“It’s expected that students want to get drunk. That needs to change”:
Alcohol Abstainer and Light Drinking University Student Experiences

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Abstract

Purpose:

An increasing non-drinker population is developing, but much research focuses on alcohol misuse, rather than the experiences of those who abstain or consume little alcohol, particularly within student populations. This student co-constructed qualitative research aimed to understand alcohol abstainer and light drinking students’ university experiences and perceptions of university alcohol cultures, given recent trends in alcohol drinking behaviour.

Design/ Methodology/ Approach:

Ten UK undergraduate students (6 males, 4 females; 21-26 years), 5 alcohol abstainers and 5 light alcohol drinkers (AUDIT-C), participated in semi-structured focus group interviews.

Findings:

Thematic analysis of transcripts identified participants’ negative experiences of pre-university social pressures in navigating no or low alcohol drinking identities, which impacted university expectations. Participants perceived alcohol drinking cultures as remaining prevalent on university campuses and possibly used for profit and recruitment. Alcohol dominant university-sanctioned social events, alongside limited other provisions, impacted initial university transitions and belonging. However, students reported co-existing realities between such cultures and simultaneous peer acceptance of their no or low drinking status, finding similar others and long-term friendships not impacted. Due to this,
Student participants called for universities to take urgent action in changing pervasive university alcohol cultures, which they felt no longer aligned with changing student behaviours and perceptions.

**Originality:**

Guided by findings, we provide important implications for prevention work and future research, including the importance of social context interventions. We also highlight the value of student co-creation and external partnerships within such work.

**Keywords:** Student, university, alcohol, culture, belonging

**Article Classification:** Original Article

**Word Count:** 7,263
1. Introduction

Within the United Kingdom (UK), alcohol misuse remains one of the biggest risk factors for death, ill-health and disability, with young people most at risk of alcohol-related harm (Public Health England (PHE), 2016; World Health Organisation (WHO), 2018). In 2021 alone, there were 9,641 deaths related to alcohol-specific causes, which has risen substantially since 2019 (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2022). However, despite much research and prevention work focusing on understanding and reducing such harms, in recent years, a significant increasing non-drinker population appears to be emerging, particularly within young people (Corre, Barrense-Dias, & Suris, 2023). Alcohol drinking non-participation appears to have great implications for identity, inclusion and social-cultural practices (Hill, Johansson, Smith, Brown & Davies, 2022; Brown, Hill, Smith, Johansson, & Davies, 2020; Davies, Smith, Johansson, Hill & Brown, 2019), but more research is required to understand potentially changing social practices of young people who seek positive social experiences away from alcohol drinking.

Students have long been the focus of alcohol misuse prevention research, due to the high prevalence of excessive consumption, or ‘binge drinking’, alongside negative health outcomes identified within student groups (Penny & Armstrong-Hallam, 2010). A recent survey of 4,063 university students suggests most still do consume alcohol, with 41% reportedly drinking once a week or more, 30% less than once a week and only 27% abstaining completely (2% unsure) (Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS), 2024). New relationships, independence, increased alcohol access and university pressures, combined with existing high levels of mental health issues and risk-taking, are often used to explain such behaviours (Boden & Day, 2023). Dominant alcohol intoxication cultures are also thought to exist on university campuses, with alcohol highly visible and heavy consumption normalised through targeted alcohol advertising and prevalent within student pre-conceptions (SOS, 2024; Gambles, Porcellato, Fleming & Quigg, 2022; Brown & Murphy, 2018; Davies, Law & Hennelly, 2018). Due to this, light or non-drinking students reportedly face issues with belonging, social exclusion, peer pressure and stigma due to their non-drinking status (Gambles et al., 2022; Jacobs, Conroy & Parke, 2018; Davies et al., 2018).

