

“I am quite mellow but I wouldn't say everyone else is”: how UK students compare their drinking behaviour to their peers’

Title page

Authors: Emma L. Davies, Emma-Ben C. Lewis, Sarah E. Hennelly

Department of Psychology, Social Work and Public Health, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford,
OX3 0BP, United Kingdom

Corresponding author: Emma L Davies 01865 484056 edavies@brookes.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

Background: Excessive drinking is commonplace at UK Universities. Individuals may misperceive how much they drink compared to others and are less likely to think that they will suffer adverse consequences. Young people often distance themselves and their friends from ‘problem drinkers’.

Objectives: The aim of the study was to explore how student drinkers compared their own drinking behaviours to the drinking behaviours of others.

Methods: An online survey was completed by 416 students aged 18-30 (68.5% female). They were asked ‘how do you think your drinking compares with other people *like you?*’ and ‘how do you think your behaviour when you drink compares with other people *like you?*’ Answers were subjected to thematic analysis.

Results: The first main theme was about ‘identification as a ‘good’ drinker’. Participants suggested their own behaviour when drinking was similar to their sober behaviour. Further, they viewed themselves as more able to maintain a balance between staying in control and having fun while drinking. The second main theme was about ‘distancing from being a ‘bad’ drinker. Participants distanced themselves from negative prototypical drinkers, such compulsive or anti-social drinkers. They also attributed their own drinking behaviours to situational factors, but described other people as intentionally violent or aggressive.

Conclusions/Importance: These findings may explain the failure of some health messages to change drinking behaviours. If drinkers perceive that their behaviour when they drink is better than other people’s then they may discount intervention messages. Targeting these biases could be incorporated into future interventions.

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INTRODUCTION

At Universities in the United Kingdom (UK) alcohol is an integral aspect of student life. A recent systematic review found two thirds of UK students could be classified as hazardous drinkers and 20% reported alcohol problems (Davoren et al., 2016). Students are at risk of harms including blackouts, hangovers (Burns et al., 2016), and impaired academic performance (Thombs et al., 2009). It is important to explore perceptions of alcohol consumption in order to understand excessive drinking in this population.

Individuals tend to believe they drink less than other people. In an international survey this effect was greater in those aged 16-24, UK respondents, and heavier drinkers (Garnett et al., 2015). In another study students ranked their consumption compared to UK data and were asked how likely it was they would develop alcohol related illnesses (Wood, Brown, & Maltby, 2012). It appeared that unsafe drinkers had a false sense of security about the riskiness of their consumption, consistently rating themselves as less likely to suffer adverse consequences, and this was linked to underestimation of their own drinking compared to others’ (Wood et al., 2012). Building on this, Moore et al., (2016) used a novel method and asked drinkers to make these rankings during a night out. Participants looked to others around them to see how intoxicated they were, and made judgements about their own drunkenness using this information (Moore et al., 2016).

Moore et al.’s (2016) study highlights the importance of an individual’s judgements about the behaviour of others, as well as their levels of consumption. Thus, it may also be essential to understand how people reflect on their own behaviour when they drink in comparison to others. There is also a strong notional, and not well defined, discourse of ‘drinking responsibly’, which research suggests can relate to drinking without unwanted consequences (Stautz &

Marteau, 2016), and to being in control of one's actions (Roznowski & Eckert, 2006). People also recognise the amount of alcohol that can be safely and enjoyably consumed as something that varies between individuals, and is dependent on factors including sex, and tolerance (Lovatt et al., 2015). If an individual's behaviour when they drink has not caused negative consequences, perhaps this signals they have no need to reduce the amount they drink because they are a 'responsible drinker'.

Other evidence suggests evaluations of social images, or prototypes, of different types of drinkers can influence drinking behaviour (Gerrard et al., 2002). When prototypes for drinkers are less negative, and are rated as more similar to the self, then young people have higher levels of willingness to drink and report increased levels of consumption (Gerrard et al., 2002). Research also suggests individuals distance themselves from heavy drinker prototypes (van Lettow, de Vries, Burdorf, Boon, & van Empelen, 2015), and from 'problem drinkers' (de Visser, Wheeler, Abraham, & Smith, 2013).

