EMBODYING UNCERTAINTY?

Understanding Heightened Risk Perception of Drink ‘Spiking’

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There is a stark contrast between heightened perceptions of risk associated with drug-facilitated sexual assault (DFSA) and a lack of evidence that this is a widespread threat. Through surveys and interviews with university students in the United Kingdom and United States, we explore knowledge and beliefs about drink-spiking and the linked threat of sexual assault. University students in both locations are not only widely sensitized to the issue, but substantial segments claim first- or second-hand experience of particular incidents. We explore students’ understanding of the DFSA threat in relationship to their attitudes concerning alcohol, binge-drinking, and responsibility for personal safety. We suggest that the drink-spiking narrative has a functional appeal in relation to the contemporary experience of young women’s public drinking.

Keywords: drug-facilitated sexual assault, uncertainty, personal safety, drugs, alcohol, universities

The Problem: Powerful Concern, Little Evidence

As far as I am aware, there has never been a case of Rohypnol in this country found ever. We ask women when they are out to look after themselves and they say ‘I always put my finger over the bottle so it can’t be spiked’. I want to tear my hair out because what is in the bottle is what’s lethal! (cited in Camber 2007: 7)

This complaint was made by the Chief Executive of the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, a charity concerned with reducing crime. Although there has been no academic research into drink-spiking fears, some cultural indicators suggest that worry over having drinks ‘spiked’ is a relatively consolidated anxiety amongst young women in the United Kingdom and United States, especially within universities. Certainly, the media tend to represent drug-facilitated sexual assault (DFSA) as a significant and widespread problem, to the extent that newspapers have appropriated the phrase ‘date rape’ to refer to this crime. ‘Date rape is the new student fear’, declared the Times Higher Educational (Hill 2004), and, as was confirmed in the interviews carried out for this project, it is specifically anxiety about the ‘spiking’ of drinks with drugs by a stranger, leading to drug-facilitated sexual assault, that is the focus for contemporary ‘date rape’ concerns.

The spectre of DFSA first appeared in the United States in the mid-1990s (Jenkins 1999), but may now have become more prominent in the United Kingdom and Australia, at least as indicated by the comparative media coverage that this threat receives in these countries. It is the drug Rohypnol (the commercial name for flunitrazepam) that is

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most commonly associated with DFSA, reflected in the popular designation of the crime as ‘roofie rape’.\(^1\) Of central interest in this article is the possibility that ‘constraining behaviour’ may have developed around drink-spiking, as in relation to other campus-related crime fears (Griffith et al. 2004; Turner and Torres 2006; Jennings et al. 2007). A survey by More magazine, a publication aimed at women in their late teens and early twenties, found that 77 per cent of women claimed to keep hold of their drink even when they go to the toilet, with only 8 per cent admitting that they ‘leave their drink on the table and hope that no-one touches it’. The character of this reaction suggests the extent to which a standard narrative of drink-spiking—as carried out in a public place by a stranger with malign intent—may have been assimilated. Our own findings suggest that a new socializing etiquette has emerged around the threat of drink-spiking. Such practices have been reflected in and affirmed by the popular culture, official health advice, and precautionary ‘risk products’. Since the UK soap opera, Brookside, featured a spiking storyline (broadcast 17 December 1999, Channel 4), others have followed suit, such as the teen drama, Hollyoaks (broadcast 20 October 2005, BBC1), and EastEnders (broadcast 24 January 2006, BBC1). Online guidance from the National Health Service (NHS Direct 2007) highlights the dangers of Rohypnol, and recommends preventative behavioural measures. A range of commercial devices are available in supermarkets, such as the ‘Drink Detective’ and ‘Safeflo’, to facilitate drink policing and testing.

