[**1 Neoliberalism, alcohol and identity**](https://jigsaw.vitalsource.com/books/9781317338321/epub/OEBPS/04-9781315660844_contents.xhtml#toc-chapter1)

A symptomatic reading of young people’s drinking cultures in a digital world

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A broad range of research has established the importance of youth drinking as an essentially social act with important implications for young people’s identities. There is long-standing evidence that peer groups form an important part of young people’s social lives generally (Kehily, 2007), and peer networks and friendship groups are central to youth drinking as a specific form of leisure practice which helps mark out identity and status, as well as a shared sense of communality (Douglas, 1987); Lyons and Willott, 2008); MacLean, 2016); Sheehan and Ridge, 2001)). Such socially orientated practices are often enhanced by the embodied pleasures young people experience while being drunk (Griffin et al., 2009)a; Szmigin et al., 2011). Moreover, ‘after the fact’, stories about drinking and drunken behaviour are often told and re-told amongst peer networks, playing a crucial additional role in the development and maintenance of friendships (Griffin et al., 2009)b; Sheehan and Ridge, 2001) and ongoing forms of identity work (Lyons and Willott, 2008); McCreanor et al., 2005). As the other chapters in part one of this volume will go on to outline in detail, these processes are always overlaid with power relations which produce important differentiations in experience across genders, socio-economic groups, ethnicities and sexualities. Conceptions of identity, identity work and differentiated power relations that work through categories of identity are all central to understanding the complexity of young people’s socially orientated drinking practices.

Over the past few decades the marketing campaigns launched by alcohol corporations have become increasingly aimed at aligning their branded messages with the meanings young people themselves form in their cultural practices and socialising. Young people have become increasingly familiar and comfortable with alcohol brands as a result, and take up and use brands in identity work across both personal and social settings (McCreanor et al., 2005); McCreanor et al., 2008). The concept of identity is also increasingly important to the way that alcohol, and in particular ‘problematic’ and ‘risky’ drinking by young people, is regulated and controlled. Alcohol consumption within the night-time economy, ‘as well as being something experienced by participants’, increasingly forms a key site of ‘spectacle with gendered and classed dynamics’, whereby certain forms of drinking and specific drinkers become identified by the state and subjected to a concerted regulatory gaze with direct policy implications (Haydock, 2015)a: 1). Young people, and in particular young women, are often ‘othered’ and pathologised through such processes (Brown and Gregg, 2012). Equally, health policy interventions seeking to minimise alcohol-related harms experienced by young people are increasingly taking account of the importance of drinking for young people’s sense of identity, and indeed it is argued that they must recognise the importance of peer-orientated socialising and associated processes of identity formation if they are to be effective (see Niland et al., 2013).

In sum, identity is well established in the literature as a key nexus, or lens, through which to analyse youth drinking cultures, both at the micro level of youth cultural practices and more broadly in terms of economics, marketing, regulation and policy. The growing centrality of digital media technologies to youth drinking practices has acted to enhance this broad relevance of identity as an analytical category. Many of the relevant online developments have been analysed in detail elsewhere in this volume, but the major issues related to identity are worth briefly recapping here. Social media have been appropriated by young people as a key site of online self-display where the pleasures, identity work, and socialising associated with their drinking cultures become extended and developed (Goodwin et al., 2016); Hebden et al., 2015); Niland et al., 2014). Analyses of self-displays and friendship in online drinking cultures have also found young people’s online practices to be bound up in structural constraints and power relations around class, gender and ethnicity in a fashion that mirrors earlier research of offline drinking cultures (Goodwin et al., 2016); Hutton et al., 2016). Alcohol corporations have been quick to follow young people to social media, utilising sites like Facebook as a key space to engage with young people in order to enhance their sales and aid their marketing campaigns. Young people’s everyday online activities now often seamlessly mesh with commercially driven alcohol promotion, blurring stark distinctions between user-generated and commercial content such that branded alcohol promotion is often a taken for granted, integral part of identity work and social life online (Carah et al., 2014); Nicholls, 2012). In opposition to these developments, social media are increasingly being considered as potentially important settings for engaging young people in forms of health promotion (Loss et al., 2014). Supplementing these shifts, new forms of more user-driven health campaign ‘movements’, like Hello Sunday Morning, ‘ask participants to stop drinking for a period of time, to set a personal goal, and to record their reflections and progress on blogs and social networks’ (Carah et al., 2015): 214). Meanwhile, a range of smartphone ‘apps’, such as ‘Let’s Get Wasted’, intensify and extend the importance of alcohol consumption to young people’s identities and social lives, both online and offline (Weaver et al., 2013).