This distancing may occur because people tend to be optimistic about the outcomes of their behaviour (Shepperd, Klein, Waters, & Weinstein, 2013) and see themselves in a positive light (Epley & Dunning, 2000). Furthermore, individuals often evaluate the underlying motivations for behaviour differently when thinking about other people's behaviour in comparison to their own. The correspondence bias refers to the tendency for individuals to evaluate other people's behaviour on what can be extrinsically observed, and to judge these behaviours as a reflection of intentions. However, they tend to take into account internal motivations and present psychological state when evaluating their own behaviour, meaning any personal bad behaviour does not equate to bad intentions. This leads to a much more positive view of the self than of others because people attribute their own behaviour as guided by good intentions, even if it results in negative outcomes (Gilbert & Malone, 1995).

Recent studies suggest the correspondence bias is more pronounced when judging behaviours that have a negative moral connotation; we regard ourselves as less likely to engage in “bad” behaviour than others (Klein & Epley, 2016). Such errors in judgement may be adaptive in enabling us to maintain a positive self-concept and may contribute to our feelings of ‘unrealistic optimism’ about our own susceptibility to negative consequences in comparison to others (Shepperd et al., 2013). As Klein and Epley (2016) highlight, the problem with believing one is less likely to succumb to bad behaviour is that one may not take adequate precautions. When considering drinking, this may have serious consequences, for example failure to plan to get home safely or having unplanned, unprotected sex. It may also mean individuals discount interventions designed to encourage them to reduce alcohol consumption.

Educational interventions are often ineffective in student populations (Logan, Kilmer, King, & Larimer, 2015) and they can be counter-productive; individuals may maintain or increase their drinking (Ogden, 2016; Quick & Stephenson, 2008). It could be that individuals may fail to acknowledge the amount they drink is harmful relative to other people around them. Moreover they may distance themselves from being the ‘type of person’ who needs to heed advice about their consumption based on how they judge their behaviour compared to others’.

Previous research shows that people tend to believe they consume less alcohol than others. It is possible that they also perceive their behaviour differently within drinking situations.

Understanding how individuals position themselves in relation to others in drinking scenarios may shed light on further psychological factors that influence drinking behaviours and may have implications for interventions to reduce consumption.

Aims

The aim of the study was to explore how students compared their own drinking behaviours to the drinking behaviours of others. Specifically, the study sought to explore how different drinker types and self-other drinking standards were described. Where previous research has

taken a quantitative approach to collecting data on how respondents compare themselves to others, this study employed open ended questions to attempt to explore the underlying psychological processes.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

Students were invited via posters and social media to complete an anonymous survey about their alcohol consumption and attitudes towards drinking. In total, 416 students aged 18-30 took part (M age = 21.00; SD = 2.83; 68.5% female; 30.3% male; 1.2 % non-binary). The sample was 91.1% White and comprised students from 27 different UK universities. Measures took approximately 10 minutes to complete, with advice about alcohol at the end of the survey. The procedures received ethical approval from Oxford Brookes University.

Measures

Previous studies have asked respondents to compare themselves to the 'typical' student, which is an abstract term that may be interpreted in various ways (Pape, 2012). People may not see themselves as the 'typical' student and may be more influenced by those in their own social networks (Carter & Kahnweiler, 2000). Thus, participants were provided with two text boxes and asked 'how do you think your drinking compares with other people *like you?*' and 'how do you think your behaviour when you drink compares with other people *like you?*' After each question the text presented was 'please use the space below to tell us what you think'. Alcohol consumption was measured using the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) a widely used and validated measure of drinking behaviour (Babor, Higgins-Biddle, Saunders, & Monteiro, 2001). The AUDIT scale was used to classify participants as low and high risk drinkers using a cut off of 8 and above to denote risky drinking (Babor et al., 2001). The order in which participants completed the AUDIT and the comparison questions was counterbalanced.

Demographic information related to gender, age, and place of study was collected at the end of the survey.

Analysis

We subjected the open ended answers to thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process. During the familiarisation phase, Author 1 and Author 2 read and re-read the accounts and discussed the initial coding schemes outlined above. In the second phase codes were applied to account for different types of inter- and intra-personal comparison, along with other content such as expressions of particular emotions and beliefs relating to the subject matter of drinking and behaviour while drunk. Responses were double-coded by Author 1 and Author 2 then cross-compared; this showed a high level of agreement and also generated new ideas at times of disagreement. A total of 61 initial codes were identified. During the search for themes the coding process was discussed with Author 3, and some codes were combined, discarded or revised to become themes. All authors reviewed the coding and themes to ascertain if the chosen themes were able to fully account for the data set.

