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Risk, Control and Hyper-Moderation Amongst Generation Z

Once overwhelmingly associated with the 'calculated hedonism' of binge drinking, youth drinking is in a condition of sustained decline in the UK and non-drinking has become common. This chapter uses moderation as a lens through which to examine how young people today understand and act upon the connections between alcohol, risk and control. It discusses findings from a large survey of young people (aged 18-25) who drink little or no alcohol, and focus groups with members of non-drinking university student societies. It examines participants' understandings of moderate drinking and the constellation of concerns that were used to explain or justify these, such as physical health, mental health and vulnerability to crime. Three principal conclusions arise from this analysis. Firstly, in contrast to the definitions within scientific and political discourse, our participants conceive moderation in a primarily qualitative way. Occasionality, non-intoxication and the pursuit of pleasure through taste are key phenomenological concerns that give meaning to moderation within the lived experiences of our participants. Secondly, our participants largely adopted 'hyper-moderate' views of drinking in which normatively desirable drinking practices are conceived as much closer to total abstinence than to more traditional conceptions of moderation. This hyper-moderation is underpinned by a strong desire for personal control and a clear preference for the avoidance of risk, rather than its mitigation. Finally, the chapter considers the possibility that a trend towards hyper-moderation amongst 'Generation Z' may help to explain the decline in youth drinking and emerging inter-generational differences in drinking practices.

Introduction.

In recent decades, excessive drinking and young people have been inseparable in public, political and academic debates on alcohol in the UK. The association of young people with problematic drinking has been apparent since at least the 1960s (Yeomans, 2014) and attracted increased attention in the early twenty-first century, with 'binge drinking' emerging as the preferred description of excessive youth

drinking practices (Critcher, 2008; Berridge et al, 2009; Hayward and Hobbs, 2009). Binge drinking was widely condemned in the 2000s; Prime Minister Tony Blair called it a “new British disease” (BBC News, 2004) and newspaper columns were filled with lurid descriptions of ‘booze Britain’, as well as salacious images of drunken young people – usually female – in various states of public intoxication (Critcher, 2008; J. Nicholls, 2010). Despite these representations of unbridled hedonism, academic studies found a different reality. Although actively pursuing intoxication, young people were doing so in a manner that mitigated certain risks by, for example, ensuring they retained the capacity to safely negotiate the journey home, avoid violent confrontations or take action to minimise hangovers (Measham, 2004; Measham and Brain, 2005; Szmigin et al, 2008). Binge drinking thus came to be understood as at least partly calculated; not pure hedonistic abandon but a “controlled loss of control” (Measham and Brain, 2005: 273). This chapter revisits the connections between risk, control and young people’s alcohol consumption in an era of declining drinking.

Alcohol consumption in the UK began a sustained decline in the mid-2000s, falling by 17% between 2004 and 2016 (BBPA, 2017). Within this broader decline, there has been a more pronounced reduction amongst young people in the UK and many other Western countries. The fact that this decreasing drinking is mirrored by concurrent reductions in smoking, un-protected sex and other ‘risky’ behaviours has led to ‘Generation Z’, or those born roughly between the mid-1990s and the 2000s, being dubbed a ‘Generation Sensible’ (BBC, 2018). It is, therefore, an opportune moment to re-examine the role of risk and control within the drinking behaviours of young people. The intuitive means to achieve this might be to repeat the sort of research with young drinkers that Fiona Measham and others conducted in the 2000s. But, from our perspective, the most striking aspect of recent changes to young people’s drinking is not the decline in excessive drinking but the dramatic growth of moderation. UK survey data has found decreasing levels of heavy drinking as well as increased teetotalism amongst 16-24 year olds (NHS, 2018; ONS, 2018). Remarkably, the 16-24 age bracket now contains a higher proportion of non-drinkers and low risk drinkers (81%) than any other age group except the over-75s (NHS, 2018). For this reason, this chapter deviates from the orthodox preoccupation of alcohol studies with excess and instead concentrates upon moderation. Taking this

less trodden path leads us to an intriguing set of questions. What is moderation? How is it understood by young people today? How do these understandings shape the drinking habits of Generation Z? These questions are central to the analysis and discussion presented here.

