

# Contemporary Discursive Constructions of Alcohol Use: **Defining problematic**

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*It's the Keele difference.*

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# Alcohol

Harmful alcohol use is linked to **over 60 medical diseases**.

*(NICE, 2011)*

In 2014 there were **8,697 alcohol-related deaths**.

*(Alcohol Concern, 2016)*

Severe alcohol use can **increase mental health symptoms and induce psychotic syndromes** such as anxiety, mood disorders, depression and increased risk of suicide.

*(Petrakis, Gonzale, Rosenheck, & Krystal, 2002; BPS, 2011)*

It has been estimated that between 2006/7 the **economic cost** of alcohol to England was **£55.1 billion**.

*(PHE, 2016)*

# Alcohol

Only 1% of alcohol dependent drinkers in the UK access treatment.  
(Alcohol Concern, 2016)

One of the largest barriers to accessing treatment is attitudinal, including low perception of need and high stigma. (*Schuler, Puttaiah, Mojtabai, & Crum, 2015*)

Discourse analysts challenge the view of language as a purely descriptive medium for conveying information. Language shapes and constructs the real world and our views and attitudes. (*Potter & Edwards, 1990*)

Given that perspectives are shared through language, it is relevant to consider the constructions of problematic alcohol use available within contemporary discourse.

# Literature

## **Policy Documents:**

Consistently reflect the popular perspectives, currently focusing on harm reduction as opposed to abstinence. (*Lucas, 2004; Abrahamson & Heimdahl, 2010*)

## **Newspaper Articles:**

Historically focused upon the positive aspects and depicted alcohol use as a normal social activity. (*Hansen, 2003*)

More recently, newspapers have begun to focus upon more negative constructions of alcohol use, leaning towards a more public health approach. (*Nicholls, 2011*)

## **Social Media:**

Facebook posts are overwhelmingly positive and highlight the social culture of alcohol use. (*Alcohol Research UK, 2014*)

# What's missing?

There is actually only very limited research studying **text-based data** surrounding perceptions of alcohol use.

Additionally, of what little text-based research there is, very little of this appears to consider how different sources **differ or compare** in their constructions.

Much of the research surrounding public perceptions of alcohol use is based upon **interview data**.

More research

# This Project

The first stage of my PhD project aims to identify the popular discourses surrounding potential problematic alcohol use.

This includes materials written by or designed for professional or general public audiences to explore the differences and comparisons in the construction and purpose of these discourses.

Specifically, this talk focuses upon how individuals define problematic alcohol use.

# Method & Data

Method: Discourse Analysis (*Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996*).

All data collected from publicly available sources and initially identified through key search terms (i.e. problematic alcohol use, drinking problem, heavy drinking etc).

## Professional

Policy documents  
(5 Documents = 138 Pages)

Journal articles  
(5 Articles = 78 Pages)

45 Newspaper articles  
(45 Articles from 3 newspapers = 82 Pages)

## General Public

Twitter  
(11,195 Reduced to 2,346 Tweets)

Blogs  
(30 Blog posts from 6 blogs = 65 Pages)

Newspaper article comments  
(Top page for each article = 446 Comments)

# Alcoholism

There is a clear distinction of what is alcoholism.

## Newspaper Comment

“There is a big difference.. an alcoholic spends his **every waking moment** drinking, whereas someone who “drinks too much” otherwise **lives a relatively normal life.**”

## Blog

“I was never the extreme, skin crawling Alcoholic.”

## Newspaper Comment

“There is a big difference. A person can be considered *an alcoholic* when consumption of the substance has completely **taken over their life**. Essentially, an alcoholic spends his **every waking moment drinking.**”

## Tweet

“#alcoholic is too strong a word for me. I prefer #icandrinkbuticanwatchmywallet.”

# 'Other' Drinking

Less severe forms of harmful alcohol use are not obvious or clearly defined.

## Newspaper Article

“Many people have a difficult relationship with alcohol; they have **stable** lifestyles, maintain jobs and social lives and **don't automatically assume they have a problem.**”

## Blog

“I didn't fit my friends' idea of an alcoholic.”