RESULTS

We identified two main themes each with two related sub-themes (see Table 1). Each theme and sub-theme is discussed below with supporting evidence. Participants are identified by gender, age, and as low risk or risky drinkers.

[Insert Table 1]

Identification as a 'good' drinker

The first main theme was 'identification as a 'good' drinker'. Participants tended to describe their own behaviour when drinking as similar to their behaviour when sober. We identified that this served to maintain a positive and stable self-identity, as discussed in the sub-theme 'stable self-unstable other'. It was also apparent that being in control when drinking was

important. The sub-theme ‘balance between staying in control and having fun’ describes how the positive aspects of one’s own drinking behaviour are contrasted with the deliberately out of control drunkenness of others.

Stable self – unstable other

Participants indicated their own behaviour when drinking was not much different from when they were sober, as illustrated here

Relatively similar to sober most of the time, compared to other people, (P31, non-binary, risky drinker)

This extract is similar to many, which highlighted participants did not believe their behaviour was significantly affected by alcohol. However, the behaviour of others was viewed as becoming more extreme. Thus, the self was stable, but other people were seen as unstable, and subject to change. While others might become very loud and extroverted, participants would describe themselves as merely becoming a little bit ‘chattier’ or ‘sillier’ than usual. Similarly, other people might be described as ‘unreasonable’ or ‘aggressive’, while participants described themselves as ‘relaxed’ or ‘chilled’, as the following participants illustrate:

I am quite mellow but I wouldn’t say everyone else is (P206; female; 19, low risk)

I would say I ‘hold it together’ very well. I maintain all my faculties, but am a tad more enthusiastic than usual. Most people seem to vomit or act unreasonably, which does not happen to me (P524; male, 20, risky drinker)

The above quotations give rise to an image of drinking for relaxation and social purposes, which allow these participants to become better versions of themselves. In contrast, the ‘other’ is positioned as deliberately transgressive and anti-social. These findings suggest the participants viewed themselves as having a narrower range of emotional states than other people when

drinking. They were also able to maintain a stable middle ground where slight changes only affect the self in a positive manner, as the following example highlights:

When I drink I become more outspoken in the sense that I will tell more jokes and make the effort to talk. However, I don't think my drinking changes me (P90; male, 25, risky drinker)

This was evident across the sample; even participants who said they drank more than others were keen to highlight that alcohol did not affect them in the same way as it affected other people. There was further evidence that participants thought others' extreme behaviour would be played out in inappropriate scenes in public. A smaller number of participants suggested the changes they saw in other people reduced their own desire to drink.

Balance between staying in control and having fun

A further important element of being a good drinker was about staying in control and having fun. Responses suggested participants viewed themselves as motivated to drink for positive reasons, whereas others drink because it is expected, or they are pressured into it. Moreover, where other people become aggressive, loud or rowdy, the participants viewed themselves as fun to be around when they drank, as the following text indicates:

When I drink I become very happy and fun to be around, I am not like others that become over drunk and are no longer in control of themselves (P278, female, 19, risky drinker)

There appeared to be an important balance to strike between drinking enough to have fun, and not drinking too much. People who said they drank more than others tended to say they enjoyed it the taste or the feeling more than others, but still described themselves as better behaved than average, as demonstrated by the following example:

I feel I'm quite tame when drinking alcohol in comparison to other people. I become quite loud and energetic, but that is in a positive way (P413, male, 21, risky drinker)

Participants appeared to be taking into account their own internal states, which could be temporary, and appeared to be more forgiving of their own transgressions. It appeared that descriptions of other people were based on observations of their outward bad behaviour, and apparently assumed to be reflective of their bad intentions. This was evident in text responses such as the following:

I always know what I'm doing when I'm drunk, I don't get violent like others do. I haven't made a mockery of myself by doing stupid things (P521, female, 18, low risk)

Participants were often keen to stress they had a good level of control over their own behaviour. Other people, conversely, were described as out of control. There appeared to be a careful balance that participants must strike, between consuming the right amount of alcohol to be fun and sociable, whilst also feeling in control, for example:

Whilst others are putting away shots in a way similar to simple breathing I tend to pace myself and ensure I don't get wiped out compared to a lot of others around me seem to have that exact goal in mind (P042, male, 20, risky drinker,)

Knowing how to stay in control was identified as an important skill. Being able to maintain control meant the individual would not have to rely on other people during or after a night out. Noting it appeared important to retain control, we were also interested in exploring what this might mean in practice. We identified that being able to stop drinking, knowing one's limits, being a sensible and responsible drinker, and someone who looked after others, was often mentioned. Those who said they drank less than others appeared to have a stronger need to retain control, which was achieved by their perceived lower levels of consumption. Those who said they drank more than others often qualified this by saying they were still able to retain control, and knew when to stop.