Drug-facilitated sexual assault is a culturally embedded crime fear, it has prompted the creation and distribution of ‘risk products’, and there seems to be widespread acceptance that it is a prevalent form of ‘date rape’. Yet, routinized DFSA is improbable as a widespread crime: it involves a stranger extracting an individual from her social group unnoticed, administering a substance undetected, precisely controlling drug effects, and reliably erasing memory of the experience. Indeed, the conclusions of scientific and police investigation suggest that DFSA is in fact a very limited threat. A research-based consensus has found little evidence of drink-spiking with drugs among those who suspect that it facilitated their own sexual assault; alcohol is the substance most commonly detected in the blood and urine samples of women who claim to have been victims of DFSA. Large-scale blood tests on victims in the United Kingdom and United States have found little evidence of specific ‘date rape’ drugs being used in attacks (Slaughter 2000; Hindmarch and Brinkman 1999; Scott-Ham and Burton 2005; ACPO 2006; Hughes et al. 2007). Summarizing a consensus, Hindmarch and Brinkmann (1999: 225) conclude that ‘These data clearly indicate that there is no evidence of widespread use of flunitrazepam in sexual assault. Alcohol remains the substance most frequently associated with this type of crime’. Testing methodology may no doubt need to be improved to accommodate the often late timing of rape reports to police. Yet, this consensus is difficult to dismiss, based as it is on an accumulation of consistent findings independent of the different circumstances under which research was carried out. Originally the principal international voice of concern about drink-spiking, Detective Chief Superintendent Dave Gee oversaw a United Kingdom-wide study into the issue from 2005 (ACPO 2006). Particularly regarding the role of Rohypnol, Gee concluded that the conventional drink-spiking narrative is an ‘urban legend’, as have policing authorities in Australia (Mayes 2003; Kate-Templeton 2004).

\(^1\) Roofie is slang in the United States for Rohypnol.
It is generally impossible to account with certainty for what happened to those who claim to have been ‘spiked’. Drink-spiking cannot be clearly distinguished from other potential causes of wooziness and dis-inhibition, no matter how certain one may feel that a loss of control was disproportionate to the quantity of alcohol consumed. The widespread belief in the imminence of the spiking threat among those who do not claim to have been attacked suggests something in the general experience of public drinking today that renders common spiking plausible. This article seeks to understand what has made the drink-spiking narrative such a salient framework for explaining one’s own or others’ indeterminate experiences and outlines the importance of ‘drink-spiking awareness’ as the basis for navigating social events.

Context and Framework for Understanding the Problem: Uncertainty and Alcohol Effects

The disjuncture between what appears to be a powerful fear of DFSA and the absence of evidence confirming this as a widespread crime invites explanation. If there is widespread belief among students that spiking is a common threat, ‘sociological imagination’ is needed to understand the relationship between perception and social reality (Mills 1959). There is, of course, a body of literature that suggests that perceptions of crime, ‘stranger danger’ and resultant precautionary behaviour cannot be understood simply as a response to personal victimization (Scott 2003; Gidycz et al. 2006). More important may be indirect victimization, crime-specific risk perception (Ferraro 1995) and exposure to local media. The university campus, in both the United States and the United Kingdom, has come to be seen as an increasingly dangerous location, particularly since concerns about female university students being sexually assaulted by their male dates arose in the mid-1980s. A number of recent studies suggest that university students engage in a range of ‘constraining behaviour’ to negotiate these campus risks, from carrying keys in a defensive manner to walking home with friends (McCreedy and Dennis 1996; Griffith et al. 2004; Tewkesbury and Mustaine 2003; Turner and Torres 2006; Jennings et al. 2007). Criminological work in this area highlights that fear of crime is gendered: women express higher rates of worry concerning crime than men (Ferraro 1995; 1996; May 2001; Warr 1984; 1985), and this group’s general fear of crime has been linked to their specific fear of sexual assault (Ferraro 1996).

Social theories of risk may also provide a useful perspective, allowing us to link the sense of being disproportionately ‘at risk’ to the experience of uncertainty (Taylor-Gooby and Zinn 2006; Zinn 2008). The heightened perception of risk may be usefully understood as the projection of the experience of uncertainty; such a process may be functional in fixing, confining and embodying otherwise nebulous worries. In the ‘risk society’, social constraints have at least partially disintegrated and previously constrained behaviours have become possible. This makes decisions, identities and lifestyles a matter of individual concern and negotiation; it also makes them the individual’s responsibility (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Stigma and barriers have fallen away; so, too, has certainty as to how new spaces and opportunities are to be negotiated. Uncertainty about the rules and norms of social interaction occurs in more individualized

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2This is the original meaning of the term ‘date rape’.
societies in which decision making becomes the responsibility of the individual. Moral pressure and constraint remain, but have been reconfigured; to an extent, the language of risk provides a new means through which moral concerns may be expressed (Ericson and Doyle 2003).