Universities therefore remain a key focus for targeting intervention efforts and, in recent years, many have developed interventions and dedicated policies to tackle alcohol misuse within student populations (Boden & Day, 2023). Many prevention approaches tend to focus on individualised health determinants, such as changing cognitive mediators underlying behaviour. For example, through targeted health messaging, it is hoped that high alcohol consumption can be reduced by increasing students’ knowledge about alcohol-related harms, while tackling positive alcohol attitudes and beliefs. Social norms approaches have also been implemented to tackle normative expectations and potential misperceptions of peer drinking behaviour. For example, it is thought individual consumption might be reduced by
highlighting that not all students consume alcohol, or that peers drink less alcohol than previously thought. However, existing social norms prevention efforts within university contexts have had limited efficacy, with research underlying such approaches also thought to be limited (e.g. Boden & Day, 2023; Foxcroft, Moreira, Almeida Santimano & Smith, 2015).

Many implemented approaches also do not consider contextual determinants related to alcohol consumption behaviour. However, many so-called alcogenic environments, including on-licensed premises such as pubs, bars and nightclubs where alcohol is consumed, are dominated by alcohol-related contextual features (e.g., identifiable drinks containers, limited soft drink availability, or no alternative opportunities for action) (Hill, Foxcroft & Pilling, 2018a, Hill, Pilling & Foxcroft, 2018b; Hill, Pilling & Foxcroft, 2018c). Alongside social pressures, which create challenges for young people attempting to maintain their no or low alcohol drinking status (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2018; Conroy & de Visser, 2014), this may further force no or low drinkers to exclude themselves from such environments. Given the importance of such social contexts for student socialisation opportunities and the ongoing dominance of alcohol on university campuses, understanding no or low drinker realities might usefully guide effective prevention approaches for reducing alcohol-related harms, while making campus spaces more inclusive given recent alcohol consumption trends.

Rationale

Given apparent recent changes in young people’s alcohol consumption, there is a need for in-depth qualitative research to understand alcohol abstainer and light drinking student university experiences. This includes understanding their perceptions of on-campus alcohol cultures as they form peer relationships within alcohol-dominated university social contexts. Such research would not only inform existing university prevention intervention approaches, by highlighting the impact of such contexts on behaviour, but also potentially highlighting changes in relation to recent alcohol trends. Importantly, such work should amplify the student voice, engaging students as active co-researchers and creating related interventions both with and for students, so as to not further exclude them in related prevention intervention work.

1.2. Study Aim

This student co-constructed qualitative research aimed to understand the in-depth experiences of university students who abstain from alcohol consumption, or drink very little, during their time at university, including their perceptions of alcohol prominence on university campuses.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design

Semi-structured focus group interviews were used to understand participants’ in-depth experiences.
2.2. Participants and Recruitment

Ten UK undergraduate students took part in this research, 6 male and 4 females aged 21-26 years old. 7 participants identified as White-British, 1 as Black African, 1 as Black and 1 as Mixed White-British/Black Caribbean. The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT-C) (Babor, de la Fuente, Saunders, & Grant, 1992) was used to determine drinking behaviour status. Five non-drinking students (never drink alcohol) and 5 light drinking students (consume monthly or less; typically consume 1-2 units) participated in two focus groups. Participants were purposely recruited as alcohol abstainers or light drinkers from a medium-sized Central England university with approximately 15,000 students through social media (e.g., Facebook) and the Students’ Union. Data collection was ended at this point as a saturation point was reached, with similar themes occurring within focus groups. During focus group interviews, participants willingly shared that their alcohol abstinence or low drinking status was due to various reasons, including negative family history, past experiences, low tolerance, disliking of taste, religious or for other reasons.

2.3 Student Co-Creation

To strengthen the student voice, this research was co-produced with two student researchers, who informed the project design, led the focus group interviews, supported data analysis and informed project recommendations. Student participants commented that they found it easier to contribute to focus groups led by student researchers, compared to staff, as they felt more at ease in discussing the research topics. Furthermore, student researchers commented on their agency and inclusion within the research process, including their enjoyment of having the ability to contribute to both the research findings, dissemination and impact of this work.

2.4. Materials and Procedure

Focus group interviews were carried out face to face, with dates and times arranged upon recruitment. After obtaining informed consent, participants completed a demographics sheet which requested information about their age, gender, ethnicity and year of study. Participants then completed the AUDIT-C, which included three questions about their alcohol drinking behaviour scored on a 0-4 Likert scale: 1. How often do you have a drink containing alcohol? (Never to 4+ times a week) 2. How many units of alcohol do you drink on a typical day when you are drinking? (1-2 to 10+) 3. How often have you had 6 or more units (if female) or 8 or more units (if male) on a single occasion in the last year (never - daily to almost daily)?

