



Transitioning to University: A Sober Experience

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Abstract

This study was designed to investigate the experiences of non-drinking, first year undergraduate students during their transition to university life. To achieve this, six semi-structured interviews were conducted. Upon transcription the interviews, each was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). From the analysis, four themes were identified: 'Experiencing pressure to drink', 'making excuses not to drink', 'sports societal exclusion' and 'a gradually improving experience: 'it gets easier with time''. The analysis revealed an overall difficult experience for each non-drinking participant, aligning with and in some cases building upon the previous literature, suggesting the importance of alcohol amongst the student population, especially during the initial transitional period. Throughout each interview and imbedded in each theme was an overarching presence of social identity, defining for each participant both their own and their peers places as first year university students. As this study and others like it are aiding in illuminating the potential struggles of non-drinking, first year students during the transition to University, results could help in tailoring university support to the students in need.

KEY WORDS:	DISCOURSE ANALYSIS	ALCOHOL	EXPERIENCE	PRESSURE	EXCLUSION
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Introduction

The transition to university life is both a crucial and difficult task for a great number of students, annually reflected through early withdrawals (McInnis, 2001). Those often coming directly from sixth form or college find the transition to a stricter academic environment difficult and often feel a lack of connection to the context of university (Perry and Allard, 2003; Maunder et al., 2013). This is often not aided by the fact that most students will, in some capacity, bring with them expectations of university life that are usually developed through prior experience of education or simply via information and stories recounted by family and friends (Brooks, 2003; Leese, 2010). Whilst the term 'transition' can be defined in a number of ways depending on the chosen period of time, Perry and Allard (2003) suggested that it is either a period or process by which the individual experiences a change of form, stage, state or activity. First year undergraduates will face considerable social and personal challenges as well as pressures from the academic aspect of university life during this unique life transition which takes a considerable amount of time and effort to overcome (Kantanis, 2000; Borsari et al., 2007; Hussey and Smith, 2010). It is in this transition to university life that undergraduate students will often first experience an entirely new culture of its own, the drinking culture.

The Drinking Culture

The social drinking culture is often regarded as a key feature of British life (Van Wersch and Walker, 2009) and this is no exception for the social lives of a great deal of university students (Gill, 2002; Conroy and De Visser, 2012). From studies both within the UK and abroad, it is clear that the 'drinking culture' is not simply limited to British university students but is a culture within its own right amongst students across the world (Zhou and Heim, 2016). As a result, a great deal of the perspectives, experiences and reasons to drink amongst undergraduates across the globe are extremely similar. Whether it be the common belief that alcohol consumption provides a form of 'social lubrication' or 'liquid courage' to those students struggling with difficult, anxious social interactions when first transitioning to university life (Dodd et al., 2010; De Visser et al., 2013; Collins et al., 2014). Or perhaps the way in which a great deal of students will blame conformity (Crutchfield, 1955; Kelman, 1958; Teunissen et al., 2012) or peer pressure (Conroy and De Visser, 2013; Mekonen et al., 2017) to be the reasons that they are drinking alcohol during this time. Furthermore, stated reasons for drinking are not simply limited to social themes but have often been found to cross into academic reasons. Several studies have indicated that undergraduate students often drink alcohol to help deal with the stress of an increased academic workload (Park et al., 2004; Holttum et al., 2014). However, there is a substantial minority of first year undergraduates that choose not to drink alcohol at university.

The Substantial Minority

These non-drinkers represent a substantial minority, as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) demonstrated alcohol abstinence had risen by 40% amongst individuals aged between 16 and 24 (Office for National Statistics, 2015). Due to their position as a minority group, they are often treated with suspicion by those who have chosen to adopt the drinking culture of university life (Conroy and De Visser, 2013).