This has particular implications in terms of women’s behaviour and experiences. For example, women now have the freedom to consume alcohol in public, relatively unrestrained by stigma and open disapproval. Particularly in the United Kingdom, stigma against female public drinking has significantly diminished, and is partially responsible for an increase in average consumption and ‘heavy’ levels among a significant minority (Plant and Plant 2001; 2006). A range of indicators suggest that more alcohol is being consumed more intensively among females in particular. The latest UK research on drinking trends highlights a narrowing of the gender gap, with a near doubling of the number of females ‘binge drinking’ from 8 per cent in 1998 to 15 per cent in 2006, whilst binge drinking rose only slightly among males in general and actually fell among young males from 39 to 30 per cent during the same period (Smith and Foxcroft 2009). There is also an increase in heavy drinking amongst university students in the United Kingdom, which exceeds levels among their peers in the general population (Gill 2002). Similarly, in the United States, the Harvard College Alcohol Survey notes a rise in female students’ alcohol consumption over a short, 6-year time-span of the study in the 1990s (Wechsler et al. 2002). As with males, heavier female drinking has a pronounced ‘bingeing’ character; some female students are now ‘drinking like the guys’. Yet, despite greater gender equality when it comes to public drinking, there is no clear language through which the female experience can be discussed, let alone celebrated in the manner that remains central to masculinity (Day et al. 2004).

The absence of such a language might make the experience of public drinking a rather uncertain one for young female students. In many respects, uncertainty is intrinsic to the social experience of alcohol consumption. Alcohol research studies demonstrate the significant and generalized underestimation of alcohol intake (Stockwell et al. 2004). Subjective judgments of intake—and other experiences associated with alcohol consumption—are particularly unreliable because alcohol has a specific effect on memory (Goodwin 1995; White 2003). Drinking too quickly is associated with inexperience and, in turn, having memory ‘blackouts’ (Goodwin 1995; Anthenelli et al. 1994). The effects of alcohol are subject to a variety of both bio-medical and social influences. Important factors are: the amount of food consumption that precedes or accompanies drinking, mood states of the person, and the time-frame of the drinking session (Wolburg 2001: 23). The extent and range of alcohol’s unpredictable, even surprising, effects may be widely underestimated. The rate at which we can eliminate alcohol and thereby limit its effects vary threefold between individuals and are influenced by a wide variety of factors, including simply the time of day during which it is consumed (Zakhari 2006). Over 150 medications interact negatively with alcohol (NIH/NIAAA 2007).

Moreover, the effects of alcohol differ between men and women. On average, women become more impaired by alcohol’s effects than men (Dawson et al. 1995; Alcohol Alert 2004; Zakhari 2006). Among other factors, women’s bodies generally have less water than men’s and, because alcohol mixes with body water, a given amount of alcohol is less diluted in women. Pressures on women to be slim may lead to individuals ‘sacrificing’ their caloric intake from food for alcohol, deliberately setting out for an evening’s
drinking on an empty stomach. Such pressures are a recognized factor in smoking among females for whom it can operate as a conscious appetite suppressant (Gucciardi et al. 2004).

Understanding student fear concerning drink-spiking involves ‘unpacking’ the social experience of uncertainty around female social drinking, and working out why it is the risk of drink-spiking, as opposed to threats associated with alcohol consumption, that is acted upon and assimilated. Asking why certain risks are selected for social attention and others are not, Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) examined the social function of risk in marking out boundaries. Particular risks, often those deemed ‘unnatural’, might became elevated and fetishized through a process serving to maintain social cohesion. More recent work highlights the externalizing role of risk in creating an ‘other’ (Joffe 1999). It remains central to the psychological tradition of risk research that exotic and unlikely hazards can be more feared and fixated upon than more mundane, if more regularly occurring, hazards (Zinn 2008). In sum, identifying something as a risk involves the embodying of uncertainty, and this process whereby we give shape to otherwise nebulous threats might be seen as functional, on occasion allowing us to displace worry about other, less manageable threats.

The Studies: Student Fears about DFSA

There is a widespread belief in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia that drink-spiking is a routine problem on university campuses, and in bars and clubs. This research constituted a pilot study to explore the nature, extent and basis of student concern about DFSA. Two hundred questionnaires, 20 in-depth interviews and four focus groups were carried out at three UK universities (Kent, Sussex and London) during the academic year 2006–07. Most of the interviewees were female (85.3 per cent), second-year undergraduates and their mean age was 21. The questionnaire was based partly upon a survey (n = 334, 219 were females) among undergraduate students at a state university in the North-East United States. The 21-item survey sought to investigate students’ knowledge of ‘date rape’ drugs, whether they or someone they knew had been victimized and whether they had changed their behaviour in relation to the perceived threat.

