

# What is 'binge drinking'? Perceptions of Australian adolescents and adults, and implications for mass media campaigns

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The risks associated with heavy episodic drinking (often referred to as binge drinking) include long-term cumulative effects, such as increased risk of cancer, diabetes and liver disease, and short-term effects on the self and others. Short-term risks to the self associated with 'binge' drinking include drowsiness, loss of balance, nausea and vomiting, dehydration, increased risk of accidents and injury and (at very high levels of consumption) even unconsciousness and death; and short-term risks to others include increased likelihood of aggression and violence.<sup>1</sup>

Binge drinking is a term that has received considerable attention amongst academics, politicians and the media,<sup>2</sup> and is prominent in Australian government media campaigns that address excessive drinking. For example, the Australian government's national media campaign that ran from 2008 to 2010 was called *'The National Binge Drinking Campaign: Don't turn a night out into a nightmare'*.<sup>3</sup> The NHMRC avoids the term in its guidelines for the public; rather referring to consuming more than four standard drinks in "a single occasion of drinking."<sup>1</sup>

Existing studies have found lay people hold varied definitions of binge drinking.<sup>4,5</sup> For health promotion messages and social marketing campaigns to be effective, it is critical to understand the public's perceptions of binge drinking (the terminology used in these campaigns) in order to target messages appropriately. This paper explores the perceptions of binge drinking held by adolescents, parents of adolescents, and community members.

## Abstract

**Objective:** While the term 'binge drinking' has no definitive definition, it is commonly used in lay conversation and mass media communication campaigns. It is important to understand how the general population interprets the term, and their positive and negative perceptions of this behaviour.

**Methods:** A convenience sample of 549 participants from two Australian towns completed a survey on perceptions of binge drinking; 221 adolescents, 104 parents of adolescents and 224 adult community members.

**Results:** Across all three groups, binge drinking was defined using broad descriptors; few respondents referred to specific consumption levels and those who did varied widely in the quantities specified. The majority of respondents described binge drinking negatively and, in most cases, more negatively for adolescents than adults. However, both adult groups perceived binge drinking to be more enjoyable and pleasant for adolescents than for adults, and more enjoyable and pleasant than adolescents did themselves.

**Conclusions and Implications:** There is a need for shared understanding of terms to ensure that educational interventions and communication campaigns are using the same definitions as their target audiences. There is also a need to ensure adults are not providing young people with mixed messages about excessive alcohol consumption.

**Key words:** alcohol consumption, binge drinking, perceptions, communication campaigns, adolescents

## Methods

Respondents were asked to complete the sentence, "Binge drinking is...". On the following page, this definition was provided: "Binge drinking is a term health experts use to describe drinking more than four alcoholic drinks in a single sitting"; followed by five items that measured attitudes using semantic differential scales.

Participants (n=549) were recruited from two regional communities, to ensure the findings did not reflect nuances from a single community, and completed either a paper (n=91) or online (n=458) survey. Participants were recruited through community

newspaper advertisements, posters in local shops and community centres, information in school newsletters and leaflets delivered in residents' letterboxes. Advertising was also purchased via the online publications of the local newspapers as well as Facebook. Intercept surveys were also conducted in public spaces such as shopping malls in one community. Survey participants were eligible to enter a draw (not linked to their anonymous survey data) to win one of three \$100 retail vouchers.

The final sample consisted of 221 secondary school students, 104 parents of adolescents and 224 adult community members.

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The study protocol was approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

## Results

### Definitions of binge drinking

Of the adolescents, 31% referred to drinking a lot in a short time, 28% drinking in excess and 27% drinking to get drunk. Eleven (5%) defined binge drinking as consuming more than the recommended amount on one occasion; only 3% identified a specific number of standard drinks (from >3 to >6). Of the parents, 29% referred to drinking to get drunk, 18% drinking a lot in a short time, and 18% drinking more than recommended or safe levels, with 16% identifying a specific number of drinks (from >2 to >6). Of the community members, 28% defined it as drinking to get drunk, 29% drinking a lot in a short time and 22% drinking in excess; 11% referred to drinking more than the recommended amount, with 10% specifying a number of drinks (from >2 to >8). Other responses are shown in Table 1.

### Perceptions of binge drinking

The majority of the adolescents stated that binge drinking is harmful (85.3%); foolish (78.1%); bad (75.6%); unpleasant (57.8%); and approximately half that it is unenjoyable (50.2%). Conversely, 11.2% described binge drinking as enjoyable, 7.1% as pleasant, and a minority as good (4.1%), wise (2.0%) or beneficial (2.0%). Males were significantly more likely to describe binge drinking as unenjoyable, bad and unpleasant; and there was a decrease in perceptions of binge drinking as unenjoyable with increasing age. More than half of the parents stated that *adult* binge drinking is harmful (63.3%), foolish

(59.8%), bad (63.9%), unpleasant (52.0%), and more than one third (41.8%) unenjoyable; 11.2% described binge drinking as enjoyable, and a very small minority as pleasant (4.1%). However, none described binge drinking as good, wise or beneficial for adults. The majority of parents stated that for *teenagers* binge drinking is harmful (88.8%), foolish (86.5%), bad (84.5%), unpleasant (63.3%) and slightly less than half (45.9%) as unpleasant. Parents were significantly more likely to describe binge drinking as bad, foolish and harmful for teenagers than for adults; but significantly more likely to describe binge drinking as enjoyable ( $Z = -2.2637, p < 0.05$ ), and pleasant ( $Z = -2.4733, p < 0.05$ ) for teenagers than for adults.