Semi-structured interview schedules were developed in partnership with student researchers and guided by the literature in this area. Questions focused on: social behaviours (e.g. what does being a non/ light drinker mean to you?), perceptions of alcohol at their university (e.g. how visible is alcohol on your campus?), perceptions of other students (e.g. how do your peers view your non/ light alcohol drinking
status?), as well as anything else they wanted to add in relation to the topic. Student researchers prompted focus group discussion topics in an open and flexible manner, with additional follow up questions guided by responses. Once focus group interviews were completed, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation. Focus group interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone to aid transcription and analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis

Focus group interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. During transcription, pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity for names and places. Obtained qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). Potential themes were identified through initial coding, which remained as close to participant’s words as possible, with divergent cases marked. Transcripts were re-read several times by all student and staff researchers who revised their coding and highlighted commonalities. A large number of similar and prominent developed codes were then combined, to produce a smaller set of themes, with identified exemplar quotes. Secondary analyses were carried out by other members of the student and staff research team before the final set of themes were agreed, with supporting quotes presented to illustrate them.

2.6 Ethics and Data Availability

The research had full ethical approval from The University of Northampton’s Faculty Research Ethics Committee. Data supporting this study cannot be made publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

3. Results

Findings highlighted how alcohol drinking cultures remained pervasive on university campuses, with students suggesting this was purposeful to increase university recruitment or profit. However, interestingly, students experienced co-existing realities, as a gap appeared to exist between prominent university alcohol cultures, university-sanctioned alcohol dominant events and spaces, social pressures and the simultaneous acceptance of non or low alcohol participation by peers. Despite expectations of excessive university alcohol cultures and consumption, which initially impacted students’ university attachment and sense of belonging, most students appeared accepting of others’ no or low alcohol participation. This led many students to call for universities to take urgent action in this area. Main and subordinate themes from the analysis can be viewed in Table 1, which will now be discussed in detail alongside related quotes.

[Insert Table 1 here]

3.1 Pervasive university alcohol cultures
Participants continually highlighted the prominence of alcohol on campus, the limited provision for alcohol abstainers or light drinkers, as well as their perceptions that alcohol was used by universities for recruitment or profit.

**Alcohol prominence on campus**

Alcohol was also promoted as a key factor within university life, even prior to joining university (e.g., on Fresher’s events promotions, Facebook group peer messages). For participants, university events, particularly within their first year, were “predominantly alcohol drinking events”. Such norms were reinforced by the high frequency of alcohol-related content shared or liked on social media (e.g., cocktail making tips, alcohol delivery pictures by venues, students posting drinks pictures):

> “On social media it’s [alcohol] promoted A LOT. Pretty much everything I see regarding the Student Union, a good 90% of the time it revolves around alcohol club events.”

Participants shared social media screenshots which they felt increased perceptions of alcohol prominent university cultures, including pictures of alcohol containers (“pints”, “goldfish bowls”), alcohol only drinks offers (“I checked, no offers for soft drinks”), slogans (“get wasted”) and club night names related to intoxication or “harmful stereotypes” (“delirious”, “insanity”, “loco”, “F**k me”). For many participants, this suggested normative perceptions of heavy alcohol consumption and problematic alcohol messages were set “before university started” and continued throughout university life. This was also the case in alcohol-dominant nighttime venues located in close proximity to campus, which many students saw as an extension of the university campus and, therefore, as a university-sanctioned alcohol dominant social space.

**Limited no or low alcohol drinker provisions**

Despite their non or low alcohol drinking status, participants felt compelled to attend such events, as many did not want to “miss out” on university social opportunities, but participants explained how they felt these events actively excluded them. This impacted their overall perceptions of and attachment to their university and, for many, distinguished them from other students by appearing to only provide social provisions for those who consumed alcohol:

> “My university does not care much about non-drinkers…non-drinkers often get side-lined. I don’t know why but I think the university casts them aside.”