Against this critical context, this chapter poses a key question: to what extent is the concept of neoliberalism useful for interrogating these broad inter-relationships between identity, youth drinking practices and digital media? We argue that setting alcohol-related identity issues in youth drinking cultures against the broader critical context suggested by the literature on neoliberalism is potentially highly useful. This is not least because neoliberalism as an analytical category highlights a series of productive *interconnections* between the contemporary (social, economic, political, policy) issues we have outlined here, equally helping to explain their extension in novel online developments. In this sense, we argue that neoliberalism provides the broader critical frame through which drinking cultures can be read ‘symptomatically’ as part of a ‘conjunctural analysis’ (Hall and Jefferson, 2006). A ‘symptomatic’ reading of drinking cultures entails treating them as reflective of wider social and political changes, rather than solely as reflections of individual motivations or attitudes. A ‘conjunctural analysis’ entails asking ‘why now?’, analysing social phenomena in relation to the key ‘political, economic and socio-cultural changes of their respective times’ (Hall and Jefferson, 2006): xiv). It in this respect that ‘neoliberalism’ becomes conceptually useful, because it remains our best means for naming, understanding, and critically interrogating the key political, economic and socio-cultural changes that mark out our contemporary societal ‘conjuncture’, as the current context in which drinking cultures play out in all their complexities. However, using the concept of neoliberalism in this way is not without its pitfalls. As an analytical term, it has been subject to sustained critique, frequently for the very reasons we are suggesting it is potentially advantageous: too often it is illdefined and yet very broadly applied in analyses that attempt to explain ‘everything’. In what follows then, we first outline the major debates over neoliberalism and define what we understand it to mean. Then we seek to show how our definitions of the term can usefully open up avenues of analysis. Ultimately we suggest ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘neoliberal identities’ become crucial analytical categories when applied appropriately as part of a symptomatic reading of drinking cultures. That is, these concepts remain extremely helpful for understanding youth drinking practices and their complex, ambivalent relationships to current power relations, identity categories, identity work and digital media.

**Neoliberalism, critique and neoliberal identity**

Neoliberalism has become one of the most widely invoked critical concepts across a variety of academic disciplines. However, it is often used in illdefined ways, ‘as a sloppy synonym for capitalism itself’ (Ferguson, 2010): 171), or is applied in relation to a multitude of competing definitions that are not always reconciled (Bell and Green, 2016); Ferguson, 2010). The term, which has an often unacknowledged and complex history (see Flew, 2012); Phelan, 2014), has therefore attracted significant critique (Barnett, 2005); Flew, 2009); Grossberg, 2010). There is not the space to canvass this history, or the detail of these critiques, here. However, drawing from Phelan’s (2014: 26–33) summation of these debates, we would highlight specific aspects of neoliberalism’s critique that are particularly pertinent for how we have, in response, structured our argument and analytical approach in this chapter. Neoliberalism can be problematically applied as a monolithic catch-all category that, in analyses which note the elements of a social context that appear neoliberal, go on to attempt to explain ‘everything’ in neoliberal terms. This tends to ride roughshod over the complexities of differentiated social contexts, while leading to a cookie-cutter approach to analysis which constantly subsumes the particular under the universal. That is, it leads to a tendency to suggest that naming something ‘neoliberal’ provides a sufficient explanation of all aspects of its nature. At worst, this can eventually lead to empirical phenomena identified as neoliberal being ‘cursorily disparaged rather than deemed worthy of additional analysis’ (Phelan, 2014): 32). This is a particular issue for our focus on youth cultures and drinking, where power-laden processes of othering, pathologising and marginalising youth practices are already in play. We want to argue that youth drinking cultures are not only contextually differentiated, complex and significant sites worthy of ongoing study, but are also deeply *ambivalent*, being bound up in processes where we see neoliberal forms of power in play but also being places where resistances, evasions and contestations of neoliberal logics are simultaneously enacted.

