



## Research paper

# Intensive alcohol consumption by adolescents in Southern Spain: The importance of friendship<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** There has been an increase in intensive alcohol drinking by Spanish adolescents since the 1990s, especially among the females, but there has been limited exploration of this phenomenon. The objective of this study was to analyse the discourses of Spanish adolescents on their drinking behaviour at contextual, relational, and personal levels.

**Methods:** A qualitative study was undertaken in 96 adolescents aged between 14 and 17 years who had experienced at least one intensive drinking episode during the previous year. They lived with family members and were not offenders or at risk of social exclusion. Participants were recruited at educational centres and youth centres in two provinces in southern Spain. Ten focus groups and 30 in-depth individual interviews were conducted. A summative content analysis was performed.

**Results:** Intensive alcohol drinking was widely practiced in this study population. Consolidation of this practice was influenced by cultural, interpersonal and personal dimensions. Consumption in public spaces emerged as a key influential factor, especially the botellón, a collective space–time in which Spanish adolescents socialize and become initiated into intensive alcohol consumption. Besides the facilitating elements of the social and cultural setting, the results also evidence the effects of interpersonal relationships within the peer group, which offer a series of approaches to risk and protective practices. In these adolescents, the main reason for engaging in alcohol drinking was to enhance their social relationships, which acted as a mechanism to normalize intensive alcohol consumption.

**Conclusions:** Policies to reduce the harm caused to adolescents by intensive alcohol drinking need to take account of the contextual, relational and personal dimensions of this practice. The discourses of these adolescents from Southern Spain point to a potential role for the peer group in harm reduction strategies.

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## Introduction

Alcohol is widely consumed by European adolescents at an increasingly young age (Gallimberti et al., 2011; Hibell et al., 2012; WHO, 2014). Intensive alcohol drinking is highly prevalent among adolescents throughout Europe and North America, although a recent decrease has been reported (de Looze et al., 2015; de Witte &

Mitchell, 2012). From an epidemiologic standpoint, the level of alcohol drinking by adolescents is considered to represent a public health problem (de Witte & Mitchell, 2012; Emslie, Lewars, Batty, & Hunt, 2009; WHO, 2010), and the negative health impact on young people of extreme drinking is well documented (Bellis et al., 2008; Currie et al., 2012; Shield, Taylor, Kehoe, Patra, & Rehm, 2012). Nevertheless, alcohol is perceived by adolescents to be the least hazardous recreational substance (Ayers & Myers, 2012).

Numerous studies have investigated the influence of the peer group on the initiation of alcohol consumption, but there has been less research on the perception by adolescents of their drinking experiences (Ali & Nikaj, 2014; Bot, Engels, & Knibbe, 2005). Greater knowledge of the social, relational and personal dimensions of alcohol drinking is needed to improve our understanding of the experiences and expectations motivating this practice and of the

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ways in which alcohol is consumed (Abar & Maggs, 2010; Aldridge & Measham, 2011; Ali & Nikaj, 2014; Bendtsen et al., 2014).

With regard to the social dimension, young people regularly congregate in public open-air spaces in Spain for the consumption in company of all types of alcoholic drink, often brought ready-mixed in plastic bottles or large plastic glasses. These events, known as a “*botellones*”, take place throughout Spain in both rural and urban settings. They can bring together large numbers of young people, from hundreds to many thousands, depending on the size of the village or town and the time of year (Baigorri & Chaves, 2006). The *botellón* has been described as favouring the socialization of alcohol consumption and its early onset (Baigorri, Fernández, & GIESyT, 2003; Elzo, Laespada, & Pallarés, 2003).

According to the latest data from the Spanish Ministry of Health (National Drug Plan, 2014), 84% of Spanish students aged between 14 and 18 years in Spain had consumed alcohol at some point, and 62% of them had participated in a *botellón* at least once in the previous year. Intensive drinking, considered as the intake of five or more drinks with high alcohol content within an interval of 2–3 h, was found to be significantly more frequent among those who participated in *botellones* than among those who did not (DGPNSD, 2014). We highlight the greater increase in alcohol consumption found among younger (14- and 15-year-old) than older adolescents and the greater increase in intensive alcohol drinking among the females than among the males (DGPNSD, 2014).