This chapter examines understandings of moderation amongst young people aged 18-25 in the UK who drink little or no alcohol through a survey and an accompanying set of focus groups conducted with members of non-drinking student societies at UK universities. While some participants abstain totally from alcohol, the majority are occasional drinkers who do consume alcohol in certain contexts, at certain times and in limited quantities. As such, this chapter is distinctive as a dedicated study of how moderation is understood by young people who actively avoid or routinely moderate their alcohol consumption. Eschewing the abstract constructions of moderation that dominate scientific and political discourse, it builds on a growing body of mainly qualitative research that examines the meanings attached to drinking by 'moderate', 'sensible' or 'light' drinkers themselves (e.g. Thurnell-Read, 2016; Caluzzi et al, 2020; E. Nicholls, 2021). In doing so, it provides insights which are relevant to ongoing efforts to explain the continuing decline in youth drinking across many Western countries (see Room et al, 2019; Mansson et al, 2020). Plus, as a specific case study of UK university students, this chapter helps make sense of how the general changes in young people's behaviour have been enacted and experienced by one particular – and, for our purposes, particularly interesting - section of the young adult population. Student drinking culture has traditionally been seen as excessive (Piacentini and Bannister, 2006), but the recent spread of non-drinking or 'sober' societies at UK universities and the creation of 'alcohol free' university accommodation provide cause to question whether this remains true. The specific concentration here upon UK university students thus allows us to consider ongoing changes to student drinking culture as well as generationally specific understandings of moderation, situated with reference to the broader decline of youth drinking.

Moderation and Hyper-moderation

Moderation is usually defined as the “avoidance of excess or extremes in behaviour” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021). It follows that moderate drinking must exist somewhere between the extremes of excessive drinking on the one hand and total, permanent abstinence from alcohol on the other. It is common to turn to official government guidelines on recommended maximum alcohol intake to identify exactly where, between these extremes, moderate drinking is located. The current UK guidelines recommend that men and women should not regularly consume more than 112 grammes of pure alcohol per week (14 units). Controlling personal consumption in this way will, it is explained, reduce the health risks associated with drinking (UK Government, 2016). Exactly how much drinking is ‘too much’ remains unclear, however. The association between quantities of alcohol consumed and risk of illness varies between different health conditions. Drinking seems to have a linear relationship with some health conditions in which risk rises in proportion to increases in consumption, but the relationship with other conditions is curvilinear or shaped by a threshold of risk reached at a certain level of consumption. The relationship between average risk within a population and the risk to any one individual, with their unique genetics, health and other characteristics, further complicates attempts to define what level of drinking is definitively unsafe (Furtwaengler and De Visser, 2013; Yeomans, 2013). These aetiological complexities are part of the reason why drinking guidelines vary so much internationally. Furtwangler and De Visser’s survey of the drinking guidelines in 57 countries concludes that there is “a remarkable lack of agreement about what constitutes harmful or excessive alcohol consumption” (2013: 11). Moderate drinking is therefore an amorphous concept that takes different forms in the drinking guidelines of different countries.

Constructions of moderation also vary through time. The Royal College of Physicians’ (RCP) 1987 recommendation that women limit their drinking to 112g of alcohol per week (14 units) and men to 168g (21 units) superseded earlier, more generous expert guidance and became the basis for UK policy (see Thom, 1999). The UK guidelines were tightened further in 2016 when the Chief Medical Officer asserted that neither women nor men should exceed 14 UK units per week (UK Government, 2016). For specific groups (e.g., pregnant women) and for the general population, moderation in alcohol consumption is thus being gradually reconstructed as something defined by progressively smaller quantities of alcohol consumption.