Analysis of semi-structured interviews with twelve alcohol drinking participants highlighted three key views regarding students who choose to abstain from alcohol use. These were, unsociability, strange behaviour that requires explanation and that alcohol abstinence holds greater negative social consequences for men than it does for women (Conroy and De Visser, 2012). Further to this, De Visser et al. (2013) stated that some previous non-drinkers will even embrace the use of alcohol to avoid social exclusion and being labelled as ‘boring’.

But it is important to highlight that despite this negative outlook on students who choose to abstain from alcohol, there are a number of positive and reasonable explanations as to why this minority choose not to drink alcohol at university. These include, but are not limited to, religious or cultural beliefs (Wicki et al., 2010), maintaining a sense of pride or individuality (Conroy and De Visser, 2012), disliking the effects that alcohol has on the self (Klein, 1990; Rinker and Neighbors, 2013; Conroy and De Visser, 2015), increased physical and psychological health (Conroy and De Visser, 2018) and fear of increasing ones use of risky behaviour. Although it is interesting to note that Erskine-Shaw et al. (2017) suggest that it is in fact group presence, not alcohol use that increases risk-taking behaviour. One alternate reason for alcohol abstinence was identified by Conroy and De Visser (2018: 93) as allowing for increased opportunities to develop a more “inclusive and fulfilling social network”. A statement that has not been previously documented amongst these forms of study. Overall, these findings echo a great deal of both earlier and later research into the reasons of non-drinking behaviour at university (Klein, 1990; Huang et al., 2011; Rinker and Neighbors, 2013). However, one key topic has received a trivial amount of research. That is, the experiences of these non-drinking students.

Previous Studies on Non-Drinkers

The small amount of previous literature has generally been concerned with students stretching across all university year groups, with very few having focussed specifically on the experiences of non-drinking, first year undergraduates who are coming into contact with the ‘university drinking culture’ for the first time (Piacentini and Banister, 2009; Herring et al., 2014). However, one such study is that of Jacobs et al. (2018) who’s study utilised Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the experiences and perspectives of exclusively non-drinking, female undergraduate students. Possibly due to the narrowing gap in male-female drinking patterns and the fact that women drinkers are often stigmatised as lacking respectability and femininity (Day et al., 2004). However, a number of studies have indicated higher levels of binge drinking amongst female undergraduate students than that of their male counterparts (Pickard et al., 2000; Underwood and Fox, 2000). The results of Jacobs et al. (2018) indicated a number of consistent issues. Such as participants feeling as though they did not belong, encountering difficulties with socialising, experiencing social exclusion as well as distressing levels of peer pressure from drinking students (Jacobs et al., 2018). One participant even reported to having drank alcohol when they did not want to, due to the act of one peer pouring out drinks as an “active offer of alcohol” (Jacobs et al., 2018: 744), giving evidence to direct encouragement, often regarded as the most simple and direct form of peer pressure (Santor et al., 2000).

These results give further evidence to the belief that abstinence from alcohol for young individuals can be difficult, due to its social significance and ability to induce social

inclusion for the drinker (Frederiksen et al., 2012). This has been reflected through studies such as that of Zhou and Heim (2016: 558), whose results portray student social activities as being “all about the rules”, stating that a host of sport centred social groups are regulated through strict group rules and norms, which, if broken, are often punished through the use of alcohol. Furthermore, the concepts of the ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’ as set out through the theory of social identity appear to be very much prevalent in literature relating to alcohol use in university social groups (Zhou and Heim, 2016). The identification of these two groups has the ability to regulate members of the ‘in-group’ to adhere to group norms, as to avoid becoming a member of the ‘out-group’ by way of abstaining from alcohol (Zhou and Heim, 2016). Due to this, it appears that students choosing not to drink alcohol at university would be challenged to engage with a vast majority of student social groups. It could be suggested that this may especially be the case for non-drinking males. As both heavy and public alcohol consumption have been historically associated with men, reflecting their masculine identity and competency (De Visser and Smith, 2007).