Other provisions for non-drinkers or light drinkers were limited, as participants explained they “don’t recall seeing anything catering specifically for non-drinkers”. Some participants did mention one or two alcohol-free events run by Students’ Unions, but these were infrequent (“so few and far between”), not advertised, poorly attended or “just boring”. Viewed as an after-thought or “add-on”, such events
actually further detached no or low drinking students from their university and the student body, leading some to take action of their own:

“Students are doing events off their own backs a lot of the time that don’t promote alcohol drinking because the SU and the University don’t do non-drinking events.”

While increasing the visibility of no or low drinking on campus was welcomed, including through increased on campus activities prohibiting alcohol, some participants highlighted issues related to the labelling of these events and of students by their alcohol drinking behaviour. Some students felt alcohol-free events could lead to further segregation, explaining how certain Society groups were poorly attended due to this: “it was called Sober Squad, but non-drinkers don’t want to be labelled…they had to change it”. Participants felt existing social events should instead be more inclusive and welcoming for all students, with alcohol less prominent generally:

“The fact that they’re trying to segregate non-drinkers from drinkers is probably part of the problem...make it inclusive. Separating people by [alcohol] drinking is not the way to go about it. People don’t want to highlight they don’t drink...they’ve [the sober event] created a divide, unintentionally...surely there could be events that are designed as neutral, let’s call it that way, and could be accessible to everyone...make non-drinkers feel welcome with drinkers and creating events that are suitable for both.”

For many, this would not necessarily mean removing alcohol from all events, but instead ensuring events had other available action opportunities which did not involve alcohol (e.g., entertainment, games, food, quizzes, DJs etc.). It would also be important that the images and languages used to promote such events, including the names of the events themselves, were not alcohol related and therefore indicated these events were inclusive for all.

*Alcohol a recruitment and profit tool*

Due to the prominence of alcohol before and during university, participants suggested that it was purposely used to increase university recruitment and to attract students to that institution based on the night life or related social events. Some suggested this was also why alcohol-free events were limited, as they “just don’t make money”, or much less profit than events where alcohol was purchased. However, participants explained prevalent university alcohol cultures were based on outdated assumptions which no longer matched student behaviour:

“They use alcohol to get students in... but now not all students drink [alcohol].”

For many participants, such prominent alcohol cultures could actively dissuade no or low drinkers from attending universities who promoted alcohol dominant social events, as well as further impacting student attachment and sense of belonging to their peers and their university.
Alcohol prominence on campus was not only related to social events, but also the perceived availability of alcohol in campus spaces and how it was used for profit. While participants acknowledged issues with “easy to access” alcohol, they felt high on-license alcohol pricing within campus venues and shops led to increased off-license purchasing at cheaper local supermarkets, which subsequently pushed heavier alcohol drinking into student accommodation:

“They [the university] want to make money off us [students]...but due to the sheer fact of the [alcohol] pricing being so high on [Student Union nightclub], they completely screwed themselves over...a lot of students chose not to go there...not student friendly at all.”

For many, this increased harmful pre-loading behaviour, while also further excluding them as light or non-drinkers. The very places they wanted to feel safe and connected to others (i.e. their student accommodation or halls) then also became alcohol prevalent:

“From what social circles I have, drinking [alcohol] before going out is pretty normal. You can just get it so much cheaper. Load up before going out. It’s how it’s done...but then they get absolutely wasted… my God it’s quite frustrating because they can get really loud and really rowdy.”

For many, this did initially impact their belonging and connections made with those that they lived with who did consume alcohol, as they made excuses so as to not take part in pre-night out rituals and related activities, or “avoided Welcome Week altogether”. However, as will be explained, expected social pressures were not always present in their interactions with peers.

### 3.2 Co-existing Realities Experienced

Participants shared negative pre-university experiences of social pressures in relation to their no or low alcohol drinking, which led many to not disclose their no or light alcohol drinking identities, particularly upon joining university. However, participants spoke of the co-existing realities they experienced, as they navigated the gap between pervasive on-campus alcohol cultures and alcohol dominant university-sanctioned events, alongside simultaneous peer acceptance of their no or low drinking status.