Critiques of neoliberalism equally suggest it is only useful as an analytical concept when it is applied with a critical self-reflexivity that starts by seeking to establish how neoliberalism plays out in specific contexts, rather than configuring it as a ‘fully present structure or agent with the totalizing power to cause, make, determine and act on a variety of social objects and practices’ (Phelan, 2014): 32). For us, part of this self-reflexivity involves the recognition that drawing on neoliberalism as our key conceptual category does not exclude other concepts being brought to bear in analysis. We argue our focus on using neoliberalism in a symptomatic reading of drinking cultures can accommodate alternative conceptual understandings. Indeed, concepts such as ‘the carnivalesque’ (Haydock, 2015a) and ‘healthism’ (Petersen and Lupton, 1996) have been usefully combined with analyses of neoliberal social formations, and we recognise their ongoing relevance in terms of reading youth drinking cultures symptomatically. Where applicable, we will briefly highlight interconnections with these terms in our analysis. Finally, critiques of neoliberalism suggest explicitly outlining how one intends to define and apply it in specific forms of analysis matters. From the range of applications available, we would highlight two definitions we deem particularly useful to our symptomatic/conjunctural approach.

The first relates to neoliberalism as it is most commonly under-stood, that is, as an economic ideology, tied to state policy changes, that heralds a process of capitalist restructuring and reform which has occurred globally since the 1970s. Keynesian economics, with its emphasis on state planning and intervention in the economy, and the associated rise of the welfare state, became identified as key impediments to progress in this process (Phelan, 2014). In contrast, neoliberal economics calls for a different set of rationalities to drive the actions of the state. That is, neoliberal reform marks out a series of key conjunctural changes that suggest:

[T]hat human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free market, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.

(Harvey, 2005): 2)

Thatcherism in the UK and Reaganism in the USA are often identified as paradigmatic, practical examples of the formation of new neoliberal states. However, a broad range of social democracies including Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Sweden have implemented similar market-centric reforms (Bell and Green, 2016). While the changes enacted since the 1970s have often been drastic in terms of factors such as the extensive roll back of the welfare state, the growing power of global corporations and the subsequent valorising of privatisation and competition, both the political and the corporate elites in Western democracies often refuse to label their actions as neoliberal or even as driven in ideological terms (Phelan, 2014). Rather, neoliberalism is more often positioned in terms of a neutral pragmatism, as simply ‘what works’ in a globalised economy (Phelan, 2014). Neoliberalism therefore assumes a certain form of invisibility, so that Monbiot (2016) argues it remains ill understood by the general public and is seldom recognised *as* an ideology or as a project consciously enacted. This matters to our argument, as our decision to continue to *name* young people’s drinking cultures and associated identity work as profoundly shaped by a ‘neoliberal conjuncture’, which we conceptualise as the result of a political economic project consciously enacted, takes on a political dimension. That is, we seek to counter its relative anonymity, which is ‘both a symptom and cause of its [neoliberalism’s] power’ (Monbiot, 2016).

Our second conception of neoliberalism, connected closely to the above, builds more directly on its relationship to lived experiences and identity, and relates to how the state reforms enacted through neoliberalism are related to new forms of governmentality (Foucault, 1991). Here neoliberalism refers to a ‘highly dispersed’ (Ouellette and Hay, 2008): 473) set of techniques and prescriptions, or technologies of the self, that outline how individuals ought to conduct themselves and, above all, take responsibility for their own lives (Lupton, 1999). As Cairns and Johnston (2015) summarise, ‘neoliberal governance is not externally imposed onto bodies, but operates *through* the embodied actions of free subjects – often by exercising choice in the market’ (p. 155, original emphasis). This notion of the ‘free’ subject exercising choice is central to a conception of neoliberal governmentality, as such ‘freedom’ is now increasingly constituted as an obligation, a marker of individual autonomy and distinctive selfhood that must be continually demonstrated and displayed (Cronin, 2000). Rose and colleagues therefore conceptualise freedom as ‘a diverse array of invented technologies of the self’, where consumption becomes central (Rose et al., 2006): 100). In exercising consumer-based lifestyle choices, the individual is recast as an entrepreneur of the self who becomes responsible for their own fate. Here the concept of risk, and in particular the responsibility placed on the subject for risk avoidance, becomes another key technology of the self with particular resonances for health and well-being (Lupton, 1999). In other words, through practices of consumption, it is the individual who takes on a morally encoded responsibility to exercise self-control, to gain forms of self-knowledge, and to continually enact a regime of self-improvement (Cairns and Johnston, 2015); Lupton, 1999). If one behaves in ways that are seen as excessive, unhealthy, irresponsible or undisciplined, then this is constituted as a moral failure of the self (Croghan et al., 2006). In what follows, we argue these imperatives are particularly pertinent to understanding youth drinking (as a site where ‘health risks’ are a key factor), the online display of youth drinking cultures, and young people’s broader uses of digital technologies. This is, in a dual sense, played out in terms of young people’s own social practices/identity work and ‘youth drinking’ as an increasingly prominent and visible site of neoliberal spectacle.