This process, whereby the definition of moderation in alcohol policy is morphing from a notional midpoint between the extremes of excess and abstinence into something increasingly proximal to abstinence, has been termed 'hyper-moderation' (Yeomans, 2013). Hyper-moderation might seem an unsurprising process if changes in official advice followed advances in scientific knowledge highlighting new or greater risks inherent in previously acceptable quantities of alcohol consumption. But it is not consistently apparent that this is what is occurring. For example, the RCP (1987) issued the recommendation that drinkers limit their consumption to 14/21 units per week (which became the basis of UK policy) despite concluding that there was a lack of evidence from which to make a conclusive judgment about what level of drinking is safe. The downward revision of these guidelines (to 14 units) was implemented in 2016 after a review of relevant evidence by an expert panel (see Committee on Carcinogenicity, 2015). Increased knowledge of how the average risk of developing cancer increases with any level of alcohol consumption is cited as the main reason for lowering the limit for male consumption (UK Government, 2016) although, given that risk increases with any consumption, it is not entirely clear why 14 units is selected as the upper limit (for both women and men). The connection between changing scientific understandings of the risk of harm and official constructions of moderate drinking is often questionable and, in some instances, clearly overridden by a precautionary governmental impulse.

Shifting understandings of risk are one of the mechanisms driving this trend towards ever-lower drinking guidelines. Specifically, there is a tendency for risk to be viewed as a hazard or danger, rather than an expression of the probability of that hazard or danger resulting in harm, as classically set out in the cultural theory of risk (Douglas, 1992). Keane (2011) examined the construction of intoxication within Australian alcohol policy and found that, instead of a temporary psychoactive state that leads to increased risk of certain harms, intoxication was constructed as something to be avoided, a harm in itself. Lindsey's study of healthy living guidelines detected an "unacknowledged slippage between different meanings of 'risk' as they are deployed within the guidelines from understanding 'risk' as an abstract probability to understanding 'risk' as a danger to the individual" (2010: 477). So, in certain public health discourses, risk – or, indeed, uncertainty about the existence or degree of risk – is constructed as a danger in itself. Risk ceases here to be a probabilistic tool to

manage the likelihood of harm and instead becomes a language through which to advertise danger to be avoided.

While the policy trend towards precautionary-driven hyper-moderation has been studied, little is known about whether there is a concomitant behavioural dimension. The suggestion here is not that changes in official drinking guidelines may have altered drinking behaviour. Studies have found that they have little to no impact over the everyday decisions that people make about alcohol consumption. Drinking guidelines have been criticised for being overly stringent and setting advised upper limits to regular consumption at points too far beneath typical levels of consumption (Lindsey, 2010; Lovatt et al, 2015). Many drinkers simply disregard the guidelines and those who try to adhere to them often struggle to understand how many units are contained in the actual drinks sold or how guidance on regular drinking should be interpreted by those who drink heavily but relatively infrequently such as weekend binge drinkers. There is an pervasive sense that drinking guidelines are disconnected from normal social life and exist within an “idealised, individualised world where lifestyle change is a straightforward matter of putting knowledge into practice” (Lindsey, 2010: 475; also Hackey et al, 2008; Lovatt et al, 2015). In reality, individual decisions about drinking are not made in a social vacuum but within everyday contexts shaped by social norms, cultural expectations, inter-personal obligations, personal or group identities and the individual or collective pursuit of pleasure through drink or intoxication.

This study is grounded in lived experiences of drinking and non-drinking and allows us to investigate if there has been a trend towards hyper-moderation in drinking practice as well as alcohol policy. The decline in drinking from the early 2000s onwards makes such a connection plausible. These ongoing changes have been interpreted as a ‘long wave’ of supranational, generational social change driven by factors such as new technology (especially social media), changing parenting styles and the growing importance of health and fitness (Pennay et al, 2018; Room et al, 2019; Kraus et al, 2019). Such studies acknowledge the need to better understand the nature, extent and causes of this generational decline in drinking.

Exploring lived experiences and understandings of moderation provides a window into the reasons why many young people are drinking less. There is an existing

literature around young people who drink little or no alcohol, much of which positions light or non-drinking young people as the exception and explores how they negotiate or manage their own non-consumption within cultures or contexts in which drinking and drunkenness are normalised (Nairn et al, 2006; Piacentini and Bannister, 2009; Conroy and De Visser, 2014; Supski and Lindsey, 2016; Frank et al, 2020). Recent studies have started to investigate drinking and non-drinking amongst young people within the context of the ongoing decline of youth drinking, including Månsson et al's (2020) qualitative study of Swedish youth. Caluzzi et al (2020a) make the interesting argument that the decline in youth drinking may be connected to the internalisation of 'healthism' – a socio-cultural practice first identified by Crawford (1980), which transforms health into a state of risk requiring constant individual management through everyday decision-making. While Caluzzi et al do not examine constructions of moderation as such, their concern for understandings of risk and the potential connection between individual drinking practices and wider socio-cultural trends resonates with our focus here. This original, empirical research presented in this chapter thus extends existing knowledge of how moderate drinking is understood and practised by contemporary young people as well as providing insights that help make sense of the ongoing generational shift in drinking habits.