**Social pressures**

Participants recalled many negative experiences in sharing their alcohol drinking status with others prior to joining university, including social pressures from trusted friends “betraying” or “turning on you”:

“They said ‘it doesn’t matter if you don’t drink, just come and hang out with us’, but then once you are there, they would say stuff such as, ‘We are all drinking, but you are not drinking, why do you have to be special? Why are you doing this?’ Once you’re out the pressuring starts.”
For many, this social pressure was harder to overcome when it involved friends, compared to comments from those they were less familiar with. This not only highlights the importance of social relationships, but also the impact of friendships on alcohol drinking behaviour. For some, social pressures did not impact them “I just tell them no”, but others found “trying to handle it” challenging. This led many to avoid disclosing their non or light alcohol drinking identities to others, particularly when first joining university (“I hid it”, “just not telling them”). Many participants also described their expertly adopted strategies to conceal their non-alcohol drinking behaviour during social occasions, which they enjoyed sharing with other no or low drinkers within the focus groups: “tip them away when they’re not looking”, “ask for drinks privately”, “be the driver, that is one of the reasons people won’t push you”:

“Slow drinking is the way to get around the peer pressure…It’s my tactic…so when everyone’s downing their drink, I’ll have one drink and I’ll go quite slow, but hide it how I hold it, they don’t realise.”

Due to these negative prior experiences and expectations of prominent university alcohol cultures, many actively avoided social events upon joining university, or made excuses not to attend these (“early lecture”, “coursework due”), which impacted their connections to their peers in the early stages of university, when most student welcome events and activities would be taking place:

“It was hard...I didn’t go [out] because I knew that I’d be the only person not drinking.”

Not attending social events may have also had a detrimental impact on particular groups of students who reported feeling isolated upon joining university, including those not living in student accommodation, mature or international students. International students further explained how UK university alcohol culture expectations not only impacted their university transition, but also may have dissuaded other international students from studying in the UK:

“I was really reluctant to go [to a UK university] ... I thought if I go there I’m not going to have anything to do...I have heard stuff about the University drinking, and drinking in the UK but I haven’t really drunk much, if anything, before that. Those expectations that this is what uni is all about...I was basically excluded and I found it very difficult to fit into the UK.”

This led participants to suggest that universities are incorrect in their assumptions that students consider a vibrant alcohol-related night life in choosing where to study. Using alcohol for profit or recruitment was presented as not only problematic in exacerbating university alcohol cultures, but could actually impede university recruitment for no, low drinkers, international and mature students, or those not living in student accommodation.

*Simultaneous peer acceptance*
Almost every participant highlighted the mismatch between pervasive campus alcohol cultures and university-sanctioned alcohol dominant social events, alongside the reality of student alcohol drinking perceptions and behaviours. Despite many participants initially concealing their no or low drinking identities, most explained that they did not find it difficult to make friends during their time at university, or to “find others like me” who also consumed no or low alcohol:

“I’ve had a really positive experience here at the University with me not drinking [other participants mutter in agreement]…My friends always made sure that I’m not feeling peer pressure…Student to student, I don’t think there is a stigma: if you don’t drink, don’t drink…it’s just an expectation that people will be negative and hostile, when in actual fact, people aren’t.”

Students exclaimed their surprise at how many more non or light drinking students there were than expected at university, suggesting, in their view, this number was “definitely increasing”. For many students, this increasing number of alcohol abstainers and light drinking students within the student body further highlighted that alcohol cultures on campus were outdated. While some students had received negative comments or experienced social pressures in the past, most found university peers positively welcomed their non or light drinking status. However, many explained it was important for this acceptance to work both ways. For example, participants spoke of their patience with peers or housemates who did consume alcohol to excess and, on occasions, had negatively impacted the social events they attended:

“I’m the ‘mum friend’…you are sober you look out for people a little bit more…someone who was quite ill and would have been in quite a vulnerable situation…no skin off my nose just to stay with them…You just think, ‘I can’t leave this person, anything could happen’. You are not a killjoy, but you just see things from a different perspective…then in the morning they text you saying: ‘sorry for being an a***hole last night’.”