**Neoliberalism and neoliberal identities in young people’s drinking cultures: freedoms, constraints and ambivalence**

In the previous section we developed a twin focus on neoliberalism as a political economic project that marks out a specific new conjuncture, while simultaneously producing new governmental imperatives in lived experiences. Here we apply these dimensions in a symptomatic reading of young people’s drinking cultures. While a critical political economy of the drinks industry is important to an understanding of neoliberalism’s conjunctural relationship to youth drinking cultures, alcohol studies have only ‘just begun to pay close attention’ (Mercille, 2016): 70) to detailed analyses of industry structures and their relationships to government policy. In the context of an extensive push towards increasingly global free trade in Western economies, it is, however, clear that large alcohol corporations now dominate the global marketplace, and are ‘increasingly reliant on marketing for their survival’ (Jernigan, 2009): 6). Indeed, the ‘unfettered expansion of alcohol marketing’ (Casswell, 2012): 483) is a key contextual feature of contemporary corporate-driven alcohol consumption across national contexts, one which stands in stark contrast to the comparative controls being placed on other substances such as tobacco. For Mercille (2016) this situation speaks to a broader fundamental re-casting of the role of the state as a facilitator of corporateled development. In his analysis of Ireland, as a ‘prototypical neoliberal state’ (p. 61), he suggests that government policies and reforms:

have supported the drinks industry, including longer opening hours for pubs, the growth of sales through outlets such as off-licences and supermarkets, favourable tax measures, support for voluntary regulatory guidelines and the enactment of weak legal regulations to reduce alcohol consumption.

(p. 70)

Similar legislative and regulatory changes, which in effect actively *encourage* heavy drinking, have been enacted across many Western nations (Gordon et al., 2012). Haydock (2015b) argues this has led to a deeply seated ambivalence in regard to alcohol regulation in England. One the one hand ‘“responsible” consumption of alcohol has been encouraged for its social, economic and even health benefits’ (p. 145). In ‘moderation’ (p. 145), alcohol consumption is constructed in policy as having a positive impact on economic and social well-being, and the notion of the responsible citizen deserving, or even earning, a drink features centrally. This ties in with the actual enactment of minimal alcohol regulations, as deserving and responsible citizens equally earn an *environment* where alcohol is easily accessible. On the other hand, ‘irresponsible’ (p. 145) drinking, and in particular the loaded image of ‘binge’ (p. 145) drinking, is singled out and condemned.