One thing that was immediately striking about the data was how few of the participants reported having had a drink spiked. Only ten people in the UK sample (n = 236) claimed to have personally experienced drink-spiking, and none had been subject to sexual assault as a result. In the US survey, 17 (n = 334) believed they were the likely or possible victims of drugging, though, again, not all mentioned assault. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the participants knew about drug-facilitated sexual assault. Almost all of the questionnaire respondents had heard of ‘date rape’ drugs (95 per cent of participants in the United Kingdom, 97.3 per cent in the United States), and an even higher number in the United Kingdom had heard of drugs being slipped into people’s drinks (96.5 per cent). Moreover, 110 (55 per cent) of the respondents in the UK sample claimed to

3 Glossy women’s magazines refer to this as ‘drunkorexia’.
4 An opportunity sample was used for the questionnaires: questionnaires were distributed after lectures and at campus cafes. The US survey sample was administered in liberal arts courses on the campus during the Summer and Fall terms of 2006. A volunteer sample was used for the UK interviews: an advert was placed on university web-pages to attract participants.
personally know someone who had had a drug slipped into their drink. In the US sample, 33.5 per cent (n = 112) had heard about such drugs being slipped into drinks at the university, and 17.1 per cent (n = 57) said that they personally knew of such an incident. The contours of DFSA as a problem are, then, well and widely recognized by university students.

Risk perceptions are contextual, relative and subject to change (Zinn 2006). To better establish the strength of concern about DFSA, the UK respondents were asked to rate their sense of risk and sense of worry for the following four crimes: being a victim of drink-driving, being mugged, having a home or room burgled, and being a victim of DFSA (see Table 1). UK respondents were more likely to express acute worry about DFSA than any of the other crimes they were asked about. Almost all of the respondents who displayed a high level of worry about DFSA were female. Further, first- and second-year students were far more likely than those in their third or fourth years to rate the risk of DFSA to be high or very high, reflecting, it is reasonable to suggest, a pronounced sense of vulnerability associated with the experience of becoming a ‘Fresher’. Respondents were also asked to rate the circumstances under which they considered themselves to be most at risk of sexual assault. A choice of six answers was given: when drunk, when walking alone at night, after having taken drugs, after having your drink spiked with drugs, in your home, when walking in an area where crime is known to be high. Having a drink spiked with drugs was the most commonly cited risk factor for sexual assault, with 150 (75 per cent) of participants identifying this as an important risk factor—a more significant risk factor than drinking alcohol or taking drugs (see Table 2). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that DFSA elicited a more acute sense of worry amongst female students than mugging.

There are ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors that make the cooptation of the drink-spiking story particularly likely amongst university students. A need to explain feelings of vulnerability associated with ‘big nights’ may well impel young female students to assimilate the discourse of drink-spiking awareness, whilst the desire to find a way of framing the masculine practice of binge-drinking in feminine terms may well make the same discourse particularly appealing. These explanatory factors are discussed in turn below.

Table 1  Questionnaire respondents were asked the following question: ‘On a scale of 1–5, how worried do you feel about each of the following? (5 being extremely worried, 1 being not at all worried)’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being a victim of dangerous driving (n = 198)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who were male (n = 50)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who were female (n = 148)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being sexually assaulted after having had your drink spiked with drugs (n = 198)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drink spiked and women (n = 198)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who were male (n = 50)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who were female (n = 148)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having your home/room burgled (n = 198)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who were male (n = 50)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who were female (n = 148)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being mugged (n = 198)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who were male (n = 50)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number who were female (n = 148)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Role of Drink-Spiking in Embodying Uncertainty

In the UK interviews, female first-year students commonly saw nights out as risky affairs, and often implied—although rarely conceded—that alcohol introduced an element of uncertainty into an already difficult social situation. One 18-year-old, for example, commented on the false intimacy engendered during a nightclub event (‘Flirt’ night) run specifically for first-year students, where free alcohol is provided:

You don’t always know everything about a person, especially at university. The guys I know here, I don’t know them, but, like at the ‘Flirt’ night, everyone’s all over each other.