This further suggests that, despite a growing peer acceptance of their no or low alcohol drinking status and their own acceptance of peers’ alcohol consumption, alcohol misuse still impacted their social relationships and enjoyment of social events.

3.3 Non-inclusive university social spaces

Participants found university social spaces to be unappealing, non-inclusive and dominated by contextual features which solely promoted alcohol drinking. Participants felt that universities should do more to ensure all students had opportunities to connect to others within appealing and more inclusive social environments.

Social contexts promote alcohol drinking
For participants, social spaces that were on campus (e.g., bars, shops selling alcohol, Student’s Unions, event spaces) and those in close proximity and often viewed as an extension of campus (e.g., night-time venues) usually had prominent alcohol-related features. Participants felt that university campuses lacked appealing social spaces that were welcoming for them. One participant gave the example of a group study meeting room on campus which had draft beer taps that were not used in the day, but still visible:

“I remember speaking to this particular friend in the Islamic Society and he said that - it wasn’t an angry conversation, but he was very off-put by the smell of alcohol in there.”

Alcohol drinking also appeared to be promoted through point-of-sale features and behaviours within most social venues. Participants explained how, when ordering an alcohol-free refreshment at a bar in an on-licensed premise, compared to peers their consuming alcohol, “I have a much smaller range to choose from”, with only alcohol mixers available (“sometimes I don’t just want coke or lemonade”). Despite the increased variety of alcohol-free or low-alcohol drinks in supermarkets, participants were surprised university on or off-license premises did not stock these. Soft drinks containers were also clearly distinguishable from alcohol containers, meaning it “made it obvious you were not [consuming alcohol]”). Participants also explained the difficulty in locating soft drinks at the point of sale, as alcohol was always more prominent:

“None of the drinks that anyone wants…in the fridges behind, harder to see. I always have to ask [where they are]. It's because less people buy them.”

Soft drinks were also described as incredibly expensive and alcohol-only promotions were viewed as unfair to those that did not consume alcohol:

“Soft drinks should definitely be cheaper…I don’t think that is fair that I often pay more for a soft drink than my friend’s alcohol…pint of juice would be around the same as a pint.”

While participants felt student peer pressure was not as prominent on campus from other students, many continued to experience negative comments or judgement for their orders from bar staff. This was surprising for some, because bar staff were often young adults or students themselves, which suggests more work is required to train such individuals on how their point-of-sale communication (not explicitly upselling techniques) could also create challenges for alcohol abstainers or light drinkers. This was particularly important as navigating drinks orders was already viewed as challenging, as bar areas were often time-sensitive contexts (“[I am] usually rushed to order”). While some participants ordered water to save money and due to limited other non-alcohol drinks being available, some did not to prevent the assumption that they were intoxicated:
“I’m always questioned if I buy a non-alcohol drink in a nightclub… and yet they’re okay with water, because that means people are trying to sober up.”

Participants also preferred social spaces where other activities were available (e.g., playing games, sports features, comfy seating, quiet conversation areas), but these features were unfortunately lacking on and around university campuses. Participants described how these contextual features meant many student social premises were unappealing for them:

“Pubs are homely, a home from home… sit down with your meal, comfy seats, a nice view, sit in there, chill and talk… yet the university just bought a nightclub [laughs], the nightclub is completely blacked out, doesn’t attract me to go there and relax. Chairs are purposely designed to make you feel uncomfortable, hate that. So, you don’t sit there for long… they can get turnaround… It’s designed to cram people in to get wasted.”

Therefore, many social spaces were likened to so-called ‘vertical drinking establishments’, with limited furnishing, loud music preventing discussion and promoted drinking as a sole activity, meaning many participants avoided frequenting them.

*Universities must represent student body*

Participants felt universities were responsible for addressing pervasive on-campus alcohol cultures and ensuring university cultures were welcoming, accepting and did not discriminate anyone. For many participants, more of the student body were now not drinking, so universities should be changing with them:

“Universities seem to have the illusion that it’s expected that students want to get drunk. That needs to change. You’ll notice there are less people that want to have that night life… they [universities] don’t cater for the student population.”