Distancing from being a 'bad' drinker

The second main theme is about 'distancing from being a 'bad' drinker'. Specifically, there was evidence of distancing from various 'negative drinker prototypes', which are outlined in the first sub-theme. Participants also appeared to ascribe different motivations for their own drinking behaviours compared to others as discussed in the second sub-theme 'dispositional versus situational attributions for behaviour'. They attributed their own drinking behaviour to situational factors (such as being a student), whilst attributing others' behaviour based on stable, internal factors (such as being intentionally aggressive).

Negative drinker prototypes

A range of drinker descriptions, or 'prototypes', were identified in the participants' responses. Firstly, they referred to the typical 'student drinker', who would drink heavily, with the aim of getting drunk, particularly during social occasions. Drinking was perceived as an important part of student culture, and used as a tool to promote bonding. In contrast, while it appeared acceptable for the typical student to drink to excess, other heavy drinkers were viewed less favourably. For example, some mentioned alcoholics as a group who drank heavily for unacceptable reasons as this excerpt illustrates:

I'm not an alcoholic, I'm a student but when I do drink I get very drunk, and sometimes cannot remember the night. Other people that are actually alcoholics can't help it (P184; male, 19, risky drinker)

This quote suggests heavy drinking was seen as volitional behaviour for the typical student, and something that could be controlled. While alcoholics did not choose to drink excessively, heavy drinking behaviour was a choice for the participants. Evidence included discussion of appropriate times to drink, such as with a meal, and inappropriate reasons for drinking, such as to feel better. These caveats illustrate the means by which participants could successfully achieve distance from negative drinker prototypes.

Secondly, participants frequently contrasted 'acceptable' volitional/social drinking with 'unacceptable' compulsive/individual drinking. This prototypical 'compulsive drinker' was understood as an undesirable 'other'. While undesirable, this type of person seemed to be pitied rather than pilloried. It appeared that by distancing themselves from the compulsive drinker prototype, participants were attempting to contrast their own agentic drinking with the helpless behaviour of those who were unable to control their consumption. Participants were also keen to stress that they were not dependent on alcohol. Thirdly, we identified the 'anti-social drinker' prototype. This person was different from the compulsive drinker, because they drank to excess in social situations. The anti-social drinker was described as boisterous, loud, aggressive, and out of control. This type of person could disrupt the situation and cause annoyance to others, as typified in the following quotes.

I am more calm than others and my attitude towards heavy drinking and being drunk is quite negative (not judgemental, just I prefer not to be drunk) (P248, male, 23, risky drinker)

I am less rowdy than some of my friends and can find it quite embarrassing when they are extremely loud (P277 female, 20, risky drinker)

The uses of the phrases 'not judgemental' and 'embarrassing' are interesting. Many participants appeared to be engaging in some quite strong social judgements about negative drinker prototypes, but at the same time adding caveats to suggest they were not the type of person who judged others. It was evident within these accounts that participants distanced themselves from the 'anti-social' drinker. The use of the terms 'aggressive' and 'violent' were relatively common, which may reveal what the participants viewed as problematic behaviour, as this quote illustrates:

I think my behaviour when I drink is pretty similar to my friends - I'm quite happy, friendly. I'm not angry or violent. But other people around me (who I don't know), can be a bit

violent, or shove in clubs, or go looking for a fight/argument (P356, female, 20, risky drinker)

By distancing themselves from the prototype of the 'anti-social drinker', participants could use their perceived lack of violence and aggression to support the feeling that their drinking was unproblematic.