## Newspaper Article

“So if you're the parent of friend of a student, how can you tell whether their drinking is just part-and-parcel of the university experience, or if they are drinking alcohol in an unhealthy way?”

# Professional Definition

The professional definitions and guidelines are largely designed for and used by professionals in order to diagnose individuals.

## Policy Document

“Harmful drinking is defined as a pattern of alcohol consumption **causing health problems** directly related to alcohol.”

## Journal

“Heavy drinking among college students is recognized as a significant public health problem...students consume **five or more drinks on an occasion** during the past month.”

## Newspaper Article

“Risky alcohol use was defined as consuming more than **21 units per week for men** and more than **14 units per week for women.**”

# Public Definition

These professional guidelines and definitions of harmful drinking are not necessarily shared by the public.

## Newspaper Comments

“The risks start at 14 units per week for women and 21 for men.

That is just slightly more than 1 500ml can of Kronenbourg a day, that is **not a ‘risk’**, the UK message on alcohol is **seriously diluted** by such extreme messages.”

## Newspaper Comments

“Is drinking half a bottle of wine or 3 pints of beer a night such a crime? Surely I'm not alone in thinking that **pretty normal** for a middle aged guy.”

# Frequency

Occasional excessive drinking is not necessarily considered problematic. However, consistently engaging with even low levels of alcohol might.

## Tweet

“You don’t have a drinking problem, but yet you’re drinking **at least five days out of the week**. #Alcoholic”

## Blog

“I didn’t get drunk every night but **always** had an unhealthy **3 or so** glasses of wine.”

## Blog

“I wasn’t a raging alcoholic, but after 6 months I **began to drink nightly**.”

# Frequency

## Newspaper Article

“I didn't consume gallons and gallons of booze. My tippie was mostly white wine, and I probably drank, on average, a **bottle a night**.”

## Newspaper Article

“His concern was more about the **frequency** and the fact that he can never seem to take a day off than the **amount** of any particular substance consumed.”

## Newspaper Comments

“Now I'm what I think is known as a **heavy drinker** and a serious wine lover but even I would be wary of drinking a bottle of wine **every night**.”

# Motivation: Habit

Additionally, the innate motivation and reasons for drinking were considered when defining if an individual's consumption is problematic.

For example, drinking because it is habit, not because of a specific occasion such as being with friends.

## Newspaper Comments

"I think the important thing is not to get too hung up about 'how much I drank last night'; but to have the discipline to stop drinking becoming a **daily habit**".

## Blog

"the **habit** of relaxing with wine...I miss sitting with my husband and my glass (or 2, 3 or 4 glasses) of wine."

# Motivation: Reliance

An extreme version of 'habit', some drink because of a reliance upon alcohol.

## Blog

"I hate that I feel I **"need"** it to relax.

## Newspaper Comments

"I feel **compelled** to drink pretty much primarily because of my job. Not excessively...but 2 pints a night has become a standard response. I don't feel the necessity to have any more but **I am aware of how much I need them and shouldn't.**"

## Newspaper Comments

"Not so much the **quantity of booze** that's a concern...more the **frequency and motivation** (alcohol as a crutch)."

# Summary

Professional texts rely upon a specific definition based around units consumed and impact for the individual, largely for diagnosis purposes.

General public largely disagree with focus on units. Instead, the public base their conception of problematic alcohol use upon frequency and motivation.

The definitions of problematic alcohol use differ between the professional and general public, potentially leading to major issues in regards to treatment and need perception.

How are these discourses reproduced within an interactional context?

# Next Steps...

The next phase of the research project will be conducting World Cafés and focus groups with both professionals and general public populations.

The questions in these sessions will focus on all different types of alcohol use including abstinence, social drinking, and alcoholism to explore the discourses available to describe all different types of alcohol consumption.

This will allow me to further explore the different discourses surrounding alcohol use and whether this reflects those discourses found within text-based documents.



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# Any questions?



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