Justification of Research

Previous literature has established the great difficulty that university can pose on an undergraduate student (Kantaris, 2000; Borsari et al., 2007) and has effectively outlined the uses of alcohol amongst them, including both their reasons for doing so and their experiences when drinking alcohol in a vast array of social circumstances (De Visser et al., 2013; Collins et al., 2014; Zhou and Heim, 2016). Furthermore, as previously demonstrated, there have been a number of studies outlining the reasons as to why the substantial minority of students choose not to drink alcohol during their time at university. However, there has been very little research regarding the experiences and perspectives of those non-drinking undergraduate students, the few of which have either focussed exclusively on one gender (Jacobs et al., 2018), or have merely investigated the experiences of alcohol abstinence within sporting societies (Zhou and Heim, 2016). Of these studies, none have so far used thematic analysis, which is surprising as it is capable of describing and organising a data set with a rich amount of detail, unparalleled by many other forms of qualitative analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

As a result, this study explores the experiences of this significant minority group of first year, non-drinking undergraduates in order to gain some level of insight into the experience of transitioning to university life without alcohol, the previously regarded ‘key feature of British university culture’ (Gill, 2002; Van Wersch and Walker, 2009; Conroy and De Visser, 2012). This is achieved through the use of semi-structured interviews with both male and female undergraduates that is analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA). It is of vital importance that this study and those that follow, uncover the hardships and struggles of alcohol abstinence at university, as well as highlight some of its potential benefits. In doing so, this study may help to inform undergraduates to the non-drinking lifestyle, whether they wish to adopt it or simply lower their alcohol intake and the possible challenges that may come with abstinence from alcohol in such an alcohol centred environment.

Methodology

Design: A semi-structured interview was implemented, in which a number of questions were asked in order to obtain a detailed account of the participants transitions to university. The collected data was then transcribed and later analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2007).

Participants: Participants were obtained via opportunity-based sampling as well as through the use of the ‘participation pool’ at Manchester Metropolitan University. The participants consisted of 3 Male and 3 Female members. All participants were issued a pseudonym for the purpose of anonymity. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 20. Participants were eligible to take part in the study if they were first year undergraduate students, who had chosen to abstain from alcohol use during their transition to university.

Materials: Following a review of previous studies such as Zhou and Heim (2016) and Jacobs et al. (2018), several themes were discovered. It was around these themes that an interview schedule was established (see appx.3). For example, the theme of ‘Social Exclusion’ inspired the question, ‘Have you ever found that, as a non-drinking student, you have found it difficult to socialise with others?’. Alternately, themes of peer pressure from Conroy and De Visser (2013) and Mekonen et al. (2017) lead to questions such as ‘Have you ever felt pressured by other students or even a situation, to drink alcohol?’. Audio recordings were taken from each interview via a recording device. The audio recordings were then transferred onto a laptop to undergo transcription and thematic analysis.

Procedure: Before each interview, participants were each handed a ‘Participant Information Sheet’, that outlined both the purpose of the study and their role within it. It also informed the participant that their data was to remain anonymous but due to the use of direct quotes, confidentiality could not be guaranteed. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw up to two weeks following completion of their interview. Following this, participants signed the ‘consent form’ (see Appx.1), confirming that they had read and understood the details provided within the ‘participant information sheet’ (see Appx.2).

Following this, a semi-structured interview of questions and follow up questions was applied, encouraging the participant to pursue narratives that were of interest to the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2013). In particular, their perspectives and experiences of transitioning to university as a non-drinking student. Each interview typically took between 35-45 minutes. Upon completion, each participant was thanked for their time and were given the chance to ask any follow up questions.

Data Collection: Due to its semi-structured nature, each interview allows for a great amount of conversational fluidity and reflexivity, as opposed to a one-sided, rigid structure (Rabionet, 2011). Due to this, a semi-structured interview allows for the dialogue to take different, branching directions dependant on the interests of the researcher. If a rigid structure of interview was employed, it could run the risk of missing crucial details of the participants experience and avenues of interest would not be able to be explored (Rabionet, 2011).