Other first years described ‘Fresher’s Week’, an introductory week characteristically dominated by parties and nightclub events, as distinctly anxiety-inducing:

Interviewer: How was Fresher’s Week?
Interviewee: I tried to stay in during Fresher’s Week, ‘cos there’s only a few people I know properly here, and I really wanted to get to know people before we went out out … I’ve been out with my house mates and I’ve only been off campus once … I like not so big groups, because you know where everyone is then.

Interviewer: So going out is risky?
Interviewee (f, 18): Yeah … like, I don’t even like going to the toilet on my own. I went out last night [to a local nightclub], and two guys came up to me, talking as if they knew me.

Alcohol might allow for easy sociability amongst individuals who are thrown together and expected to become a social group—it might allow, for example, people to ‘act as if they know you’—but this can be a disconcerting experience. A sense of anxiety prompts precautionary behaviour, illustrated by the following typical exchange with another first-year student:

Interviewee: I’m always quite precautionary, ‘cos when you’re drunk you’ve got to be, you can’t … you’ve always got to be aware of things. But I think there is always [the threat of drink-spiking] in the back of your mind now. And I don’t necessarily think that’s a bad thing, it just means you’re more cautious … it’s a slight paranoia. I mean, I wouldn’t get paranoid to the extent that it ruins a night, but it’s a concern. Especially because I don’t really drink bottled drinks … I mean, you don’t always want to carry [your drink] around everywhere but, really, that’s inevitable .... Like, before, in the Venue you could leave your drinks and go for a dance. But not so much now. I only leave [my drink] with friends, but even then … [hesitates].

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**Table 2**  
*Respondents were asked the following question: ‘Under what circumstances do you consider yourself to be most at risk from sexual assault? (please tick no more than three boxes)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>Number and percentage that identified the given risk factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When drunk</td>
<td>144 (72%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When walking alone at night</td>
<td>140 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After having taken drugs</td>
<td>44 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After having your drink spiked with drugs</td>
<td>150 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In your home</td>
<td>10 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When walking in an area where crime is known to be high</td>
<td>58 (29%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviewer: You wouldn’t leave it with a friend?

Interviewee: No, I do trust my friends, I don’t know why I said that ....

What is interesting about this conversation, beyond the student’s marked level of distrust, is that concern about alcohol is quickly elided by concern about drink-spiking. Alcohol makes it necessary to be cautious, this young woman suggests, but it is the more specific threat of DFSA—of a drink being spiked rather than the drink itself—that becomes the focus of attention. Whilst a few students give up drinking altogether, most continue to drink and increasing numbers drink heavily, and, for those in the last two categories—the drinking majority—alcohol is deemed to be less of a problem than drink-spiking. In fact, often, in US respondents’ accounts of suspected drink-spiking incidents, there was a distinctly defensive view negating the role of alcohol in producing the events or symptoms. This was accomplished either by identifying symptoms with a specific drink (n = 21) rather than ‘drinking’ or by including information about how little alcohol the victim had consumed (n = 12), such as:

They were given a drink and woke up in a guy’s room

I accepted a drink from someone I didn’t know & woke up a day later w/no clothes in someone’s car.

… she was given drinks, only a couple, but came back acting severely intoxicated.

On my 2nd beer, extreme dizzy feeling, had to immediately sit down, once sitting couldn’t keep my eye open, began vomiting & soon passed out.

… girl I know had one drink at a party and then blacked out and woke up sitting on a curb.

Unprompted, respondents nonetheless felt the need to address the alcohol contribution in their accounts, if only to deny its role. There appears to be widespread disbelief, or active denial, that excess alcohol could cause the same incoherence, physical distress and incapacity associated with ‘date rape’ drugs.

Alcohol’s role in DFSA was strongly denied by the US students, and interviews with the British students showed that anxiety about its effects, though evident, was generally displaced by reference to drink-spiking. Moreover, limiting alcohol intake was very rarely seen as a means of mitigating risks to one’s safety and health. Only one of the 200 questionnaire respondents in the UK study and three in the United States reported that they had limited their alcohol intake in response to the threat of drink-spiking. A possible explanation for this is that alcohol consumption is an integral component of becoming a ‘Fresher’. Being vigilant against the ‘exotic’ risk of drink-spiking does not require a significant disruption to social routine. The mundane risks associated with drinking are a different matter. Those interviewees who had limited their alcohol consumption spoke of an unrelenting pressure to drink. ‘It’s almost impossible not to drink’ was a typical comment. The following quotation captures the sort of pressure many feel:

Before every night out there’s a drinking circle at the bar .... And last night I couldn’t go … and this morning I had loads of text messages saying ‘where were you? It’s terrible, you’re a Fresher, you should be out’. Now I don’t drink that much, but it’s definitely seen as a bonding thing, like the Freshers should get to know the Seniors by going out and drinking .... There are a few people who don’t really drink in the club, and after a while they’ve been forced into doing it. Like I’ve been offered a drink, and when I said ‘No’ I’ve been given very funny looks ....
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In this context, alcohol consumption is functional and framing this behaviour as ‘the problem’ in terms of feelings of anxiety and vulnerability is, as those interviewees who chose to drink less found, likely to elicit disapproval amongst peers. Yet, the difficulties created by excessive alcohol consumption amongst female students—the false intimacy it creates in nightclubs where you don’t really know anybody, the way in which it opens you up to threats—still require negotiation. ‘Drink-spiking awareness’, and the restricted sociability it recommends, might perform just such a role.

The UK questionnaire respondents were asked to note how they had changed their behaviour (if at all) in response to the threat of DFSA, and the results reveal a standard language of ‘drink-spiking awareness’. Out of the 74 questionnaire respondents who commented on how their behaviour had changed, 60 mentioned watching their drinks when out, 17 mentioned not accepting a drink from a stranger, 14 looked out for their friends, seven kept their thumb over their bottled drinks and six reported that they only bought bottled drinks. In the US survey, 34.7 per cent (n = 116) said they had changed their behaviour and described how. The most common response (n = 62) was increased physical surveillance of drinks. Questionnaire respondents’ answers in both studies were remarkably similar in terms of how these measures were outlined:

**Behavioural changes amongst the UK students:**

Not accepting drinks from strangers and watching my drink at all times.

Don’t leave my drink alone. Usually have a bottled drink. Wouldn’t let a stranger buy me a drink.

Never let anyone you don’t trust implicitly buy a drink. Always be aware of your drinks and never leave them unattended.

Watch my drink—always!

**Behavioural changes amongst the US students:**

I watch my drink, get it myself.

Don’t leave my cup out unattended.

... never drink anything I haven’t seen poured.

Never leave drinks unattended. Even in Commons, around friends!!!

A number of participants made it clear that drink-spiking awareness is deemed a matter of ‘common-sense’, as one of the young women put it. The following exchange demonstrates the extent to which rules of social conduct shaped by ‘drink-spiking awareness’ have been assimilated:

Interviewer: Do you think an awareness of ‘date rape’ has altered your experience of going out?

Interviewee (f, 21): I wouldn’t say it’s altered my behaviour going out. But ... well I suppose it’s altered it in the way I’m now conscious of my drink all the time. In the sense that I don’t let it out of my sight and I don’t leave it anywhere, and if I do my eyes are always on it.

Interviewer: What about if a stranger offered you a drink?

Interviewee: (emphatically) I would never accept a drink off anyone.
The etiquette encapsulated in the ‘drink-spiking awareness’ discourse is not seen to require conscious behaviour modification, rather it is experienced as a normative set of rules that is easily internalized because it apparently answers to the ‘reality’ of risky socializing. It is a discourse that is reinforced by conversations with friends, parental warnings, university awareness campaigns and the media:

Interviewer: Is [drink-spiking] something you talk about with friends, with family, with parents, perhaps?

Interviewee (f, 20): It tends to crop up quite a lot with my parents. I mean every time I’m on the phone and about to go out, they’re like ‘watch your drink’. They’ve been like that for quite a few years. And the same with friends, I think. We’ve had quite a few discussions, generally about friends who don’t look after their drinks. And I’m constantly telling them, ‘look after your drinks’. Especially in the Venue, where you can’t take drinks onto the dance floor. So you end up … you’ve got a pint in your hand, or whatever, and you’ve got to put it down and keep an eye on it. Some people aren’t looking at their drinks. And so the opportunity’s there for it.

Interviewer: What sort of things do you hear?

Interviewee: People say ‘drink as fast as possible’, or they just, generally, say ‘always buy your own drink’, ‘never let a guy buy the drinks’ … There’s also a little bit about cigarettes, as well; a lot of my friends won’t take cigarettes off people now, because of them being spiked.

