Alcohol, young people and the media: a study of radio output in six radio stations in England

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ABSTRACT

Background This research investigated the representation of alcohol in radio output. The study was prompted by concerns that media output might be part of a developing culture of excessive drinking among young people.

Methods Alcohol comments were examined across six radio stations in England. 1200 h of weekend output was screened and the sampling frame included periods when references to alcohol would be expected, such as the Christmas period. Statistical analysis identified the volume and proportion of comments, whereas qualitative analysis explored these in more depth, focusing on the themes and discourses surrounding alcohol talk.

Results Of 703 alcohol comments identified, 244 involved presenters. The volume of comments about alcohol varied between stations, being lower on BBC than on commercial stations and being influenced by music genre. Seventy-three percent of comments initiated by presenters, compared with 45% of comments from all sources, encouraged drinking. The majority of comments by presenters support drinking in relation to partying and socializing. Alcohol comments seem to create identity for programmes and forge connections between presenters and audiences, although some presenters achieve this without mentioning drinking. The assumption that alcohol is necessary to have a good time is seldom directly challenged.

Conclusions While it may be unsurprising that much of this content reflected themes of weekend drinking and partying, the study suggests that alcohol comments play a particular role in marketing and branding of radio output. Comments about alcohol are shaped by broadcasting conventions that make it difficult to challenge discourses surrounding excessive drinking. Further research is needed on the influence that radio output may have on drinking behaviour among young people.

Keywords alcohol consumption, young people

Introduction

Concerns about heavy drinking are long established in the UK.¹² Levels of alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems in the UK have risen during recent decades, in contrast with the patterns in most other Western European countries. There are concerns about ‘binge drinking’ or ‘risky episodic’ drinking, particularly among women, with levels among 15- and 16-year-old girls in the UK higher than among boys of the same age,³⁴ and many women aged 18–24 consuming the equivalent of at least a bottle of spirits each week.⁵ The problems associated with these trends have been acknowledged by the Government.⁶⁷ There are concerns about violent episodes triggered by heavy drinking as well as rising alcohol-related morbidity and mortality, with some teenage girls developing alcohol-related liver disease.⁸

The mass media is only one influence on social practices of alcohol consumption, and few researchers would suggest that media output directly shapes or influences drinking behaviour among young people. The role of the mass media may nevertheless be significant in relation to young people’s experiences. Although this study did not investigate the
‘reception’ by young people of alcohol-related messages in radio broadcasts, it is pertinent to note that the processes underpinning the reception of media messages remain the focus of considerable debate. For many years, the ‘encoding/decoding’ model has occupied a prominent position in media studies and has been used to emphasize the active nature of audiences, in particular, the capacity of audiences both to resist media-mediated messages and create their own interpretations of such messages. Evidence from more recent studies indicates that while audiences do sometimes process media messages in an active and critical manner, the media exert considerable influence on the development of social attitudes and behaviour.9

A recent review has explored research on the impact of media output on young people, focusing on relationships and social networks.10 This suggests that young people are not simply passive recipients of media messages. Rather, media representations of alcohol and drinking are mediated by and through the views of young people and of significant others in their immediate spheres. Nevertheless, the content provided by popular media consumed by young people does seem to play an important role in young people’s lives, providing scripts and associations that can help to mediate their negotiation and entry into social networks. This fact is recognized by commercial companies who attempt to co-opt definitions of youth and exploit the connection between them and drinking for economic gain.11

It is here where most public concern about media manipulation and alcohol consumption has focused.12 Alcoholic beverages and drinking them are widely discussed and presented by radio, television and other media that target young people. Much of this content contains mixed messages.13–16 While the evidence for a direct causal effect between media portrayals of alcohol and young people’s drinking patterns appears equivocal, with the media’s influence likely to be ‘subtle and insidious’,10 further research is needed before the notion of media influence can be dismissed.

Given the complexity of the issues and the diversity of media forms, targeted studies in specific areas are needed in order to progress understanding in this field. Radio is the focus of the current study. Within the UK, there is a common perception that radio output encourages excessive drinking.17 However, most of the research on this subject has been conducted outside the UK.18–24 Given current concerns about drinking among young people, there is a need to investigate in more depth the nature of alcohol references and representations in media output aimed at young people in the UK.