Data Analysis: For the purpose of this study, an inductive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the transcribed interviews of each participant, as it has previously demonstrated itself as an effective method for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79). The themes were established by first identifying ‘codes’, following the reading and re-reading of each transcript. These codes are features of the data that were of interest to the researcher, before being clustered into a ‘theme’ (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). A ‘theme’ within thematic analysis, embodies something important about the data set that is relative to the research question posed (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Boyatzis, 1998). The phases of this procedure were conducted in-line with that of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-stage method of thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations: In the case that any participant became upset as a result of discussing the outlined issues, the Manchester Samaritans hotline was provided. Ethical approval was obtained through Manchester Metropolitan University (Ethical Clearance Number: 2296).

Results

Thematic Analysis of each transcript revealed four overarching themes: ‘Experiencing pressure to drink’, ‘making excuses not to drink’, ‘sports societal exclusion’ and ‘a gradually improving experience: ‘it gets easier with time’’. The first of which consisted of two sub-themes: “Peer Pressure” and “Social Pressure”. The former took the form of direct, face-to-face pressuring, whilst the latter was applied indirectly, predominantly through social media platforms such as Facebook.

Experiencing Pressure to Drink – Peer Pressure

This narrative was evident in each of the six analysed transcripts, differing in severity depending on the participant. In each description, participants discussed varying forms of pressure that were applied by both strangers and friends alike, both of which shared the trait of drinking alcohol as opposed to each participant. What was most interesting about this theme is the effects that peer pressure can bring about in the participants, such as feelings of isolation or exclusion as well as the differing severities of pressure that appear to depend on whether the pressure is being applied by a stranger rather than a friend.

Extract 1: Elizabeth discussing peer pressure during a night out at freshers' week.

01. *Elizabeth: ...people were telling me like 'oh it's alright you won't be sick if*
02. *look after you' or 'It's just one drink it's not going to kill you'. But they don't*
03. *know the effect it has on me, why should I have to drink just to be able to*
04. *join in with them?*
05. *Int: Yeah, absolutely.*
06. *Elizabeth: Then I'm very aware that I'm the only sober one and I'm kind of*
07. *alone. Like not alone, alone but I'm not like part of them. You become very*
08. *self-conscious.*

Elizabeth has noted that she is not ‘part of them’, placing herself as part of the out-group and has acknowledged her isolation through the phrase ‘kind of alone’. Although

this could be seen as her accepting her place in a night-club as a non-drinker, she does challenge the notion of being pressured into drinking as well as why she should be excluded for not doing so. The following extract from Andrew further describes forms of pressure but on two fronts:

Extract 2: Andrew discussing being pressured as a non-drinking Muslim by a fellow Muslim who has taken up drinking.

01. Andrew: ...it's a little more relatable because they align with your values a
02. little more. But when they turn around after all this time, sharing all the
03. same values as you, it becomes a bit more persuasive because they're
04. coming from a place where you come from. Like other people wouldn't
05. understand the pressure of having a religious background and not being
06. able to drink.
06. Int: So, it becomes tempting?
07. Andrew: It makes you think, should I? should I not? You know?

Both participants align in their feelings of being pressured by their peers, but Andrew is further tempted by the fact that his friend, rather than a stranger, is from a similar cultural background, emphasising alcohol's accessibility and reducing the stigma of drinking alcohol as a Muslim. The extract also suggests that Andrew feels a significant amount of pressure from his cultural/social background as a Muslim, causing him to 'not being able to drink'. Extract 2 is fascinating as there are not simply two group dimensions which is often the case when examining social identity theory. Whilst Elizabeth and Andrew are both part of the 'out-group' when in the presence of drinking students, there appears to be a third group in play for Andrew. This third group appears to be one based on shared cultural backgrounds as his friend is 'coming from a place where you (Andrew) come from', that makes the possibility of drinking 'a bit more persuasive'.

