and post images with alcohol brand hashtags linked to specific highly valued cultural events (Carah, 2017). Such forms of digital alcohol marketing encourage both consumption-based identities and alcohol-driven socialising (McCreanor et al., 2013; Niland et al., 2017). Additionally, mobile social media platforms have locational affordances that allow commercial establishments to target and interact with young people as they engage in nights out drinking with their peers (Carah, 2014b). Social media marketing techniques based on virtual tracking allow commercial establishments to encourage young people to visit and attend specific nightlife locations and events (Carah & Dobson, 2016; Niland et al., 2017). Alcohol companies also encourage drinking and promote particular drinking identities by using augmented reality and immersive, interactive apps (e.g. Zaitsev, 2017).

Overall, marketing and branding activities used by alcohol companies within the evolving social media environment are highly effective and generate lucrative income from and for mobile social media platforms (Carah, 2014a; Carah & Angus, 2018). These changes have enhanced novel forms of (often real-time) alcohol marketing in ways that stimulate young people's drinking, socialising and identity work. A systematic review of 47 studies in this field concluded that young adults find alcohol-related branded marketing messages highly appealing, and also that exposure to digital alcohol marketing is linked with higher levels of drinking (Jernigan, Noel, Landon, Thornton, & Lobstein, 2017; Lobstein, Landon, Thornton, & Jernigan, 2017). This has led to public concerns about the difficulties of regulating the marketing of unhealthy commodities—including alcohol—on social media (Mart, 2017).

Conclusion

Diverse, mobile, 'always-on' social media open up a range of new opportunities for young people to develop their identities around alcohol consumption and drinking practices. They provide a way for young people to engage in processes of individual and collective forms of identity creation, but within an environment that is heavily laden with alcohol marketing. Social media are primarily visual, providing novel, immediate and fun ways for young people

to create their identities linked to drinking and socialising, although this is more easily achieved by some groups than others (Atkinson, Ross-Houle, Begley, & Sumnall, 2017; Lyons et al., 2017). Although they are commercialised platforms, social media also provide spaces of belonging where young people can engage with collective identities around alcohol consumption. Researchers need to expand their focus to the multiple forms of mobile social media platforms that diverse groups of young people are now using in their drinking cultures (Goodwin & Lyons, 2019), and consider what this means for their processes of identity construction across different social groups and in different geographical locations.

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