1) Methods

This chapter is based on evidence from two empirical sources. Firstly, a survey among those aged 18-25 who drink little or no alcohol was conducted across June and early July 2020. The survey consisted of an online, self-completion questionnaire with mostly multiple-choice questions but also a small number of open questions. Hence, the survey collected largely quantitative data. 517 people completed the survey, of whom 96% were aged 18-25 (while the remaining 4% did not disclose their age). We distributed the survey through mailing lists and social media platforms. 79% of the sample were female, 17% male and 1.7% non-binary. High female participation has featured in other surveys of light or low risk drinking (e.g. Mugavin et al, 2020). 60% of the sample reported having no religion, 20% were Christians, 6% were Muslims and small numbers belonged to other faiths. Judging from the last job of their main income-earning parent, the majority seemed to be broadly middle class in their socio-economic backgrounds. The survey findings presented here consist of descriptive statistics.

Secondly, four focus groups were conducted with members of non-drinking student societies in June and July 2020. A growing number of 'sober' or 'high on life' societies are attached to students' unions within UK universities. They are not religiously affiliated and generally aim to provide opportunities for socialising and recreation that do not involve alcohol. We identified sober societies from the webpages of various students' unions, contacted them through publicly available email addresses and arranged focus groups with those willing to participate. We conducted one focus group with sober society members studying at a 'plate glass' university in a small city in northern England, another with sober society members at a 'plate glass' university in southern England and two separate focus groups with different sober society members at a 'red-brick' university in a medium-sized city in northern England. A total of thirteen participants took part in the four focus groups (10 female, 3 male). The focus groups took place during the coronavirus pandemic and so were conducted online (via Zoom). The resulting qualitative data was analysed thematically.

The mixed methods adopted here usefully combine a broader perspective deriving from the quantitative survey with deeper insights resulting from the qualitative focus groups. The study is limited somewhat by the convenience sampling strategy which drew primarily upon the online networks of the researchers and was biased towards young people who were former or present university students. This was not a significant concern as we did not intend to secure a representative sample but were concerned to solicit a relatively high number of young respondents from which to identify discernible patterns (n=517).

The focus groups targeted sober societies in a purposive fashion due to our interest in emergent forms of moderation or non-drinking. However, it is important to stress that our findings are presented as a case study of one specific group of young moderate or non-drinkers. Given how little is known about young non-drinkers in the UK, this case study is partly exploratory. The analysis presented here is principally qualitative. It seeks inductive understandings of the meaning of drinking practices, rather than generalisable patterns. Hence, the sort of non-probability sampling used

more generally within qualitative studies (Lewis-Beck et al, 2004) is entirely appropriate.¹

Results

4.1) Occasional Drinking

In our survey, 18% of participants reported never consuming alcohol. The majority (77%) do consume alcohol but only 'occasionally' (33%) or 'very occasionally' (34%). 'Occasional drinker' was also the most popular term for self-identification amongst our survey, preferred by 46%. 'Light drinkers' was preferred by 26% and 'non-drinker' by 21%. When asked to select the contexts in which they would drink, the most popular answers were 'at a party' (33%), 'at a pub' (27%) and 'only at celebrations like a wedding' (16%). An occasional drinker from a focus group explained these habits further and indicated that different drink options are relevant too:

occasionally I'll drink it if there's some cocktails that I think... I can actually appreciate it, but I've never gotten drunk or anything like that, so I'm usually a non-drinker.