This apparent increased acceptability on campus made it “easier for students not to drink [alcohol]”, but such changes described by participants were not necessarily due to increased knowledge of alcohol harm risks (“people know what it [alcohol] can do to you”). Instead, participants felt there were now “more health-conscious students generally”, who wanted to avoid being “shamed” on social media for their intoxication, were “too skint” to afford expensive alcohol due to the current financial landscape, or were more interested in other activities. Some participants felt some students had replaced alcohol with “other things, drugs and that”, but explained how peers were less likely to talk about their drug use, so were not sure if this was the case. Generally, students felt university peers were becoming more accepting of others’ differences, suggesting increased inclusion and acceptance on campus cultures more generally:
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“There’s a lot of different people all together in the same place and because they’re so different they have to learn to live with each other’s differences and to learn about each other and to accept it…. people [students] are broadening their interests…people are interested in different things.”

As previously mentioned, despite excessive alcohol consumption often negatively impacting their social experiences, most participants were accepting of others’ alcohol drinking status and felt complete abstinence was not the right approach for universities to take:

“It [alcohol] can be positive because it gets people go out and make more friends and meet more people. Alcohol should not be viewed as a negative thing. It’s only when it’s abused and gets out of hand.”

This provided further justification from students that the approach taken by universities should focus on harm-reduction and making university campuses more inclusive for all.

4. Discussion

This student co-constructed qualitative focus group research aimed to understand university experiences for alcohol abstaining and low-drinking students, as well as their perceptions of university alcohol cultures. Our findings highlight continued pervasive university alcohol cultures and limited alternative student social provisions, which appeared to initially detrimentally impact students’ sense of belonging and university attachment. Previous negative experiences of peer pressure, particularly in sharing their non or light drinking status, alongside university alcohol culture expectations led to initial concealment of alcohol drinking identities to peers. However, despite apparent university-sanctioned alcohol dominant social spaces, participants spoke of experiencing co-existing realities, as university peers generally accepted their non or low alcohol participation and their long-term university friendship formation did not appear impacted. This mismatch between pervasive alcohol cultures and simultaneous student acceptance led students to call for urgent university action in making campuses more inclusive and representative of diverse student bodies.

Although a data saturation point was obtained within the current study, researchers faced unexpected recruitment challenges in attracting alcohol abstainers and light drinking participants to take part in this research. This further speaks to findings, potentially in terms of how prevalent non or light drinking behaviours appear to students within these contexts and how willing students are to share their experiences. Therefore, not only is future work required to promote conversations about these behaviours on campus, but such work should also aim to recruit a larger sample size from a number of different institutions, as we acknowledge potential limitations with focusing our research on one medium-sized Central England university. In addition to this, future work might consider stratifying
recruitment and data collection based on participant demographics, as well as reasons for abstaining or drinking little alcohol, as these factors may also be important to participants’ subjective experiences.

While our findings appear to provide further support for an increasing non and light alcohol student drinking population (Corre et al., 2023), some care must be taken in interpreting findings from this participant cohort who themselves have had fairly limited exposure to university drinking behaviour. The focus of the current work was also on qualitative experiences, rather than establishing temporal trends and future research will be required to continue to understand such changes in student alcohol consumption more generally. Despite this, our findings do point towards a greater inclusivity of no and low drinking, while supporting research suggesting alcohol remains dominant both within and around university campuses, local nighttime venues and related communications, creating challenges for individuals who do not drink alcohol or drink very little (SOS 2024; Gambles et al., 2022; Brown & Murphy, 2018; Davies et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2018a, 2018b; 2018c; Jacobs et al., 2018; Conroy & de Visser, 2014). Our findings also support existing research suggesting alcohol may be used for recruitment or profit (e.g., Gambles et al., 2022), but we further suggest such approaches may actually impede recruitment and exclude potential applicants.