Experiencing Pressure to Drink – Social Pressure

It was evident throughout many of the participants narratives that social pressures were also being experienced throughout their transition to university, specifically during fresher's week. It is in this period when most participants noted that both the frequency and intensity of these social pressures were at their highest. This one factor that cut across each participants experience was the exposure to pressures from social media that seemed to exacerbate not only the pressure to drink with their peers, but also their feelings of isolation.

Extract 3: Elizabeth describing seeing her friends' pictures on Facebook during fresher's week.

01. Elizabeth: Like they were going out and having such a good time without
02. me and I was just there missing out. And like because my friend joined the
03. netball society, I saw stuff of her on Facebook and thought, if I could drink
04. again, that could have been me and her instead of these other people.

The extract describes how, at first, she was isolated as she was unable to join her friends during nights out due to her not drinking but due to social media, she was

exposed to the fact that she was being replaced by ‘those other people’. It also eludes to the fact that it is not only the problem of social media but also that her friend ‘joined the netball society’, linking sports societal inclusion to the act of drinking alcohol. The use of the term ‘if I could drink again’ emphasises the pressure that Elizabeth feels as a non-drinker. She is restricted in her participation but as a previous drinker before coming to university, knows that drinking alcohol could be the solution. It is also interesting that Elizabeth uses the phrase ‘these other people’, once again, highlighting the presence of social identity through the establishment of her in-group with her friend and hostility towards the ‘other people’ or out-group.

Excuses Not to Drink Alcohol

With this description of both peer and social pressure, utilisation of excuses to not join in with alcohol related activities were prominent in most narratives. Examples of which were explained by the participants, not only in their situational application but also outlining how their excuses were seen as being valid and justifiable. What is different here when compared to previous research regarding the lying/excuse making behaviour of non-drinkers at university is the comparisons that the participants make between the validity of their excuses compared to other non-drinkers.

Extract 4: Andrew discussing how his religious beliefs constitute as a valid reason to not drink at university.

01. *Andrew: It's like unless you have a proper strong reason not to do it, like*
02. *being Muslim, the norm would be just to do it. Like a religious reason holds*
03. *a lot of gravity about it. But if you don't have a real, heavy reason to not*
04. *drink then there's no reason why you shouldn't.*

Andrew outlines his view that being unable to drink as a Muslim holds ‘a lot of gravity about it’, validating his excuse to both his peers and himself whilst describing how, if others do not have a ‘real, heavy reason’ or excuse, they have no reason to not drink alcohol at university. Andrew’s use of the term ‘norm’ also emphasises that, even as a non-drinker, he recognises the significance of the drinking culture and its place as the social norm amongst students. This point of justification was both echoed and expanded upon by Margaret:

Extract 5: Margaret describing her attitude towards other non-drinkers at university.

01. *Margaret: ...if I didn't have a reason to not drink like my religion, I think*
02. *people would think that it's a bit weird. Like why isn't she drinking? Is she*
03. *trying to hide something? Maybe she just doesn't want to have a good time.*

Both participants describe how, on religious grounds they have a valid reason to not drink alcohol here at university. However, Margaret goes further to suggest that those who do not have a ‘real, heavy reason’ to not drink alcohol are both ‘weird’ and suspicious in the fact that they may be ‘trying to hide something’. What is most interesting is that under the theory of social identity, Margaret would be part of the out-group in situations of drinking activities at university. Yet she has separated herself from other non-drinkers as, like Andrew, she feels that she holds a valid excuse to not drink alcohol when compared to others without a ‘real, heavy reason’.

Sports Societal Exclusion

Another prominent feature of the transcripts was the shared attitudes towards sports societies at university, mainly, their apparent inaccessibility. When discussing social exclusion during the transition to university, a number of participants noted without prompting that sports societies seemed unapproachable and almost entirely centred around drinking. However, Elizabeth and Anne had both attempted to join the netball society. As they had been part of what could be considered as the in-group, even briefly, both could describe the experience in a similar fashion.

