



## Female alcohol consumption, motivations for aggression and aggressive incidents in licensed premises

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Alcohol consumption and aggressive incidents in licensed premises were examined.
- ▶ Females involved in aggressive incidents had consumed more alcohol.
- ▶ Females involved in such incidents had not consumed more male-oriented drinks.
- ▶ Verbal aggression was more common than physical aggression in licensed premises.
- ▶ Aggression was commonly motivated by the desire to address a grievance.

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### ABSTRACT

Research into the relationship between alcohol and aggression has previously focused on men. However, in recent years there has been an increase in binge drinking and violent crime among women, behaviours which have been labelled 'ladette' culture in the UK. The current study advances the literature in this area by investigating the relationship between alcohol consumption and aggressive behaviour of females in licensed premises, including the type of aggression and motivations for aggressive incidents. Ninety-three female university students completed the Student Alcohol Questionnaire (SAQ; Engs, 2002), the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992) and a questionnaire developed to measure self-reported aggressive incidents. Females who had been involved in an aggressive incident reported spending more time on average in licensed premises per week and higher levels of aggression as well as consuming significantly more alcohol on the day of the incident than females who had not been involved in an aggressive incident. Contrary to expectations, however, those who had been involved in an aggressive incident did not report drinking more beer (a male-orientated drink) than those who had not. Verbally aggressive incidents were reported more than physically aggressive incidents, and aggression was commonly motivated by an emotional reaction or to address a grievance. The finding that average alcohol consumption per week was significantly associated with female aggression in licensed premises highlights the importance of developing interventions to reduce alcohol consumption among young females.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years the media has provided extensive reports on alcohol related crime, particularly the rise of aggressive incidents occurring in licensed premises (The Daily Mail, 2009; The Guardian, 2011; The Telegraph, 2011), and numerous studies have reported a link between alcohol consumption and violence. Saner and Ellickson (1996), for example, found that violent delinquents consumed more alcohol than non-violent delinquents, and Richardson and Budd (2003) reported that one in five violent incidents occurs either in or around licensed

premises. Furthermore, research has shown that victims believed that the offender was under the influence of alcohol in 50% of violent incidents (Flatley, Kershaw, Smith, Chaplin, & Moon, 2010).

The number of women convicted of violent crimes in England and Wales has almost doubled since the 24-hour drinking laws emerged in 2004, an epidemic for which the British media blame the recent rise of the 'ladette' culture (The Daily Mail, 2008, 2010; The Telegraph, 2009). Ladettes are described as women who display typically male characteristics such as assertive, tough and aggressive behaviour as well as drinking large quantities of alcohol, particularly those beverages which were previously perceived to be male-orientated drinks (Mercer & Khavari, 1990).

The emergence of the ladette culture could be attributable to a number of factors. In Britain alcohol has become increasingly accessible

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(sold in supermarkets as well as restaurants, bars and clubs) and affordable (with offers on bulk buying in supermarkets and drinks promotions such as happy hours in bars). There has also been an increase in the number of advertising campaigns which target the promotion of alcohol specifically for women, with drinks such as low calorie alcopops and wine being advertised as glamorous (The Telegraph, 2011). Alcohol use by female celebrities is also frequently depicted as glamorous in magazines (Atkinson, Elliot, Bellis, & Sumnall, 2011) and it has been suggested that there has been a marked change in attitudes and behaviour towards alcohol by British society as a whole (Institute of Alcohol Studies, 2007).

The prevalence of alcohol use and its associated problems is higher in student populations than the general public (Evans & Dunn, 1995), and an international study of drinking among university students (Dantzer, Wardle, Fuller, Pampalona, & Steptoe, 2006) found that only in England and Ireland did female students binge drink more than males. The Institute of Alcohol Studies (2007) also reports that approximately 1 in 10 young British women aged 16–24 drink more than 35 units of alcohol per week (the equivalent of approximately four bottles of wine), which is well over the recommended allowance. It is important to address these behaviours because of the rise in the number of young women being admitted to hospital after binge drinking which is causing police and medical staff to struggle to cope with rising demands (Institute of Alcohol Studies, 2009, 2010). In particular, there has been a noticeably large increase in the number of people aged 20–29 admitted to Accident and Emergency Hospital departments following assaults on Friday and Saturday evenings (NHS, 2011) and the increase in street fights around licensed premises has been blamed by the media on this excessive drinking (The Daily Mail, 2004). Furthermore, this level of drunken disorder and crime has created ‘no go zones’ where people do not go out into certain areas in town or city centres due to a fear of drunken and antisocial behaviour (Engineer, Phillips, Thompson, & Nicholls, 2003; The Telegraph, 2011). Thus, an increase in alcohol use among young people is a pressing public health problem associated with serious societal consequences, such as an increase in violent incidents.