The current study focused on weekend radio output broadcast at times when it might be expected that young people will be drinking or preparing for a night’s drinking and socializing. The purpose of the study was not just to assess the volume of alcohol talk in radio output but also to assess the extent to which alcohol is implicated in notions and connections, such as those between ‘youth’ and ‘the weekend’ that may mediate young people’s individual and social experiences.

Research aims and methodology

The research sought to assess the volume and content of comments about alcohol in weekend radio output aimed at young people in England. A total of 1200 h of output from a purposive sample of radio stations across England (Fig. 1) were screened over nine consecutive weekends before and after Christmas 2007. The sample included the major publicly funded national radio stations targeting youth audiences as well as commercial stations focusing on specific regions and music genres such as Black music and rock music. The output tracked included a broad, eclectic mix of individual shows in regular time slots. All of the shows usually had one or more studio co-presenters and they invariably featured ‘new media’ audience interaction: often by telephone, sometimes via text and e-mail. The genre of shows ranged from the nation’s second most popular radio show The Chris Moyles Breakfast Show which is listened to by millions of people and features several co-presenters, celeb’ interviews, comic slots and music; through to niche programmes such as Simon James and Hill’s ‘Morning after show’ on the rock radio station Kerrang FM.

The amount of broadcast talk in programmes that constituted this sample was to some extent determined by the programme format. While the broadcast talk of presenters in some programmes was predominantly orientated to the music played, in the majority of programmes sampled, more interactive formats were apparent. In the latter, presenters’ broadcast talk involved interaction with either colleagues or ‘guests’ in the broadcasting studio, or with listeners (and on occasions colleagues) through phone-in’s, or, more indirectly, through the receipt of texts and email. A number of presenters regularly encouraged listeners to phone, text or email their show. Research in relation to British radio programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Coverage</th>
<th>Music genre</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radio 1</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>All types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xtra</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Black music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiss 101*</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>S.W. England and Wales</td>
<td>Black music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key 103</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Greater Manchester</td>
<td>All types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galaxy</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Birmingham</td>
<td>All types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerrang</td>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Birmingham</td>
<td>Rock</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Weeks 1–4 only.

Fig. 1 The sample of radio stations, their coverage and music genre.
indicates that the introduction of audience input into a broadcast is a highly routinized event.\textsuperscript{25,26} The sampling frame was limited to weekends and the included periods before the holiday period, which is intrinsically associated with drinking and socializing, and afterwards, where fewer comments about alcohol might be expected. The sample therefore allowed a detailed study not just of the volume of comments about alcohol but of the themes and discourses represented in alcohol talk. This allowed analysis of the role that alcohol comments play in constructing radio output. Full details of the methodology adopted are available in the project report.\textsuperscript{27}

Programmes were screened at 5-min intervals using a data extraction sheet to capture comments about alcohol from a number of sources including presenters, listeners, adverts and news. Where available, ‘listen again’ facilities were used for the screening. Where possible, programmes were recorded for back-up purposes and when ‘listen again’ facilities were unavailable the protocol was applied to pre-recorded material using windows media player. This approach captured a random sample of comments but could not capture every reference to alcohol. In order to validate the research approach, a purposive subsample of 10 programmes (25 h and 15 min of broadcasting) was identified for detailed analysis. This subsample included Friday shows, as alcohol was more likely mentioned by presenters on Friday evenings. However, it included shows broadcast throughout the day and encompassed five stations, hence it reflected the range of comments about alcohol. These programmes were listened to in full and all alcohol-related presenter comments were noted. The volume of comments identified in these programmes was compared with that identified in prior screening of the same programmes. The analysis suggests that the screening method captured over three quarters of relevant material.

For the qualitative analysis, all significant comments about alcohol by presenters that were identified in screening were transcribed verbatim. This reflects a conservative approach to data collection since only comments directly referring to alcohol were included. For example, a passing reference to ‘going to the pub’ was not necessarily assumed to be about alcohol unless some further comment about drinking was made. It was our aim to explore the discourses used by presenters and listeners to understand their representations of alcohol to see if they were contributing to a ‘subtle and insidious’ normalized portrayal of alcohol on radio output aimed at young people. Informing the qualitative analysis of data were three premises derived from discourse research. First, there was a concern with the content and organization of broadcast talk. Second, broadcast talk was seen as constitutive: the alcohol-related talk by presenters, their co-presenters and callers, was construed as helping to construct particular identities, social relations and versions of reality. Third, broadcast talk was therefore viewed as performing certain social actions.\textsuperscript{28,29}

In addition, four case study programmes broadcast outside of the Christmas period with relatively high levels of alcohol content involving the presenter were analyzed. The case studies encompass four of the stations screened: no programmes from 1Xtra or Kiss 101, where presenter comments tend to be fleeting, met the inclusion criteria. These programmes made up 10 h and 30 min of broadcast time.