These results echo the findings of Mugavin et al (2020). Using survey data on 'low risk' Australian drinkers, they characterised the majority of these (65%) as 'special occasion' drinkers who were usually abstinent but would drink between a half and four drinks during celebrations or other events on a small number of days each year. Like our participants, Mugavin et al's occasional drinkers tended to be younger than other low risk drinkers and to prefer drinking in pubs or at parties. Most of our participants viewed their current habits as unlikely to change. Månsson et al's (2020) qualitative study of young Swedish drinkers found some evidence of abstinence being replaced by occasional drinking over time. When asked whether they thought their drinking habits would change when they reached the age that their parents are now, 37% of our survey participants thought their drinking habits would change while 39% said no. They were, however, more likely to associate alcohol with being a teenager (37%) than being an adult (28%). Participants in our focus groups more emphatically emphasised the permanence of abstinence or occasional drinking; few

¹ The research was granted ethical approval by the SRC Ethics Panel of the University of Kent School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (reference: SRCEA id 258).

reported that they anticipate increased drinking at any point in their lives and several stated clearly that they intend not to do that.

Sometimes I think about it because it's a normal thing, but I just don't want to, and so I don't think I will change it. (Female, Plate Glass University).

Two focus group participants acknowledged that their habits might alter as their circumstances change:

I can see myself having to drink more as life gets more and more stressful, but I also think that life is getting more and more stressful since I was about six years old, so I'm not really sure if I will start drinking more because life has gotten more stressful.... (Male, Plate Glass University).

The last point is worth noting. Månsson et al (2020) identified going to university, making new friends and spending more time in bars and clubs as reasons why some young people abandon moderation. Our participants, however, had already made that transition at the time of data collection. They had, moreover, endured several months of lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic and it is quite plausible that this experience might have increased stress or heightened other factors that inclined them towards drinking. But 55% of our survey participants said their drinking was unaffected by lockdown. Only 11% reported an increase in their drinking while 32% reported a reduction or complete cessation of drinking during lockdown.

Our data was collected during one sweep only and, of course, only time will truly tell how Generation Z's drinking habits develop through their life courses. But our findings provide no sense that drinking habits will alter as our participants age or, indeed, as wider social change occurs. The picture arising from our data is one of distinct, generational change. The rise of occasional drinking appears to be locked in.

4. 2) Understandings of Moderation

Our survey participants were asked 'what does moderate drinking mean to you?' and were given options that could be selected or added to. 145 participants defined moderation as 'consuming a certain of units per day or per week'. When asked to specify this number, 58% of these participants identified moderate drinking as consuming up to 5 units (40g) per week and 22% selected 6-10 units (48-80g) per

week. Those who favour a quantitative conception of moderation define moderation as significantly lower than the threshold of acceptability set out in the official UK drinking guidelines and, for the majority, actually closer to total abstinence than to the upper limit of low-risk consumption (14 units/112g). Our focus groups echoed these views. As one participant explained, moderate drinking is:

...drinking because you like the taste of the drink or you have... like one bottle of cider and that's it, and it would be maybe like on the weekends or on a special occasion. Like, I think as soon as you get over maybe like more than twice a week, it starts to get into, oh, that's just a regular habit, rather than a moderate amount occasionally.

Such views show the salience of hyper-moderate views of drinking within our sample. Moderation is confined to the consumption of only small amounts of alcohol on an occasional basis. Most participants favoured non-quantitative conceptions of moderation. 'Drinking with others but not alone' (18%), 'drinking alcohol but never to the point of being drunk' (18%) and 'drinking alcohol but remaining in control of my actions' (25%) were the most popular responses to our survey questions on meanings of moderation. Similarly, when our focus groups discussed moderate drinking, they made no mention of alcoholic units or official guidelines. Instead, several focus group participants confirmed and extended the point that moderation is intimately connected with efforts to avoid drunkenness and remain in control. As one participant put it:

[A moderate drinker] means someone who has a couple of drinks but they're not actively drinking to get drunk. They may be just like, 'I fancy the taste of it or something' (Female, Redbrick University).

The salience of non-intoxication and focus upon taste was confirmed by others, for example:

...well, for me at least, if I drink, it's because like it's something that I like the flavour of or just happens to be that I want to drink something at that point. But I don't – like, a lot of the time, I decide not to just because I'm not interested at all in like the experience of being drunk, or like drinking alcohol (Female, Plate Glass University).