For Haydock (2015b) the concept of the binge is a potential obfuscation, because it is not the *quantity* of alcohol consumed, or even heightened pleasure per se, that is judged. Rather it is a particular *culture* of drinking to get drunk associated with ‘little social control’ (p. 146) and the subversion of social and identity norms. There is a symbolic violence enacted here, as specific practices (and people) become rebuked. Thus Haydock (2015b) ultimately suggests debates over ‘binge drinking’ become evocative of the carnivalesque, where both toleration (within defined limits) and unease coincide. It is also here that our two aspects of neoliberalism, as a political economic project and a governmental regime, are bought clearly into play, and it is the concept of identity work which becomes the crucial mediator of this process. Within a deregulated environment that makes alcohol easily accessible, and where it is relentlessly marketed, responsibility is devolved to the individual to develop an appropriate identity and a certain social deportment in relation to alcohol. The swathe of broader regulatory reforms that enact *structural* changes which actively promote alcohol consumption are elided, and moral responsibility for managing behaviour is placed squarely on *individuals* alone. Health promotion policies follow similar logics, devolving responsibility for managing health risks (including those arising from alcohol consumption) to individuals while prioritising good health choices (Ayo, 2012). Indeed, given a reduced role for the state in providing social support and health care, ‘healthism’ (Crawford, 2006) generally – with the responsibilities it places on individuals to manage health risks and lead healthy lives – becomes central to the broad neoliberal agenda for reform. The emphases on rational choice and individual responsibility that emerge in health promotion can, in particular, have detrimental effects on ‘young people living within the contexts of structural disadvantage [e.g. long term unemployment]’ (Brown et al., 2013): 333) who are positioned as authors of their own circumstance. In Brown and Gregg’s (2012) analysis of Australian alcohol health promotion policies, they highlight young women as particularly subject to judgement from a regulatory gaze. In this sense, profound forms of youth inequality become naturalised within neoliberal social formations.

At the same time as these broader processes are playing out, the deregulation of the alcohol industry has been accompanied by a more specific state and corporate interest in promoting spatially bounded locations for alcohol consumption, as part of fostering a new night-time economy (NTE) central to urban regeneration (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001). These corporately promoted and bounded urban ‘wild zones’ predominantly target a young adult consumer demographic (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007), and are linked to what Measham and Brain (2005) term a new ‘culture of intoxication’. For young people particularly, this extends and heightens the ambivalence at the heart of corporate alcohol promotion and state alcohol policy, as such ‘zones’ operate with a simultaneous logic of seduction and repression. Young people are seduced into a normalised culture of excessive drinking positively promoted by alcohol corporations and linked to wealth creation in the NTE, while simultaneously risking being pathologised as disordered and disorderly ‘binge drinkers’ (Szmigin et al., 2008). This encourages young people to exercise a ‘calculated hedonism’ (Measham, 2004) that combines discourses of discipline, self-knowledge over drinking limits, and self-control alongside pleasure and enjoyment as key categories governing conduct (Measham, 2004). Calculated hedonism, as a ‘controlled loss of control’, predominantly operates within the boundaries of specific times (the weekend), specific places (a club or bar within the ‘wild zone’ or a private party), and specific company (young peers and friendship groups) (Measham, 2004). As Cairns and Johnston (2015) point out in relation to a different context (neoliberalism and dieting), there are always different, competing imperatives at work in such forms of neoliberal governmentality, and these must be *actively* negotiated and reconciled by embodied subjects in the complexities of their lived experiences. There is the imperative towards corporeal self-control (Cairns and Johnston, 2015), which in drinking cultures suggests avoiding the embodied experience of being ‘out of control’ in the overtly and excessively drunken body, but this is *simultaneously experienced* by subjects alongside the ‘felt’ imperative to consume. In other words, in a ‘market-orientated culture that celebrates consumer choice as an expression of freedom, the good (and healthy) citizen cannot be marked solely by restraint’ (Cairns and Johnston, 2015): 156). Young people must, therefore, learn when, where and how to indulge in alcohol consumption, not merely forms of self-restraint.

In sum, viewing the complex issues relating to sociality, identity and alcohol consumption through the lens of neoliberalism provides, we argue, a useful analytical stance for symptomatic readings of drinking cultures. It allows us to see productive interconnections between corporateled development, state policies regarding alcohol regulation and health promotion, urban development, and a series of accompanying governmental imperatives that play out in young people’s alcohol-related leisure practices. It also allows us to critique how power relations play out, that is how neoliberalism potentially perpetuates itself through cultural practices. This requires recognition, because the relative invisibility of neoliberalism is compounded here through the production of an immersive neoliberal spectacle that focuses predominantly on young people. The structural changes associated with neoliberal processes of reform that have led to an active promotion of alcohol are elided, fading into the background, as ‘binge drinking’ becomes located at the level of individualised failings of ‘youth’ to lead appropriately controlled lives. Recognising this is doubly important because, while neoliberal accounts of the subject suggest the imperative to lead an ‘appropriately responsible’ life plays out uniformly across populations, neoliberalism in practice tends to ‘exacerbate existing social divides’ (Cairns and Johnston, 2015): 156) as those suffering *structural* disadvantage are most likely to enact ‘failed’ subjectivities.