The statistical data were analyzed using SPSS for windows, whereas the qualitative analysis identified key themes and discourses about alcohol.

## Results

A total of 703 alcohol-related extracts were identified during 1200 h of screening, 244 of which involved presenters initiating or responding to a comment about alcohol. Variations in the volume of comments across the sample were found (Table 1). The volume of comments varied between stations and was influenced by seasonal factors, such as Christmas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discouraging excessive drinking</th>
<th>Neither encouraging nor discouraging alcohol consumption</th>
<th>Encouraging alcohol consumption</th>
<th>Encouraging excessive drinking</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radio 1</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>11 (55%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>2 (10%)</td>
<td>11 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1Xtra</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>6 (50%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiss 101</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3 (75%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key 103</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>6 (21%)</td>
<td>15 (52%)</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galaxy Birmingham</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>9 (17%)</td>
<td>29 (56%)</td>
<td>11 (21%)</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerrang! Radio</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>52 (84%)</td>
<td>7 (11%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
<td>34 (22%)</td>
<td>108 (60%)</td>
<td>24 (13%)</td>
<td>9 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References to alcohol diminished but did not disappear after Christmas. Broadcast sector also affected the volume of alcohol references, which were generally higher on commercial stations than on BBC stations (Fig. 2). The volume of comments was also influenced by music genre: hip-hop and Black music stations such as 1Xtra and Kiss 101 having a low density of comments compared with rock music station Kerrang!.

The study examined the types of messages contained in these comments. While less than half (45%) of the comments from all sources were found to encourage drinking, 73% of comments initiated by presenters encouraged drinking including 13% that appeared to encourage excessive drinking. Presenter comments about alcohol varied by radio station and broadcast sector, with comments supporting drinking more frequently broadcast on commercial radio and BBC presenters more likely to make neutral comments or comments discouraging excessive drinking (Table 1). However, while the volume of alcohol-related content varied across stations and programmes, it contained some consistent messages and reflects common themes about alcohol across the sample (Fig. 3).

Comments about excessive drinking can be difficult to separate from other comments about alcohol. Qualitative analysis suggests that comments about excessive drinking developed in a number of ways, described below. Importantly, these comments seem to reflect a relational process. In this sample, comments encouraging excessive drinking were more likely to be made when there is more than one presenter or contributor in the studio than in solo presenter broadcasts.

Presenters’ comments often encouraged drinking in relation to weekend partying and socializing, although this was not the only context in which drinking was discussed or presented in a positive light. The relational nature of comments about alcohol was also reflected in presenters’ responses to listeners’ comments. Listeners were generally more enthusiastic about alcohol than presenters, who sometimes responded neutrally when listeners talked about excessive drinking. However, while presenters occasionally advised listeners to keep ‘safe’, the assumption that drinking is necessary to have a good time was rarely directly challenged.

The main themes found in the data are now discussed.

**Weekend drinking and partying**

*Because weekends were made only to be vaguely recalled.*

(From a pre-recorded jingle)

The largest number of comments encouraging alcohol consumption made reference to the theme of partying and socializing. Hence, alcohol was positioned as a marker of the weekend, a time for leisure and celebration of the end of work. While alternative messages were found, the idea of choosing not to drink alcohol at times when drinking is expected, such as Christmas and New Year parties, was not mentioned as a realistic possibility.

While comments about excessive drinking are sometimes difficult to separate from those about drinking in general, the former group included some particular elements, such as a focus on the effects of too much alcohol. Having a hangover was often presented as a marker of having had a good night out, with some presenters modelling the idea of having a hangover in the studio. Another characteristic of many
comments that seem to encourage excessive drinking is their interactive quality, which is a feature of the new media, that seems more attractive to young people. Hence, these comments often occur in conversations between presenters, studio guests and contributors and audience members.

The analysis shows other ways in which comments about alcohol can extend to encourage excessive drinking, one of which is through the use of language. Hence, a rich vocabulary surrounded the party theme with many terms used to describe the effects of alcohol, such as getting ‘ruined’, ‘lashed’ and ‘crazy’.