Additionally, participants raised the importance of knowing not to drink every day and knowing “when to start and... when to stop” (Female, Redbrick University).

Moderate drinking is, therefore, contrasted to both drunkenness and the daily consumption of small, potentially non-intoxicating amounts of alcohol.

For our participants, moderation bears little resemblance to official drinking guidelines. Instead, our participants understood moderate drinking as bounded by occasional patterns of consumption, a refrain from intoxication and the pursuit of disciplined, sensory pleasure through the taste of certain drinks consumed in certain contexts. It is these experiential or phenomenological boundaries, not any quantitative formulation of recommended upper drinking limits, that give moderation meaning to the young people we researched.

4.3) Risks of Drinking

Why do our participants understand drinking in this way? It might be possible to conceive of our participants as straightforward rational actors using available information on the risks and harms connected to drinking to make decisions that maximise their long-term personal wellbeing. This vision of behavioural change through informed decision-making is the working assumption behind official drinking guidelines (Lindsey, 2010). And it is apparent that concerns about health were prominent within our survey. 70% of our survey participants reported concerns about the specific consequences of drinking alcohol and, when asked to specify, ‘health issues’ emerged as the single biggest category of answers (21%), ahead of ‘loss of control’ (13%) and ‘change in behaviour/embarrassment’ (10%). Long-term health problems, particularly damage to the liver, were mentioned in all four focus groups. However, only one group really elaborated:

Like, you go out, you drink, you get a little bit relaxed, you think, oh, I’ll have a couple of cigs, I’ll have a smoke of that, I might snort some of that, and you’re just wrecking your body. And if it’s a long-term thing, you’re just destroying your insides. In moderation, everything’s fine, with enough rest time and good healthcare between that. (Female, Redbrick University)

Alcohol consumption is thus constructed as damaging to health due to its direct long-term effects as well as the short-term manner in which drinking might lead to other behaviours that risk long-term health. In both senses, the value of moderation to long-term health is reaffirmed. Drinking is constructed as damaging to health due to both the long-term effects of alcohol and the manner in which drinking inclines the participant towards other behaviours that risk long-term health, suggesting (self) control is the guiding principle. However, on balance, our findings suggest that short-term factors risks are more salient. Only 26% of survey participants said they would drink more alcohol if it posed no long-term risk to health whereas 59% said this would not affect their (non)consumption. Similarly, the focus groups attributed less importance to long-term health than to other potential consequences of drinking. Several participants discussed the negative effect of alcohol on mental health as an important consideration. A participant who used to drink frequently explained that:

I don't really drink because – I don't think – yeah, being drunk isn't a great state of being... I would just get really, really sad, and my mental health is up and down at the best of times. I'm not medicated, but just drinking, I'd never really have a good time. (Female, Redbrick University).

Others explicitly stated that protecting their mental health is a bigger motivation for non-drinking than protecting their physical health:

I feel like it mentally is a better thing for my mental health to not drink. In terms of physical health, less so... I'd say it more plays into mental health than physical health. (Female, Plate Glass University).

These concerns about protecting mental health were also decidedly short-term. The quote above on the immediate effects on mood plus another participant's account of post-drinking anxiety illustrate the limited temporal parameters to these anxieties:

I have OCD. I have a bit of a history of mental health issues. I would be concerned about how getting drunk or – not necessarily getting drunk, but like the aftermath maybe would affect me. I'd be worried that, I don't know, I'd say something and then I'd have to, you know, deal with the consequences of that, or that – I do know quite a few people who – that have mental issues that

definitely do seem worse the day after, that, you know, all of their symptoms are just exacerbated a bit. (Female, Plate Glass University)

The other short-term risk that strongly featured in our findings was the risk of being a victim of crime. Over half (51%) of survey respondents see a connection between their decision to drink moderately and their vulnerability to crime. Sexual assault is the crime that the highest number of respondents ranked as a concern, especially the young women in the sample.

Overall, participants were concerned about the impacts of alcohol on their health, as conceived holistically to include mental, physical and general wellbeing. While the long-term risks of drinking were discussed, short-term risks to physical health, mental health and personal safety featured more strongly in our results.