More than half of the community members stated that *adult* binge drinking is harmful (65.0%), bad (54.4%), foolish (52.3%), and more than one-third unpleasant (43.5%) and unenjoyable (39.4%). The majority stated that for *teenagers* binge drinking is harmful (83.2%), bad (78.3%) and foolish (78.4%), just over half that it is unpleasant (50.8%), and more than one-third unenjoyable (37.6%). Consistent with parents, community members were significantly more likely to describe binge drinking as bad, foolish and harmful for teenagers than for adults; but were more likely to describe binge drinking as enjoyable ( $Z = -4.4542, p < 0.05$ ), good ( $Z = -2.1739, p < 0.05$ ) and pleasant ( $Z = -2.9588, p < 0.05$ ) for teenagers than for adults.

## Discussion

### What is binge drinking?

Combining all three groups, the most common definitions of binge drinking were drinking 'a lot in a short time' (27.7%), 'to get drunk' (27.5%) or 'in excess' (24.9%). Parents

were more likely than the other two groups to describe binge drinking as drinking 'more than recommended'; and none of the adolescents described it as drinking to the point of 'experiencing side effects'. The definitions of binge drinking provided by all groups were difficult to quantify, with terms such as drinking 'heaps' or 'in excess' commonly used. Very few respondents identified a specific number of drinks: 3% of adolescents (ranging from >3 to >6 standard drinks); 16% of parents (from >2 to >6); and 11% of community members (from >2 to >8).

### Who is binge drinking bad (or good) for?

More than half of adult respondents perceived binge drinking (for adults) to be harmful, foolish and bad; and slightly less than half to be unpleasant and unenjoyable. Both adult groups were generally more likely to describe binge drinking as negative for teenagers than for adults. However, parents were more likely to describe binge drinking as enjoyable and pleasant for teenagers than for adults; and community members were more likely to describe it as enjoyable, good and pleasant for teenagers than for adults.

The majority of the adolescents described binge drinking as harmful, foolish, bad, unpleasant, and unenjoyable; with only 10% describing it as enjoyable, and very few as pleasant, wise or beneficial. Older adolescents were less likely to perceive binge drinking as unenjoyable. Males were significantly more likely than females to describe binge drinking as unenjoyable, bad and unpleasant; an unexpected finding that may be associated with recent data suggesting the gender gap in adolescent drinking is narrowing.<sup>6</sup>

Parents and community members were more likely to describe binge drinking as enjoyable and pleasant for teenagers than were adolescents themselves. Young people may be presented with mixed messages if their caregivers perceive adolescent binge drinking to be associated with positive outcomes. Given the evidence that parents continue to have an important influence on their children's drinking behaviours in adolescence,<sup>7,8</sup> this finding has implications for educational programs targeting adults.

### Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on self-reported attitudes and beliefs of a convenience sample. The findings may not be generalizable beyond these two

Table 1: Definitions of binge drinking.

Definition	Adolescents (n=221)	Parents (n=104)	Community (n=224)
Drinking a lot in a 'short time'	68 (30.8%)	20 (19.2%)	64 (28.6%)
Drinking in excess	63 (28.5%)	25 (24.0%)	49 (21.9%)
Drinking to get 'drunk'	59 (26.7%)	30 (28.8%)	62 (27.7%)
Drinking 'regularly'	17 (7.7%)	8 (7.7%)	19 (8.5%)
Drinking more than recommended/more than a specific number of standard drinks	11 (5.0%)	19 (18.3%)	24 (10.7%)
Drinking to the point of experiencing side effects (other than 'getting drunk')	0 (0.0%)	15 (14.4%)	28 (12.5%)
Drinking 'irregularly'	4 (1.8%)	11 (10.6%)	16 (7.1%)
Unclear definition	5 (2.3%)	3 (2.9%)	3 (1.3%)
No response	19 (8.6%)	7 (6.7%)	24 (10.7%)

Australian communities; although some confidence can be drawn from the similarities in findings between the two communities.

## Conclusion

While 'binge drinking' is a popular term in layperson conversation, media coverage and information campaigns, it does not have a universal definition, and is not consistently used in drinking guidelines. The formal term in Australia is 'single occasion risk',<sup>9</sup> defined as >4 standard drinks in a single drinking occasion. It is evident from this study that the lay definition of 'binge drinking' differs significantly from 'single occasion risk drinking' and is seen as a poorly defined amount ('excess' or 'too much') or as a function of intent (such as 'to get drunk'). While 'binge drinking' is generally seen as a negative behaviour, a substantial minority perceive it to be associated with positive outcomes. Of most concern is the finding that adults perceive binge drinking to be more enjoyable and pleasant for adolescents than for adults; more so than do adolescents themselves. Future campaigns need to provide the community with a better understanding of the risks associated with high levels of alcohol consumption; and convey to parents and other adults the need to avoid providing young people with mixed messages about the advisability and potential outcomes of excessive alcohol consumption.

Effective communication requires having an unambiguous message that has the same meaning for the sender and the receiver. When governments, or other agencies, are developing media campaigns they first need to have a clear understanding of the specific behaviour they wish to discourage. Is it drinking more than four standard drinks (NHMRC Guideline 2), or is it 'drinking to intoxication' (the stated objective of the National Binge Drinking Campaign)? If it is the latter, (how) can 'intoxication' be objectively determined? Second, they need to ensure that the term they use to describe the behaviour has the same unambiguous meaning to the target audience. Further research is needed to determine the most appropriate term to clearly and succinctly convey the otherwise complex message that "For otherwise healthy men and women, drinking no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion reduces the risk of alcohol-related injury arising from that occasion".<sup>1</sup> However, it is clear from this study that the term 'binge drinking' does not have this clarity.

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