Nevertheless, a fully symptomatic reading of drinking cultures requires greater recognition of the tensions, ambiguities and complexities that emerge in the lived experiences of young people than this potentially totalising account suggests. We must avoid a tendency towards ‘theoretical determinism’ (Cairns and Johnston, 2015): 157). There is a risk here of viewing young people as ignorant of these processes, or as – simply – thoroughly disciplined subjects. Power here emerges in a more indeterminate form, and also as thoroughly embodied and corporeal and therefore open to forms of subject-driven evasion, contestation and resistance. This suggests an investigative, relatively open stance towards young people’s drinking cultures is required, and reminds us that theoretical accounts of neoliberalism do not exhaust the ‘reality’ of the identity processes in play. For example, the processes of socialisation and associated identity work young people undertake while out drinking have been linked to a strengthened importance for ‘friendship groups as sites of collective identity, community, care and support, as well as fun and enjoyment’ (Griffin et al., 2009)b: 226). Learning to look out for one another while on nights out drinking could help young people avoid, resist or mitigate the effects of the individuating, regulatory nature of neoliberal governmentality and its relationship to the structural forms of inequality they experience. Young people potentially develop self-directed, yet collective forms of group belonging and support and an associated sense of self that disrupts individualisation (Griffin et al., 2009b). Haydock’s (2015a, 2015b) insistence on the importance of the ‘carnivalesque’ to drinking cultures, which suggests a temporary inversion of the social order may at least in part be taking place, are also relevant here.

Equally, young people’s collective drunken narratives – so essential to processes of identity formation – often include factors like a loss of consciousness and a lack of rationality that potentially threatens the neoliberal project of the self as a thoroughly rational, calculative effort towards self-responsibility and self-improvement (Griffin et al., 2009a). The very nature of drinking as a sociable, pleasurable, and altered form of embodiment tied to positive affects also suggests it could operate to disrupt the disempowering process whereby structural problems are experienced in neoliberal social orders as private burdens that are routinely *felt* throughout everyday life (Cairns and Johnston, 2015). There is a certain *autonomy* to drinking practices. Somewhat paradoxically, their resistant aspects may be most salient for those who have the greatest difficulty negotiating drinking cultures, such as young women who experience the NTE as a dilemmatic space where they are exhorted to be up for it, sassy, and independent, and yet censured should they drink like men or appear as ‘drunken sluts’ (Griffin et al., 2013): 184). It is with this sense of complexity in mind that we turn to a symptomatic reading of ‘digital life’, identity, drinking cultures and their relationship to neoliberalism.

**What’s going on(line)? Neoliberal identities, drinking and social networking sites**

In a strict sense, discussing digital media technologies in a separate section misconstrues their nature. They are thoroughly integrated into young people’s lives, and it is no longer possible (if it ever was) to discuss identities in ‘online’ and ‘offline’ life as if they were distinct. Yet it is analytically useful here to discuss digital media technologies separately, because – above all – we wish to emphasise that their active appropriation by young people as an integrative part of their drinking cultures extends the deep sense of contradiction, or ambivalence, that we have argued lies at the heart of neoliberalism and neoliberal forms of governmentality. Digital media technologies *simultaneously* enhance the neoliberal, corporate promotion of alcohol in the NTE and the disciplinary dimensions of drinking cultures in novel ways, while providing new avenues and sites of resistance, evasion and contestation. This complexity and ambivalence is central to our argument, and invites a close empirical analysis of young people’s actual social practices and identity work online as part of a symptomatic reading of drinking cultures. Despite a spike in recent publications, research work on young people’s drinking cultures and digital media technologies is only just beginning. While very little of it currently focuses specifically on neoliberalism, governmentality and identity, there are numerous developments potentially relevant to our discussion (e.g. uses of mobile technologies and smartphones, smartphone app development, and blogging). For the purposes of illustration, and clarity, we will concentrate here on the growing importance of social networking sites (SNS) for young people’s drinking cultures.