Talk about excessive drinking often seemed to develop in instances where boundaries, such as the boundary between the broadcasting studio and social spaces occupied by young people, were blurred. Hence, ‘parties’ involving alcohol frequently took place in the studio around the Christmas period. In mainstream society, drinking at work is discouraged.

Comments about excessive drinking often drew on comedy, evoking a well-established tradition of British comedy in which the effects of excessive drinking are exploited for their comic effects. Comedy and ‘fun’ were often a feature of shows, serving to strengthen the appeal of the broadcast and to mitigate any offence that might be taken by discussion of ‘serious’ topics. The traditional slapstick comedy discourse was sometimes extended to reflect young peoples’ experiences and concerns, hence comments about late night ‘diddling’ and the condition of the toilet floors in nightclubs. Comedy also served to neutralize discussions about the more extreme effects of drinking, such as incontinence, and risk behaviours resulting from excessive drinking, such as drunk driving. Occasionally, producers intervened to draw presenters back, for example, when comments were made that seemed to encourage drinking and driving. These comments seemed to cross a boundary too far. However, in general, comment about drinking seemed to reflect an accepted culture in broadcasting to audiences that include young people.

**Alcohol and identity**

XX has celebrated her 34th Birthday and what way better to celebrate than to drink for 34 hours solid! I’d be crawling for my bed after about 4 hours but not XXX – she carried on like a real trooper and still managed to look gorgeous at the end of it.

(From a discussion between presenter and a regular contributor in a ‘celebrity news’ feature)

Alcohol was also positioned in relation to the theme of identity, including constructs of age and gender. For example, while presenters and listeners often complained about the effects of alcohol, such as ‘having a hangover’, there was a subtext in which participants seemed to bond over hangover stories. In these exchanges, being hangover seemed both a mark of pride as well as a means of separating young people from adults.

In several comments, alcohol was positioned as a marker of gender identity. Hence, drinking rituals were mentioned in the context of same sex solidarity as well in relation to shifting gender roles, as in comments about excessive drinking by ‘ladettes.’ Alcohol was also positioned as a support for young people negotiating potentially difficult or stressful situations including sexual encounters and relationships. Finally, alcohol references were used to challenge gender identity, for example, when one presenter jokingly challenged another’s masculinity by suggesting he was more at home in the bingo hall instead of the nightclub.

**Effects of excessive drinking**

Mixed messages were also found in the treatment of media stories about drinking and drug taking by celebrities. On the one hand, news items portrayed the effects of excessive drinking by celebrities in a discouraging light, focusing on negative aspects. However, their inclusion reflects an assumption that these stories appeal to listeners’ interests and aspirations. This double standard was also reflected in presenter talk, including talk with and about bands and celebrities, some of which appeared to represent partying and excessive drinking in a positive, humorous light. Double standards were also reflected in comments that parody the notion of ‘responsible drinking’ favoured by the alcohol industry.

**Limiting drinking**

Not all the comments by presenters encouraged drinking. One-fifth was classified as neither encouraging nor discouraging alcohol consumption, rising to two-fifths of comments made in response to a comment by a member of the audience. Further analysis revealed a number of discourses reflected in these ‘neutral’ comments as well as those discouraging excessive drinking. These include the need to limit drinking because of specific considerations such as safety; health, illness and pregnancy; work and family or domestic responsibilities.

**Branding**

The data suggest that comments about alcohol play a significant role in some stations and programmes. These comments may contribute to identity and branding of radio output. A most basic challenge facing radio presenters and producers is that of generating and retaining audiences. The style, tone and content of shows and the personalities of presenters and co-contributors are important elements in
branding and forging connections with listeners. It is in this context that comments about alcohol are made or avoided. For example, some stations and programmes seem to appeal to audiences by emphasising ‘fun’, joviality and mild transgression. This can proscribe content that is too ‘serious’ or controversial, undermining messages such as ‘responsible drinking.’ It can also influence talk about alcohol, for instance, through comic references to ‘laddishness’ and drunken behaviour. Hence, production values can sometimes encourage content as well as performance styles that reinforce particular constructions of alcohol and undermine health promotion messages. This suggests that the responsibility for alcohol-related messages does not lie exclusively with radio presenters.

Discussion

Main findings of this study

This study identified a total of 704 alcohol references in 1200 h of radio broadcasts from a purposive sample of radio stations broadcasting in England over a 9-week period from 13 December 2007. A total of 244 of the comments involved presenters. The majority of the comments by presenters support drinking and a proportion (13%) appear to support excessive drinking. One-fifth of comments made by presenters are neutral, and a very small number of comments directly discourage excessive drinking. Some comments by presenters that appear to discourage excessive drinking contain mixed messages or are delivered in a comic way.