The contextual dimensions of alcohol consumption include the access of young people to alcohol (Demant & Landolt, 2014), which can only be legally purchased and consumed in Spain once the age of 18 years has been reached. However, as noted above, alcohol consumption is widespread at younger ages, and *botellones* provide highly public evidence of the limitations of this type of legislation (Montes, 2012). With respect to the relational dimension, friendships are known to be highly influential in encouraging adolescents to participate in intensive alcohol consumption events (Bergh, Hagquist, & Starrin, 2011; Janssen, Mathijssen, Van Bon-Martens, Van Oers, & Garretsen, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Patrick & Schulenberg, 2010), and the peer group is considered a key predictor of recreational substance use and drug consumption patterns throughout life (Branstetter, Low, & Furman, 2011). On the other hand, peer group pressure has also been associated with protective behaviours, acting to moderate the adverse effects of alcohol consumption (Armstrong, Watling, Davey, & Darvell, 2014). With regard to the personal dimension, researchers have focussed on social rules and the expectations and motivations of adolescents in relation to alcohol consumption (Halim, Hasking, & Allen, 2012; Hasking, Lyvers, & Carlopio, 2011). Intensive alcohol drinking has mainly been characterized by the search of young people for “fun” and disinhibition (Demant & Landolt, 2014; Freixa, 2004). It has been described as driven by the desire for an enhanced emotional state (internal reward) and greater social approval (external reward), among other motivations (Kuntsche & Cooper, 2010).

Alcohol consumption patterns vary among adolescents (Danielsson, Romelsjo, & Tengstrom, 2011; Donovan & Molina, 2013), and there has been a call for greater in-depth investigation of cultural variants around alcohol consumption by young people, especially minors (Katainen & Rolando, 2014), to identify protective behaviours and develop harm reduction strategies (Ehret, Ghaidarov, & LaBrie, 2013). There is a need for further research on the views of the young people who participate in intensive drinking events in order to determine the factors that underlie this pattern of behaviour. According to Lang et al. (2012), the relationship of risk-taking and the search for sensations with alcohol consumption is usually mediated by the experience of positive consequences.

The objectives of this study were to examine the discourses of Spanish adolescents in relation to intensive alcohol consumption and to identify associated factors at contextual, relational and personal levels.

## Methodology

This qualitative study included 96 adolescents aged between 14 and 17 years from two provinces in southern Spain (Granada and Seville) who had experienced at least one intensive drinking session during the previous year. The field study was conducted between February and December 2014.

### Participants

In an intentional sampling procedure, participants were recruited from 13 educational centres and youth associations in the two provinces. The research team sought participants via multiple independent networks in order to increase the external validity of the process, reducing bias in the selection of sample units.

The sample selection and size were governed by the need to include different individual profiles (see below) and by discourse saturation. The general inclusion criteria were age between 14 and 17 years (either male or female) and at least one intensive drinking episode during the previous year. The project was aimed at the general population of school students living with their family rather than at-risk groups (e.g., offenders or those in danger of social exclusion). The variation of profiles sought included (a) differences in residential setting (metropolitan area, intermediate-inner city and rural area), (b) parental occupation (manual, non-manual), (c) sexual orientation (heterosexual, non-heterosexual), (d) family structure (nuclear, single-parent) and (e) polyconsumption (consumption or not of other recreational substances).

### Procedure and materials

The combination of focus groups and individual interviews in this qualitative study was designed to gather in-depth knowledge of the personal, interpersonal and socio-cultural factors underlying intensive drinking by Spanish adolescents. Ten focus groups were formed in the first phase of the field study, starting with a protocol and script initially prepared by two members of the research team. After preliminary analysis of the transcripts obtained in the first two focus groups, the final protocol (used in the remaining eight groups) comprised six parts: (1) description of leisure/free-time spaces; (2) attitudes, beliefs and motivations related to alcohol consumption; (3) alcohol consumption patterns; (4) secondary effects of alcohol consumption; (5) alcohol and risk behaviours and (6) prevention strategies. The protocol was always applied with sufficient flexibility to allow maximum adaptation to the narratives of the participants. Thus, the focus groups permitted the identification of perceptions related to expectations, manifestations of social desirability and behaviours considered appropriate for adolescents. Experiences gathered from the focus groups were used to formulate the script for individual interviews in the next phase of the field study, designed to explore further the knowledge, life and personal experience of participants.

Educational centres were contacted via the heads of educational orientation departments, who were responsible for selecting the groups of participants. The directors of youth centres were contacted via the local authority and also guided the group selection process. Four female groups, three male groups and three mixed-sex groups were formed in order to maximize the incorporation of different perspectives. The selection of three of the focus groups (1 male group, 1 female group and 1 mixed-gender group)

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