It is now well established that young people use SNS to share their tastes and preferences, to develop and sustain social connections with friends and their broader peer group, and to perform their identities online (boyd, 2007); Livingstone, 2008). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that a burgeoning literature is now documenting how young people routinely share stories and photos depicting drinking and drunken behaviour on SNS (e.g. Beullens and Schepers, 2013); Egan and Moreno, 2011). Much of this research is conducted within a public health frame, with concern growing that the sheer prevalence of peer-generated alcohol content on SNS profiles is creating ‘intoxigenic digital spaces’ (Griffiths and Casswell, 2010) – online alcohol promoting environments – potentially damaging to public health (McCreanor et al., 2013). While health concerns are legitimate, it is equally clear that young people have actively appropriated SNS to extend and enhance the socialising and identity work associated with drinking cultures. Young people use SNS like Facebook to anticipate, organise, share and celebrate their pleasurable drinking experiences through status updates, uploading photos, videos, comments, likes and posts (Brown and Gregg, 2012); Hebden et al., 2015); Niland et al., 2014). Digital mobile technologies have enabled young people to engage in these SNS activities while they are preloading (drinking alcohol at private premises before entering the NTE) (Moewaka Barnes et al., 2016) and out in the NTE (Lyons et al., 2014). Such experiences help young people to sustain a collective sense of identification with their peer networks and to solidify close friendship group bonds (Niland et al., 2015).

There is much here to suggest that SNS enable young people to enhance the value of drinking cultures as sites of community, care and support as well as increasing the fun and enjoyment of drinking. These are the very factors that we have argued may well be linked to forms of subject-driven evasion, contestation and resistance to neoliberal regimes. There are novel advantages for young people to be considered here too. SNS allow young people to share drinking content both in real time and asynchronously, to ‘store’ and revisit their drinking experiences at will and to enable drinking-related socialising to continue after the fact, in the ensuing ‘physical’ absence of their peers (Goodwin et al, 2014). Moreover drinking photos are constructed by young people as particularly valuable on SNS like Facebook, as they attract more comments and likes than other forms of content, and therefore *actively* develop social connections (that may not otherwise be made) through making young people far more ‘visible’ to their peers and ‘popular’ on the platform (Goodwin et al., 2016).

However, it is precisely because SNS offer young people powerful new forms of ‘freedom’ (see Rose et al., 2006), in relation to drinking as a central site of consumption, that they reintroduce the question of neoliberal governmentality in social life. Through using SNS extensively, young people potentially come under increasing pressure to perform a self-controlled, responsible and moral self in their drinking practices. This pressure is enhanced through the same technological affordances that augment their socialising, as the ability of SNS software to record searchable and persistent data on young people’s activities exposes them to broader ‘invisible audiences’ potentially watching, such as the police or employers (boyd, 2007); Goodwin et al., 2014). These heightened online visibilities intensify the relationship between young people’s drinking cultures and neoliberal spectacle, and introduce *new forms* of ‘risk’ to be actively managed that relate to ‘appropriate’ online self-displays. Little is yet understood about how young people negotiate such pressures in drinking cultures. But there is evidence to suggest that they actively manage their online drinking displays through carefully choosing photos to upload, while spending an inordinate amount of time and effort tagging and untagging images uploaded by others with their public performance of self in mind (Goodwin et al., 2016). That is, they produce what has been termed carefully managed, ‘airbrushed’ versions of the self in relation to their SNS displays of drinking practices (Niland et al., 2014). The links increasingly made between alcohol, health and SNS as ‘intoxigenic digital spaces’ (Griffiths and Casswell, 2010) intensifies these processes further, due to the fundamental connections evident between ‘healthism’ (Crawford, 2006) and the general neoliberal project of societal reform. The failure to perform a ‘healthy’, disciplined and self-responsible identity is particularly stigmatised in neoliberal regimes as a moral failure of the self (Croghan et al., 2006). Thus the new ‘work’ SNS drinking displays require can be conceptualised as a form of disciplinary practice, and young women appear to feel these pressures to perform ‘appropriate’ online drinking identities most acutely (Lyons et al., 2016).