Extract 6: Elizabeth reflecting on her experience with sports societies at university.

01. *Elizabeth: I wanted to join netball and play sport here, but I can't because I*
02. *don't drink so I'm sort of stuck. It's not their fault, I mean I'm the one that*
03. *can't drink.*

The following extract, whilst similar in its theme of social exclusion, differs slightly from Elizabeth, in that Anne not only questions the importance of alcohol to the sports societal dynamic but in doing so, also assigns blame for her lack of inclusion to the society as opposed to Elizabeth.

Extract 7: Anne describing her difficulty in joining the netball society.

01. *Anne: Yeah, especially sports societies like netball because most socials*
02. *and even the meet and greet sessions for societies were all drinking based*
03. *and going out such as to pubs as well 'initiation' that always involves*
04. *alcohol.*
05. *Int: Yeah, there's been a lot in the news recently regarding that sort of*
06. *thing, initiations at universities and student deaths from alcohol poisoning.*
07. *Anne: Exactly, it's so stupid, why should you have to be able to down a*
08. *bottle of wine in 30 seconds in order to throw a netball through a hoop*
09. *effectively?*

Both participants describe the inaccessibility of sports societies to non-drinking students, emphasising alcohol as a key feature of the process. However, Anne questions the reasons as to why alcohol should be central to societal inclusion whilst the act of playing the sport itself is left as almost an afterthought, going as far as to call it 'stupid'. This defiance to being left as part of the out-group and not blaming herself for her exclusion is what separates her from Elizabeth and reflects a feeling of frustration and confusion that was not present in other extracts. Both extracts also describe drinking behaviour in a similar way to previous research in that one of its key capabilities is to increase social inclusion and act as a form of social lubricant.

A Gradually Improving Experience: “It Gets Easier with Time”

The final theme that was identified throughout the transcripts was one of hope, describing how time is a key factor in explaining both the frequency and severity of the previously outlined social difficulties and experiences of non-drinking students when transitioning to university. This outlined how the transition, that is, the opening weeks of university, were the most challenging to them as non-drinkers before improving later

in the academic year, usually at the start of the second term. Whilst previous literature has discussed the academic workload of university being related to drinking behaviour, it has often been seen to increase alcohol consumption to reduced stress of drinking students. However, the participants narratives argued against this fact:

Extract 8: Philip, after being asked about feeling restricted as a non-drinker.

01. *Philip: Yeah, all the time, at least when I tried to go out with them lot at first*
02. *during freshers and all that.*
03. *Int: Do you feel any differently now?*
04. *Philip: Well yeah, it's a bit easier now, like we all have reading and*
05. *assignments to do so there aren't as many people going out anymore. Or*
06. *like not as much, they still go to (club in Manchester) on Wednesdays but*
07. *that's it really.*

Contrary to previous literature, this extract describes a narrative that suggests that the academic workload of university indirectly affects the negative experiences of non-drinkers at university. By increasing academic workload, thereby reducing the frequency of drinker-exclusive events such as nights out in clubs and bars, the feelings of exclusion and other social difficulties as previously described are reduced for non-drinking undergraduate students. As a result, the opening transitory period of university i.e. 'during freshers and all that', appears to be viewed as the most difficult time for non-drinkers by the participants.

Discussion

The data analysis has explored and identified various themes of the experiences amongst first year undergraduate students who are undergoing the transition to university life as non-drinkers. Whilst the findings do support various aspects of previous research such as themes of social exclusion and peer pressure (Conroy and De Visser, 2013; Mekonen et al., 2017; Jacobs et al., 2018), as well as the importance of alcohol in this challenging, transitory environment and the ever-present factor of social identity theory (Dodd et al., 2010; Frederiksen et al., 2012; De Visser et al., 2013; Collins et al., 2014; Zhou and Heim, 2016), it has both developed them further and discovered different experiences of non-drinking students.