4.4) Control and Risk Avoidance

Several quotes in the previous section imply that the consequences of drinking that loom large in the thinking of our sample derive from a loss of control over yourself or your immediate situation. The fear of losing control underpins anxieties about taking additional psychoactive substances, saying or doing embarrassing things, making bad decisions or becoming more vulnerable to sexual assault or other violence. It was discussed explicitly by our survey respondents who identified it as a key consequence of drinking heavily (see Table 5). For focus group participants, the fear of losing control was cited as a key reason for light drinking or abstinence. In one case, staying in control was highlighted as especially important in certain drinking spaces:

...I don't like not being in control. [...] I think like a lot of it ties into like the clubbing culture. There are a lot of clubs that I don't really like and I don't feel comfortable in. So, if I'm already in an environment that I don't feel comfortable, I don't want to drink and become even more out of control in that environment. (Female, Redbrick University)

The unpleasant bodily sensations of being out of control were also identified as relevant by another participant:

...I've just never really enjoyed not feeling in control [...] even like if I was in my own flat, like I just wouldn't want to drink to get drunk. (Female, Redbrick University)

As one participant pointed out, the bodily consequences of losing control stretch forward in time through the 'hang over':

...it's just the kind of general like loss of control, like the hangover, which just kind of ruins you for a day... you've only lost a day, but then if you've got four lectures that day and you're not really able to pay attention in any of them then you're then catching up for another day, and that impacts the next day, and it just doesn't really seem worth it. (Female, Redbrick University)

In addition to finding the bodily sensations of losing control as a result of intoxication unpleasant, both survey respondents and focus group participants linked specific short-term risks of drinking squarely to losing personal control:

...I'd noticed that one of our flatmates had like disappeared as we were walking round the club, and I said, 'Oh, does anybody know where she's gone?' They were like, 'Oh no, she'll turn up, don't worry.' I was like, 'Well, maybe we should worry, because she's very drunk and has just wandered off on her own.' But they were also way too drunk to really care. [...] I just would never want to put myself in that situation... (Female, Redbrick University)

[Intoxication means] making yourself vulnerable and more susceptible to stuff. Like I have very sensible, straight talking friends when they're sober, you get on really well with them, and then you'll watch them have a few drinks, get a little bit loose, and then as the night wears on, "Oh yeah, I might just try a little bit of MD," or, "I might just try a little bit of that," you know, tiny quantities, and thank god, they've done it and been fine, but then you hear way too many stories about it just not working out for people. And I just think the risk is too great, outweighs the reward." (Female, Redbrick University)

The need for control therefore underpins much of how our participants understand drinking and intoxication. Losing control is seen as unpleasant in itself as well as unpleasant consequentially as it might act as a gateway to vulnerability, victimisation and other harms. Of course, Generation Z are not the first to notice that drinking

alcohol can be harmful. The important distinction is how the risk of harm is managed. As discussed earlier, the binge drinkers of the 2000s were generally found to practise a 'calculated hedonism' that was intended to enable the pursuit of intoxication while managing the risk of suffering various harms through the observation of certain situational constraints (Measham, 2004; Measham and Brain, 2005; Szmigin et al, 2008). For our participants, however, control does not come from managing the situational risks of drinking but from avoiding these risks entirely. One participant explicitly set out her avoidance strategy with regards to the risk of addiction or dependence:

I think with alcohol, there's like a temptation that... well, I feel stressed, so I'm just going to drink the stress to go away and I'm like because I don't even want to risk that happening, I'm like let's just not go anywhere near it because I'm like I don't want to take the chance that I'm then dependent on it.

(Female, Redbrick University)

In some respects, this construction of alcohol consumption resembles the 'slippery slope' of drinking popularised by the Victorian teetotal temperance movement (Yeomans, 2014) and similarly posits that consuming even small quantities of alcohol starts the drinker on an inexorable trajectory toward harm. For our participants, the steep incline of the drinker's path compresses the semantic distance between the possibility of an individual suffering a certain alcohol-related harm and the actual occurrence alcohol-related harm. Viewed through this lens, risk does not appear as something probabilistic that can be managed through situational adaptations and instead appears as a danger to be avoided. The avoidance of alcohol or other apparent dangers thus becomes part of a restrained, controlled lifestyle:

I go to bed and get up at the same time each day. I'll make sure I always eat fruit and veg. I exercise or do yoga every day and go for walks, and I think a lot of my life does revolve around trying to stay physically and mentally healthy, but that's just what I need to do to survive and so if I feel like something isn't making me physically or mentally healthy, then I will avoid it at all costs 'cos I just don't want to risk anything. (Female, Redbrick University)

5) Conclusion

Our findings show that moderation is principally understood as a qualitative rather than quantitative concept. Official drinking guidelines have little, if any, resonance with the decisions about alcohol that are made by the young people in our sample. When described quantitatively by those who drink little or no alcohol, moderation is typically seen as the regular consumption of a quantity of units that is closer to abstinence than to the upper limit of UK drinking guidelines. But the idea of counting units and observing certain quantitative limits barely featured within our data. This study affirms the findings of previous research that has found a disconnect between official drinking guidelines and lived experiences of drinking (Hackley et al, 2008; Lindsey, 2010; Lovatt et al, 2015). Our participants were mostly occasional drinkers and occasionality of consumption was a key part of how they differentiated moderate drinking from other drinking habits. Equally, a refrain from intoxication and an enjoyment of alcohol purely through the pleasure of taste were crucial considerations. So, while scientific and political discourse defines moderation with regards to certain limits on the number of alcoholic units consumed, popular or lay conceptions of moderation have a more qualitative character. Specifically, based on our findings, it is occasionality, non-intoxication and the enjoyment of pleasure through taste that give meaning to moderation within the lived experiences of Generation Z members who drink little or no alcohol.

Aspects of our findings are consistent with the results of wider studies of young people who drink little, or no alcohol conducted elsewhere in the world, notably with regard to the prevalence of occasional drinking (e.g. Mugavin, 2020; Frank et al, 2020; Caluzzi et al, 2020) and concern for health (e.g. Caluzzi et al, 2020; Frank et al 2020). The eminence of health within the lives of our participants and their individual efforts to maintain health by limiting their drinking are partially supportive of Caluzzi et al's (2020) argument that 'healthism' has been internalised by younger generations. However, it is also clear that how risk is understood and how control is valorised is also significant. Specifically, an understanding that risk constitutes danger rather than probability, and so must be avoided rather than mitigated, was strongly evident amongst our participants. The contemporary centrality of avoidance

to controlling risk starkly contrasts the perceptions and practices of previous generations of young binge drinkers whose 'calculated hedonism' enabled them to pursue and enjoy intoxication while retaining some measure of control over certain risks through selected situational adaptations (Measham, 2004; Measham and Brain, 2005; Hackley et al, 2008). It also contrasts orthodox understandings of moderate drinking as a mid-point between the extremes of excess and total abstinence. Our participants articulate and enact *hyper-moderate* drinking practices in which control is sought through risk avoidance.

This study has thus found a behavioural parallel to the policy trend towards hyper-moderation that was described earlier. As stated already, this behavioural hyper-moderation does not show the effectiveness of alcohol units guidelines and, indeed, there is no evidence that it results from any change to policy or law. Instead, we assert that the growing salience of a particular conception of risk (as danger to be avoided) is reconstructing how alcohol is understood at a policy level and how drinking is managed at a personal level. We have identified hyper-moderation within the thoughts and actions of the non-drinkers of Generation Z; it is a crucial part of how our participants perceive alcohol and rationalise their own mostly non-drinking behaviour. Given this, it is also reasonable to suggest that their greater adherence to hyper-moderation might be a key reason why Generation Z currently drink less than most other age groups and less than many preceding generations of young adults. Further research is needed to really demonstrate this – and that research should include comparative transnational studies as well as further in-depth case studies of certain age groups and particular types of drinkers or non-drinkers. But, in spite of the methodological limitations of the present study, the symmetry of behavioural hyper-moderation with policy hyper-moderation, as well as the consistency of some of our findings with an emerging international body of knowledge, do support the possibility that shifts in how risk and control are perceived are reshaping how drinking is understood and practised more widely. In short, hyper-moderation could be the reason why Generation Z have become 'Generation Sensible'.

Limitations of mainly female, middle class – student? -

Further research with working class young people...

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