

Portrayal of women's drinking habits in the media offers biased, judgemental view

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Credit: University of Glasgow

Women who binge drink are depicted more negatively by the media than men who do the same thing, according to new research.

Researchers at the University of Glasgow and Glasgow Caledonian University have investigated how the media report women's and men's binge drinking.

The study, which is published in *BMJ Open*, analysed 308 articles

published over two years in seven popular UK national newspapers and found that women's binge drinking was given more coverage in the media, despite men drinking more in reality.

As well as misrepresenting differences in the amount that each gender drinks, the researchers found that articles depicted women's and men's binge drinking in very different ways. Articles typically linked women's binge drinking to impacts on personal appearance, both in terms of physical appearance and public behaviours.

Newspapers presented female drinkers as haggard, vulnerable, physically incapacitated and socially transgressive. There was also a tendency to characterise women as inconvenient burdens to their male drinking companions.

While the research is about what the newspapers say, rather than what readers think, the researchers suggest that the types of unrealistic

portrayals of binge drinking they found could give audiences inaccurate understandings of what binge drinking is, what its effects are and how to lower their own health risks.

Chris Patterson, from the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow, said: "Media coverage of women's binge drinking isn't just about health or public disorder; it also performs a moralising, paternalistic role, reflecting broader social expectations about women's public behaviour. As well as unfairly stigmatising women, [media coverage](#) of binge drinking is problematic in terms of communication information about a serious health issue to the public.

"Evidence suggests that the public view binge drinking as a masculine activity and statistics tell us that men do drink more than women in reality, but the media are depicting a different story. The reason why this

matters is that the media have a big influence on how we understand the world, and therefore on how we behave. If audiences take newspapers' depictions of binge drinking to heart, they could be led to believe that binge drinking is primarily the domain of raucous young women, and that the main threats it presents are to our public appearance, rather than our long-term health.

"It's vital to clearly define unhealthy behaviours so that we can address them. What is [binge drinking](#), and why is it a problem? If the media feel a responsibility to inform the public, they might seek to help us understand what constitutes harmful drinking, and what the risks of it are, without promoting harmful stereotypes that get in the way of evidence-based facts."

Dr Carol Emslie, Lead of the Substance Use & Misuse research group in the School of Health & Life Sciences at Glasgow Caledonian University, co-authored the research.

She said "In the UK, men still drink more than women and are more likely to die from alcohol-related causes. However, the [media](#)'s disproportionate focus on [women](#)'s drinking, including the headlines and images used, may lead the [public](#) to think that it is primarily young females who are the problem drinkers. Alcohol is more freely available, more affordable and more heavily marketed today than it has been for decades, and [excessive drinking](#) affects all sections of the population."

Provided by University of Glasgow

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