For example, a number of studies have demonstrated that social exclusion is a common theme across the narratives of non-drinking students (Frederiksen et al., 2012; De Visser et al., 2013; Jacobs et al., 2018). Separately, studies have also discussed the inner workings of sports societal groups at university, including how they are often regulated by in-group norms and has effectively reflected the feelings of a number of the participants in this study, namely, their alcohol centred attitudes (Zhou and Heim, 2016). However, this study has discovered a theme linking both phenomena together: 'sports societal exclusion'.

When discussing the theme of 'sports societal exclusion', the findings do replicate those of 'social exclusion' from Jacobs et al. (2018) to some extent, but do not expose a narrative that suggests non-drinking undergraduates lack the opportunities to socialise with their drinking peers. Rather, they simply do not feel equipped to deal

with alcohol-centred environments such as sports societies. As they do not partake in the central tenet of these societies, that is, drinking, they are somewhat prone to self-exclusion from the secondary activities which are ironically the sports themselves. This aligns with several aspects of previous research, in that ‘social lubrication’ as a function of alcohol is a widespread phenomenon amongst the student population (Dodd et al., 2010; De Visser et al., 2013; Collins et al., 2014) and that sports societies are very much regulated by the continuous and often binge-like consumption of alcohol that is capable of discerning the ‘in’ and ‘out’ group as stated in the theory of social identity (Tajfel, 1974; Zhou and Heim, 2016; Zhou et al., 2018). These points were well illustrated by extracts 6 and 7 in which both participants had been exposed to the drinking culture of sports societal groups. Through the exposure, both were able to observe how the ‘in-group’ operated. This clearly outlines the pillars of social learning and exposure, both of which are central to the construction of stereotypes, another central topic amongst social psychologists (Linville et al., 1989).

Clearly, the presence of social identity was an overarching constant throughout most transcripts and cut across most themes that were discussed, a result that had been previously discussed by Zhou and Heim (2016). The most interesting of which came from Andrew in extracts 2 and 4 in which he described his inclusion in a secondary social group that was formed through his cultural upbringing as a Muslim. This ultimately led to a complex dynamic of identity grouping, in which both himself and Margaret separated themselves from their own out-group of non-drinkers as they felt that they had far stronger, validated excuses for not drinking at university. This reflects similar results from Conroy and De Visser (2013) in which their participants admitted the deployment of excuses and identified socially ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ excuses for not drinking. But in some regards, the findings from Andrew and Margaret go further. They identify not only the acceptable vs. unacceptable excuses of Conroy and De Visser (2013) but also a fracturing of the traditional in-group vs. out-group dynamic, observing that shared cultural backgrounds can lead to a sub-division of the initial out-group of non-drinkers.

These results, when examined through the lens of social identity theory are not surprising as Tajfel (1974) proposed that these ‘groups’ whether they are constructed socially or culturally are key to one’s sense of pride and individuality. By identifying themselves as part of the ‘out-group’ when it comes to drinking behaviour in the environment of university life, some non-drinking students may achieve this, as previously identified by Conroy and De Visser (2012). This does however, also often involve a member of one’s in-group seeking to find negative aspects of the ‘others’ or out-group, demonstrated by Anne, describing sports societal drinking behaviour as ‘stupid’ in extract 7. Elizabeth, in extract 3 also refers to drinking students as ‘these other people’, not only demonstrating the prevalence of social identity construction but also the previously mentioned act of ‘stereotyping’.