Comments encouraging alcohol are most often made in discussions about weekend partying and socializing. In these exchanges, alcohol is positioned as a natural and necessary marker of the weekend. While other themes and messages exist, the notion that drinking is necessary to have a good time is seldom directly challenged.

The boundary between comments about drinking and comments about excessive drinking is not necessarily fixed. The analysis shows a number of ways in which comments about alcohol can extend to encourage excessive drinking through language, genre, comedy, ambiguity and boundary blurring. The analysis also reveals the way in which the production values that shape radio output can influence constructs of alcohol and potentially undermine public health messages.

The proportion of radio output that seems to encourage excessive drinking varies across stations and programmes. This pattern of variation can be to some extent explained by analysis of the way in which alcohol contributes to identity and branding of radio output as well as to the forging of connections between presenters and listeners.

What is already known on this topic

Patterns of rising alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems in the UK have been contrasted with the patterns in most other Western European countries. There is particular concern about levels of alcohol consumption among young people.

The topic of alcohol is widely covered in UK media, and research suggests that much of this content contains mixed messages. While there is a perception that factors such as radio output may encourage excessive drinking, most of the research on this subject has been conducted outside the UK. Hence, research is needed in specific national contexts in order to understand the role and impact of alcohol-related media output on young people.

This research shows that we need to understand representations of drinking in terms of symbolic meanings and examine alcohol consumption in a cultural context in order to better understand why young people drink. Radio like other media provide a ‘subtle and insidious’ discourse on alcohol which is accepted as normal by presenters and young people alike. In fact, their interactions can normalize excess:

Caller . . . down the motorway taking my little boy to my mum’s so I can go out on the razz!
P Yes, yes – you go girl.
Caller Yeah!
P Bet you deserve it.
Caller Work bloody hard I do.
P You go out and have a bloody good time!

(From a phone-in discussion between presenter and caller)

What this study adds

The study shows that current radio output in UK stations aimed at young people tends to encourage drinking by reflecting the branding and discourses of radio shows and their presenters. Given that the sample was limited to weekend output and included the holiday period, this may not be surprising. However, the study explored not only the volume of comments about alcohol but of the themes and discourses represented in alcohol talk and the role that alcohol comments play in constructing radio output. Further, the study also suggests that responsibility for the 13% of this radio output that might be seen to support excessive drinking does not lie exclusively with radio presenters. Hence, comments about alcohol reflect particular production values. This can be seen in comments that follow on from ‘entertainment news’ and ‘celebrity gossip’ features. Production values that emphasize ‘fun’, ‘joviality’ and mild transgression can sometimes undermine ‘serious’ content such as ‘responsible drinking’ messages in advertising.
A key question is whether radio output influences young people’s attitudes and behaviour or merely reflects dominant cultural values. Further research is needed to address this question. However, the current study addresses this in part by identifying instances where presenters’ comments about alcohol seem to actively construct and extend the dominant discourse as well as instances where presenters limit alcohol talk. Of interest are instances where connections with listeners are forged through the blurring of boundaries between the broadcasting studio and young people’s social spaces, where presenters model excessive drinking in the studio, and where listeners who challenge presenters’ comments about alcohol are marginalized.

Some presenters successfully create identity and connect with listeners without mentioning drinking and some shows have few or no references to alcohol. While these presenters do not challenge alcohol discourses directly, they model alternative behaviours and send strong signals, for example, by simply ignoring comments from listeners or others about alcohol. This suggests that individual presenters and producers can choose whether and how to employ alcohol in branding and marketing of radio output.

Limitations of this study

The methodology sought to identify the volume and proportion of alcohol comments broadcast by these stations mainly at weekends. The screening method captured a random sample of comments but was not able to capture every comment. However, the results of a validation exercise suggest that the study was able to capture three quarters of relevant material.

The impact of radio output on young people’s attitudes and behaviour is difficult to address in a study focusing on broadcast material alone. However, we suggest that a ‘subtle and insidious’ alcohol discourse exists in some radio output aimed at young people and that the significance of alcohol increases when shows become interactive. To fully address the impact of this effect would require the use of methodologies such as interviews and observation of young people. Hence, further research is needed on the impact of radio and media output about alcohol on young peoples’ attitudes and behaviour.

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