It is also essential to recognise SNS as environments that have compounded the drive towards wide-ranging, corporate-driven alcohol marketing (McCreanor et al., 2013). Multinational alcohol corporations have been ‘well ahead of the curve in developing the potential of SNS for commercial gain’ (Goodwin et al., 2014): 62). Nicholls (2012), for example, has documented the extensive use of ‘real world tie ins, interactive games, competitions and time-specific suggestions drink’ (p. 486) in corporate SNS alcohol marketing strategies. State legislatures have recognised alcohol brand profile pages as powerful marketing communication tools, but often do little more than apply the weak model of industry self-regulation to online communication (Sven and Carah, 2013). This situation extends the well-established links between the alcohol industry and ‘light touch’ state regulation, a factor central to neoliberal reform.

Part of this regulatory problem relates to the increasingly sophisticated nature of alcohol SNS marketing strategies. Corporations not only ‘mine detailed consumer data that allow them to target advertising to specific audiences’, they also exploit SNS sociality in general (Carah et al., 2014): 259). That is, they strategically employ sites like Facebook to manage connections with ‘consumer’s identity making practices and engage with the mediation of everyday life’ (Carah et al., 2014): 259). The brand effectively ‘travels’ online in a dynamic fashion via young people’s online identity performances and the social connections young people make, which blurs clear distinctions between user-generated and commercial content. This also allows corporations to actively manage the ‘circulation of affect’ around the brand, while ‘prompting connections between mediation of drinking and the brand that would not be possible in other media channels’ (Carah et al., 2014): 259). This raises fundamental questions about the level and type of autonomy young people enjoy online, while doing nothing to displace the neoliberal notion that it is primarily the ‘responsibility’ of the *individual* to manage their identity, socialising and alcohol consumption practices. This potentially perpetuates neoliberalism’s relative invisibility as a concentrated political project that perpetuates corporate power. At the same time, we may also be witnessing the entrenchment of a *new* form of corporate power, whereby corporations retain ownership of detailed personal information on young people’s ostensibly ‘private’ lives, derived from SNS usage that they can then exploit in a sophisticated manner, while individuals themselves have limited access to their own data (Andrejavic, 2014). It is important to recognise here that SNS alcohol marketing campaigns primarily work because they are *actively* appropriated by young people in their day-to-day lives as part of their own socialising and identity work. Young people themselves are often unconcerned about commercial content on SNS (Goodwin et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the *differential* level of power these marketing models produce, which sees corporations extend and enhance their dis-proportionate influence in day-to-day life, requires recognition as it arguably supports their central role in sustaining neoliberal social orders.

**Young people’s digitally mediated drinking cultures, identity and neoliberalism: a symptomatic reading as a critical starting point**

In this chapter we have explored the usefulness of neoliberalism as an analytical concept when employed as part of a symptomatic reading of drinking cultures within the frame of a conjunctural analysis (Hall and Jefferson, 2006). In doing so we have sought to occupy a difficult middle ground between what we consider to be two unproductive directions. The first would be, in the face of significant critiques of the term, a failure to apply neoliberalism at all when attempting to understand the complex interconnections between young people’s identities, youth drinking cultures and digital media. When carefully defined and judiciously applied as part of a symptomatic reading, we argue neoliberalism becomes critical to gaining important insights into the current conjuncture. Without the concept of neoliberalism, we can fail to fully recognise novel contemporary relationships between alcohol regulation, health policies, corporateled development and marketing, urban development in the NTE and young people’s actual social practices and identity work. Moreover, a symptomatic reading that draws on neoliberalism creates a productive critical space where aspects of the power relations that structure social processes and identity work in youth drinking cultures can be unpacked and interrogated. The second unproductive direction, however, would be to apply neoliberalism in too totalising a manner. That is, to reduce digitally mediated youth drinking cultures to little more than corporately controlled spaces producing thoroughly disciplined subjects. This would fail to recognise the embodied, lived complexities of young people’s drinking practices, and would overlook their ties to collective forms of belonging and support that may well be linked to resisting the neoliberal project of the self, and its ties to social inequality. While we do not wish to suggest it is the only critical way forward, we feel our symptomatic approach remains capable of interrogating both these dimensions of contemporary drinking cultures. It creates an investigative, relatively open analytical stance: one that does not anticipate its conclusions before it begins, but remains capable of exploring drinking cultures as open to corporate influence, as overlaid with neoliberal governmental imperatives, while simultaneously being sites of resistance to neoliberal regimes.

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