One further interesting point of discussion is the identification of the fourth theme which describes a somewhat positive aspect of the transitional period as a non-drinker. This theme of ‘a gradually improving experience: ‘it gets better with time’’ was formed by a number of optimistic narratives from the participants who described how, over time, the difficulties of university life become manageable as the prominence of the ‘drinking culture’ decrease due to an increased academic workload that limits nightlife activity to a certain extent: ‘it’s a bit easier now, like we all have reading and assignments to

do so there aren't as many people going out anymore' (Extract 8). This finding echoes the statements of previous studies in observing that the transition to university can be a challenging task that can take a considerable amount of time to overcome (Kantanis, 2000; Borsari et al., 2007; Hussey and Smith, 2010). However, the theme itself, where time is a factor of positive/negative experiences in one's transition to university as a non-drinking student has not so-far been discussed in previous studies. Furthermore, contrary to both the previous themes of this study and those of the studies before it, the theme offers an optimistic viewpoint. Whilst the stricter academic workload, possibility of feeling disconnected from the university as well as other factors are challenging (Perry and Allard, 2003; Maunder et al., 2013) and are evidently amplified by the previous three themes, with time, the experience can improve for non-drinking first year students.

Limitations

One glaring limitation of this study is the fact that each participant is recalling their experiences of the initial transition to university several months after the fact. It could be argued that in discussing their experiences retrospectively, each participant's narrative could be distorted, whether it be intentionally or unintentionally through the often-discussed paradigm of social desirability (McCrae and Costa, 1983; Furnham, 1986). As a result, each narrative cannot be taken as the absolute truth. Further to this point, as the study only consists of only six participants, the results should not be seen as being entirely conclusive but merely a reflection of a small number of students.

Future Research

As a great deal of this study's results have centred around the theory of social identity that claims that the concept of the self is created from the group in which the individual presides, it could be beneficial to utilise focus groups for the collection of data (Tajfel, 1974). The unique dynamic of a focus group could allow a platform for group discussion, reflection and comparison of experiences to bring forth rich levels of data that a one-on-one interview cannot provide (Morgan, 1993; Edwards and Stokoe, 2004; Munday, 2006). This would also allow for a larger group of participants, resulting in a wider and more diverse discussion on the transition to university for non-drinking students.

Conclusion

Following on from a relatively small body of literature, this study has identified both existing and new themes regarding the transition to university for non-drinking, first year undergraduate students. Its use of thematic analysis enabled a detailed, in-depth exploration of the experiences of these non-drinking students. Although a small sample was used, the results have aided in illuminating the negative experiences and struggles of this significant, expanding minority group. These have ranged from high levels of both peer and social pressures, participants having to constantly excuse themselves from drinking activities as well as sports societal exclusion. However, the final theme of 'a gradually improving experience: 'it gets easier with time'' does offer a small degree of comfort after discovering that most participants believed that the university experience as non-drinkers became better with time. The study has done

what it set out to do, in providing further evidence for previous research as well as discovering new depths of experiences for the non-drinking student during the transition to university. But more importantly, it has provided a voice for the underrepresented minority of students who's struggles with university life have only recently begun to be explored. However, the real-world applicability of these results and others like it are difficult to define as a great deal of the negativity encountered by non-drinking, first year undergraduates is outside of the universities interventional range. One such outcome could be an improved understanding of the non-drinking experience at University and help to support struggling students during the transition.

Reflexivity

Upon reflection I have realised that my research in this area has been influenced by both a personal and academic standpoint. Firstly, on a personal level, whilst I have never often abstained from drinking, I did find the transition to university difficult when I first arrived in Manchester, despite an abundance of friends both old and new. It was clear, even before arriving at university that alcohol was to play a key role in the life of a student. Combining these views, I was influenced to investigate the drinking culture at university in one form or another, keen to explore how it affects what both I and research agree to be a challenging time for first year university students, regardless of their choices to drink or, more importantly, to not drink alcohol. Secondly, I have been influenced by the previous research in this area of social psychology, or lack thereof. Whilst it has been previously noted that a great deal of research has been conducted regarding drinking behaviour and the experiences that it entails, very little has examined the experiences of the non-drinking student. Especially during the transition to university where both social and academic changes can be most challenging. A point that is highlighted during the opening paragraph of my introduction. Although I was to initially rely on the 'Participation Pool' of the University to gather participants, it did not produce the number required. As a result, I had to adapt my approach and adopt a form of snowballing, by which I found new participants by asking existing participants to approach their non-drinking friends.

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