### 1.1. Theories of the link between alcohol consumption and aggression

Graham (1980) proposed that theories which attempt to explain the link between alcohol and aggression could be separated into four categories according to the role assigned to alcohol: alcohol directly causes aggression; alcohol indirectly causes aggression; alcohol indirectly causes aggression when associated with particular motives for drinking; and a spurious link between alcohol and aggression.

Firstly, the disinhibition theory purports that aggression is facilitated by the direct anaesthetising effect of alcohol on the brain which usually prevents aggressive responses because of the reduced inhibitions which humans generally display while intoxicated. Alcohol potentiates the inhibitory neurotransmitter gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) which in turn reduces the effects that fear and anxiety have on inhibiting aggression. This provides an increased likelihood that individuals who have consumed alcohol to levels of intoxication will respond aggressively when faced with a threat (Warneke, 1991). Although the disinhibition theory is supported by laboratory evidence, it does not explain why some individuals experience increased levels of aggression whilst under the influence of alcohol whereas other individuals do not (Boyatzis, 1974; Tomsen, 1997).

Secondly, theories which propose that alcohol indirectly causes aggression are underpinned by the notion that alcohol produces changes in physiology, emotions and cognitions which in turn increase the likelihood of aggression occurring. The consumption of alcohol has been found to increase emotional instability and impair cognitive functioning (Lyvers & Tobias-Webb, 2010; Pihl, Paylan, Gentes-Hawn, & Hoaken, 2003) as well as to reduce awareness (Pernanen, 1976). In some individuals, these changes may result in an increase in risk-taking

behaviour and a decreased ability to respond to situations in a non-aggressive manner. These direct and indirect physiological theories have been challenged by the expectancy theory which proposes that aggression is influenced by alcohol due to people's expectations about how their behaviour will change when they are under the influence of alcohol (Lang, Goekner, Adesso, & Marlatt, 1975).

Thirdly, there are theories which propose that alcohol provides an indirect cause of aggression conditional upon an individual's motive for drinking i.e. particular motives which lead people to consume alcohol interact with the effects of alcohol and lead to aggression.

Finally, it has been suggested that there is a spurious link between alcohol and aggression which is based upon interactions between the characteristics of individuals who drink, the situation in which they consume alcohol, and aggression (Graham, 1980; Graham, West, & Wells, 2000). For example, studies have indicated that temperature (Anderson, 1989; Baron & Bell, 1975; Bell, 2005; Bushman, Wang, & Anderson, 2005), noise (Konecni, 1975) and population density (Griffitt & Veitch, 1971) may influence human aggression. Research has also found that alcohol related aggression is most likely to occur in bars, pubs, clubs and other public drinking establishments (e.g. Graham, Bernards, Osgood, & Wells, 2006) and that elements of the drinking environment can be a contributing factor in aggressive incidents. For example, Deehan (1999) found that licensed premises which are attractive and well-maintained have fewer incidents of violence, whilst places which promote discounted drinks have more.

### 1.2. Motivations for aggression in licensed premises

Most research into the motivations for aggressive incidents in licensed premises has focused on males (e.g. Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996; Giancola & Zeichner, 1997; Lang et al., 1975), and Graham and Wells (2003) identified four motivations in the literature which they considered to be particularly relevant to male aggression in licensed premises: male honour; addressing a grievance; an emotional reaction; and fighting for fun. *Male honour* refers to face saving or the protection of one's reputation when faced with insults or personal attacks. Studies have indicated that aggressive confrontations often arise when a male has been insulted and feels that they have to maintain their social honour and masculine identity (Archer, Holloway, & McLoughlin, 1995; Felson, 1982; Iwamoto, Cheng, Lee, Takamatsu, & Gordon, 2011). However, interviews with young men involved in aggressive incidents in licensed premises have indicated that ‘winning’ a fight is not as important as maintaining an impression of masculinity and standing one's ground (Tomsen, 1997). *Addressing a grievance* reflects aggression that aims to bring about justice or rectify an issue following the actions of another individual which are perceived to be unjustified (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), although this motivation can also be altruistic through acting as an aid to a friend (Berkowitz, 1986). *An emotional reaction* refers to aggression as an emotional response driven by anger or frustration. This anger or frustration may be a response to situational factors associated with licensed premises such as heat and overcrowding, which alcohol can exacerbate. Finally, *fighting for fun* refers to aggressive behaviours such as swearing, pushing and being rowdy which are perceived as being part of the pleasurable experience of collective male drinking sessions (Tomsen, 1997).

### 1.3. Female aggression in licensed premises

Given an increase in ‘ladette’ culture and studies which have shown that women have the potential to be as equally aggressive as men (Hoaken & Pihl, 2000), it is important to understand female aggression in licensed premises. In one of the few studies to investigate licensed premises aggression among females, Spence, Williams, and Gannon (2009) examined whether women who had behaved aggressively in licensed premises ( $n = 29$ ) could be distinguished from

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