Dispositional versus situational attributions for behaviour

Another way participants distanced from being a 'bad' drinker was how they attributed drinking behaviours either to the situation or to the person. The main situational factor in evidence was the culture of student drinking, which participants blamed for their own consumption levels, and any transgressive behaviour. Participants' responses indicated they thought alcohol was an expected part of student life, as well as part of UK culture, and this was a cause of some negative behaviours. Some participants distanced themselves from student drinking culture, with the implication that other people were more 'easily led' by social norms, for example:

Compared to other students like me, I find that a lot of people throw down shots and force their alcohol consumption (even though they do not like the taste) in order to feel a part of the student community (P352, female, 23, risky drinker)

In these accounts, there was a sense that those who felt the need to fit in with student drinking culture were weak willed, and unable to express individual agency. Some participants appeared therefore to assume different causes for the same kinds of behaviour between self and other. They drank because of the social obligation to do so, while others drank because they wanted to get drunk, as typified below:

I drink alcohol because I enjoy it, especially alongside dinner or as part of a social interaction. I feel a lot of people my age, students in particular, drink alcohol to get drunk,

even if they don't enjoy the taste. I don't understand this habit at all (P443, female, 23, risky drinker)

Indeed, there was also evidence that non-drinking was stigmatised, suggesting the social obligation was strong, and it might be difficult to transgress this norm, as the following example illustrates:

I don't see the point of drinking, I do it because this stupid culture is backwards and in order to be social you need to feel the pressure to drink (P236, male, 20, low risk)

Social pressure to drink in this context can be used as an explanation or excuse for bad behaviour. The individual can attribute their own drunkenness to factors outside of their control, specifically the need to drink within student culture. Conversely, other people's drunkenness can be ascribed to their internalisation of the culture.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to understand how student drinkers compared their own drinking behaviours to others. Our findings highlighted differences between perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' drinkers. Within the first theme about 'identification as a 'good' drinker' we found evidence to suggest individuals judged themselves as more stable when drinking, but viewed others behaviour as likely to change in more extreme ways. Within this theme, the importance of staying in control, whilst also being fun in social situations was also identified as an important aspect of being a good drinker.

Research has shown individuals tend to overestimate the amount that other people drink (Garnett et al., 2015; Perkins, Meilman, Leichter, Cashin, & Presley, 1999). Here we have shown that there may be similar misperceptions about the way that other people's behaviour changes when they drink. This kind of misperception may serve to maintain a stable self-concept free from negative or immoral traits (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Strohminger, Knobe, &

Newman, 2017). This could be particularly important when related to student drinking where the 'bad' behaviour that is often apparent in popular discourse may threaten this stability.

The importance of control for young adult drinkers has been demonstrated in previous research highlighting the sometimes precarious balance between staying in control and losing control (Szmigin et al., 2008; Zajdow & MacLean, 2014). This balance may be maintained by monitoring and regulating internal bodily feelings, which may be an effortful process when the competing goals of social pleasure and bonding are also at the forefront of a night out (Zajdow & MacLean, 2014). Our participants seemed hyper-aware of the need to maintain control and actively denigrated those who were unable to regulate their drinking to stay in control.

Being in control has been identified as important in other studies. For example, an effective means of targeting students could be to encourage them to stay in the 'sweet spot'; where they feel the positive benefits, without the negative consequences, such as becoming aggressive or unwell (de Visser et al., 2015; Graber et al., 2016). The term 'calculated hedonism' has been used to describe the situation where drinkers allow themselves to drink to a level where they feel they have lost the constraints of their sober existence, but still retain control (Szmigin et al., 2008). Thus, being in control may be much more important than monitoring the amount of alcohol consumed.

In our second main theme, about 'distancing from being a 'bad' drinker' we found evidence that participants distanced themselves from 'negative drinker prototypes' (specifically the student drinker, the compulsive drinker and the anti-social drinker). The finding of particular characteristics related to drinker types fits the assumption in the Prototype Willingness Model; that people have clear images associated with those who engage in risk behaviours (Gerrard et al., 2002). Our results suggested individuals may see these negative prototypes as more relevant targets for alcohol interventions than themselves. De Visser et al., (2013) also found young people distanced themselves from problem drinkers, which may hamper prevention measures.

Also within the second main theme, and described under the sub-theme 'dispositional versus situational attributions for behaviour', evidence suggested individuals may attribute different reasons for drunken behaviours carried out by themselves, as opposed to others. Some of this evidence suggested these misattributions were made in line with the correspondence bias (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). The student drinking culture was a strong situational driver for some. Drinking to fit in with this culture was viewed negatively, but it was also blamed, or given as an explanation as to why the participants got drunk. They also suggested their own behaviour when drunk was 'fun' whereas others were described as violent or aggressive. In some accounts there was evidence that participants viewed this aggressive or out of control behaviour as deliberate, and in line with others' intentions.