This is one of few studies highlighting the co-existing realities experienced by students, in relation to the mismatch between pervasive university alcohol cultures, university-sanctioned alcohol dominant events and simultaneous peer acceptance. However, no and low drinking participants in our current study also recognised how important alcohol was for some of their peers, as previous research has highlighted (e.g., Hill et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2020; Davies et al., 2019), therefore suggesting that this acceptance also works both ways. While our findings also suggest that social relationships appear to have a powerful influence on alcohol drinking behaviour, as suggested by previous research (e.g., Gambles et al., 2022; Jacobs et al., 2018), long-term friendships did not appear to be impacted. Participants in our study generally felt that student bodies were inclusive and accepting of difference on campus, not just in relation to alcohol drinking behaviour. Further work, however, is required to understand changing alcohol trends and university transitions, in relation to exclusion, belonging and attachment, particularly for certain student groups.

Participants felt universities were responsible for taking action and it is important to note that there is already much positive work in this area. However, we suggest that such intervention work must be informed by apparent recent changes in socialisation practices and alcohol drinking behaviour trends. We welcome initiatives to increase non-alcohol participation visibility on campus, for example, through social norms approaches, alcohol-free events, particularly during induction or welcome weeks, dedicated sober halls and sober buddy interventions. However, such approaches must be evaluated long-term to ensure they do not unexpectedly lead to greater exclusion or labelling. Participants in our study not only voiced concerns about the labelling of certain events, but low drinkers in our study highlighted
how previous university surveys had labelled them as a ‘drinker’ despite them identifying more as a non-drinker. Therefore, intervention and future survey work should instead highlight the range of alcohol drinking behaviours participated in by students, while avoiding potentially problematic binary alcohol drinker/ non-drinker distinctions which may further exclude them.

Our findings have further revealed areas for enhancing prevention and policy, which might help to address limitations of dominant social norms approaches (e.g., Boden & Day, 2023; Foxcroft et al., 2015) and reduce well-documented alcohol-related harms (e.g., ONS, 2022; WHO, 2018; PHE, 2016; Penny & Armstrong-Hallam, 2010). Changing perceived norms through campus educational opportunities by highlighting an increasing no or low drinker population, alongside potential impacts of excessive consumption on others’ nights out may be effective, alongside work to increase inclusivity and wellbeing on campus more generally. Prevention efforts should also account for the impact of alcohol-related contextual features on alcohol consumption within university social contexts (e.g., Hill et al., 2018a, 2018b; 2018c). For example, by auditing on-campus contexts and limiting certain types of premises (e.g. so-called vertical-drinking establishments), while increasing other opportunities for action, reviewing advertising, event names, promotions, product availability, pricing and training staff. We also caution in generally increasing on-campus alcohol prices, which may lead to problematic purchasing and alcohol pre-loading in other contexts.

Partnership working both within universities (e.g., Student’s Unions, marketing) and outside of university campuses (e.g., other nighttime premises, local organisations) will be essential in the ongoing success of work to prevent student alcohol misuse harms and address dominant alcohol contexts on university campuses. For example, many students in our current study viewed local nighttime premises situated within close proximity to universities as an extension of their campus and, therefore, related to their university experience. Such work will potentially require complex joined up approaches led by universities, local organisations and venues within local nighttime economies, with dedicated working groups and shared practice within these areas. What is important is that any related interventions, research or working groups, also involve active contributions by students and collaborations with students, to ensure student ownership of tackling such issues, while further enhancing the student voice and student inclusion.

Conclusion

Universities remain key sites for understanding student alcohol drinking participation and non-participation. However, despite diversity, equality and inclusion being key to university strategies, outdated alcohol drinking cultures remain prominent which potentially discriminate and exclude certain groups of students. The high visibility of alcohol on university campuses not only detrimentally impacts initial student belonging and inclusion, but also potentially impacts university recruitment and valuable social interaction opportunities. Importantly, our findings highlight a mismatch between dominant
university alcohol cultures and the acceptance of non and light drinkers by university students, while also proposing new insights for university interventions. Further student co-constructed research is urgently required to understand these trends, while informing existing and future prevention interventions. Such work should actively involve students in creating inclusive and responsible campus cultures whereby all students feel like they belong.

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