Increasingly, researchers are beginning to understand the experiences of non-drinkers in a bid to explore the more varied ways that young adults interact with alcohol (Conroy & de Visser, 2015). Non-drinkers are often denigrated by peers, and described as anti-social (Conroy & de Visser, 2014). Heavy drinkers were described as anti-social in the current study, suggesting non-drinkers and heavy drinkers are similarly seen as 'other'. It can be challenging to find opportunities to socialise without alcohol (Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010), therefore young people must strike a careful balance to fit in.

Implications

These findings offer insight into why some alcohol interventions are ineffective. If individuals view themselves as drinking less and behaving better than others when they drink, then it follows that they may not see themselves a target for such interventions. In line with Klein and Epley's (2016) assertion, perhaps those who judged their drinking as less problematic may take fewer precautions against adverse consequences as they do not believe themselves to be at risk.

The identified themes have further specific implications for the development of interventions. Individuals could be encouraged to contemplate similarities between their own behaviour and the behaviour of different drinker types, in order to reduce distancing. To target the perception

that one's own behaviour does not change as a result of drinking, it would be interesting to present drinkers with images or videos of themselves on a night out to see if they are influenced by viewing their own behaviour. A pilot scheme in Cardiff, UK was set up to present drinkers with films made when they attended an Alcohol Treatment Centre. However, there was no evidence this was effective means of reducing subsequent drinking, and it could have unwanted consequences if recipients view their bad behaviour positively (Moore, Sivarajasingam, & Heikkinen, 2013). The balance between staying in control whilst having fun may also offer intervention designers a fruitful avenue for exploration. Acknowledging that individuals often drink to have fun may avoid intervention messages being seen as unrealistic. Focussing on staying in control rather than sticking to a set number of units, or highlighting future health harms could be more appealing to younger drinkers. It may also be important to show that drinking for fun may also have negative consequences for short and long term health.

The finding that individuals attribute their own behaviours to situational factors and others' behaviours as intentional could also inform interventions. For example Pronin and Kugler (2007) found that participants were poor at judging their own susceptibility to bias relative to others'. To overcome this, they educated participants about potential biases in judging others' behaviour and observed a reduction in the participants' tendency to view their own evaluations as unbiased (Pronin & Kugler, 2007). This principle could be applied within alcohol interventions. Participants could be given information about the likelihood they will be biased about making judgements about their own drinking behaviour and encouraged to view this in a more realistic light. This builds upon social norms and health messaging interventions, and takes into account the correspondence bias observed here.

Limitations

While we collected data from a large sample of respondents, they were recruited opportunistically and findings may not be reflective of comparisons made by non-students or older drinkers. Using open ended questions within an online survey may also restrict the depth

of answers. Interviews would allow further probing of the nature of comparisons, and specific occasions could be recounted in detail. This study built on previous studies by asking people to compare themselves to other people 'like them' instead of the 'typical' student. However, this comparison may still be too abstract, and perhaps it may be better to ask individuals to compare with close friends. Social desirability, as well as accuracy and memory for recent drinking occasions can hamper alcohol research. Some participants (9% for drinking and 26% for behaviour) did not make explicit comparisons to others. This may be misinterpretation of the question, or it could reflect that the question prompted introspection rather than outward comparison. We attracted a high proportion of low risk drinkers into the study (who may not always be the intended targets of interventions) and thus it would be beneficial to explore these findings with more high risk drinkers. Given the prevention paradox that small changes in the population could lead to greater benefits to the population as a whole (Rose, 2001), it is important that low risk drinkers also take heed of responsible drinking campaigns.

Conclusions

In summary, participants appeared to view themselves as being 'good drinkers' and distanced themselves from others who were 'bad' drinkers. They viewed themselves as good drinkers through a perception that their behaviour when drinking was similar to their sober behaviour. Furthermore, they viewed themselves as more able to maintain the balance between staying in control and having fun when drinking. Participants viewed others as 'bad' drinkers, and compared themselves to various negative drinker prototypes, such as alcoholics. They also attributed their own behaviours to situational factors, but described other people as intentionally violent or aggressive. This evidence may explain why interventions sometimes fail to reduce student alcohol misuse. Individuals may simply not view themselves as a target for such interventions, instead believing that it is other people who need to change.

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TABLE

Table 1: *Main themes and sub themes identified in the thematic analysis*

Main Theme	Sub theme
Identification as a 'good' drinker	Stable self – unstable other Balance between staying in control and having fun
Distancing from being a 'bad' drinker	Negative drinker prototypes Dispositional versus situational attributions for drinking behaviour