One of the fascinating things about this conversation is the extent to which the risks associated with alcohol consumption have been sublimated; the recommendation that one drink ‘as fast as possible’ in order not to leave a drink unattended might allow one to evade the drink-spiker, but it also, ironically, opens up a much more significant set of risks associated with rapid alcohol consumption. This is the broader issue: the discourse surrounding drink-spiking displaces the risks associated with alcohol consumption, not because the former represents a more serious threat, but because the latter is a more convenient and acceptable way of framing the uncertainty experienced during ‘big nights out’. As we’ll see below, ‘drink-spiking awareness’ is functional in other respects, too.

**Drinking with the Girls**

The upward trend in female drinking raises an interesting question: how do young women discuss, explain and understand public binge-drinking—a behaviour that is so closely associated with masculinity? As Gough and Edwards (1998: 409) put it, ‘Western cultures advertise (excessive) alcohol usage as an exclusively male activity’. Indeed, some have pointed out that female binge-drinking is regularly represented in the media as transgressive. Day et al. (2004: 166), for example, argue that women who drink are presented as ‘problems’ in the media, and as ‘subverting their normal feminine virtues (modesty, nurturance, etc)’. Others have framed heavy alcohol consumption amongst young women as evidence that women are gaining ground on men, suggesting that an interest in ‘drinking like the guys’ is indicative of a tide-change whereby previously male-dominated activities are increasingly available to women. Young et al. (2005) tested this hypothesis, though their interviews with young women suggested that heavy drinking was more likely to be a means of showing off one’s sexual availability (that is, lack of prudishness and inhibition) than a gesture of gender equality. Female drinking, then, is
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widely seen as challenging gender norms, either as a deviant subversion of ideals of femininity or as part of a broader project of female emancipation.

Interesting as they are, such interpretations ignore the actual experience of binge-drinking, the fact that lots of young women do it without questioning their sense of femininity or conventionality. This research suggests that female drinking is by no means at odds with a dominant discourse of femininity, and one of the central ways in which these two are allowed to co-exist is through recourse to ‘drink-spiking awareness’. Watchfulness, concern for personal security and predatory males, looking out for others and policing one’s physical boundaries are all integral aspects of hegemonic femininity, as well as at the heart of ‘drink-spiking awareness’. Moreover, many UK interviewees and some survey respondents invoked a sense of female camaraderie when speaking about going out, drinking and drink-spiking. Women are frequently held up as people who look out for each other, drink-spiking incidents that were relayed by questionnaire respondents often involved a thoughtful female friend stepping in and taking someone home ‘before it was too late’, and a number of interviewees spoke about mentally mapping the area of a club or bar so that they always knew where their friends were. Drinking alcohol in groups, on ‘big nights out’, opens up the possibility for women to express an ethic of care towards others, and this is made possible by the discourse of ‘drink-spiking awareness’ and the drinking etiquette it recommends.

It may therefore be unsurprising that drink-spiking is a topic of conversation between women, female friends and even mothers and daughters. Our data suggest that students’ perceptions of DFSA are strongly shaped by local, interpersonal relationships, such as those with friends and family. Notably, 76 (38 per cent) of UK respondents indicated that friends had cautioned them about leaving drinks unattended, whilst 86 (43 per cent) pointed to family members. Whilst similar numbers of male and female respondents cited friends as sources of advice, the latter were twice as likely to report having received advice from their parents and mothers than the male participants. Similarly, many of the female interviewees (n = 11, nine were first years) mentioned, unprompted, receiving advice from their mothers concerning DFSA. Such advice was often described as consisting of generalized warnings such as ‘watch your drink’ and ‘don’t let anyone buy you a drink’. One student, who was in her first year, reported that her mother and grandmother had warned her about drink-spiking every time she had talked to them since coming to university. The following exchange is characteristic:

Interviewee (f, 18): The first time I heard about [drink-spiking] was probably, I don’t know, by watching one of those programmes where it shows some girl going to a party, and, you know, she wakes up somewhere. It’s not like I saw anything incredibly traumatising, or anything. It’s just that I was aware of that possibility from that point. But then I really became really aware about it when I first started going out and my mum started talking about it. And that was when I was sixteen or something.

Interviewer: So your Mum’s warned you about it?

Interviewee: (laughing) Yeah, she’s like ‘if you leave your drink anywhere, just get another one, don’t even think about it. If a friend gets a drink for you, you know, say thank you nicely, and then just get yourself somewhere and put it down’ (laughs). And she says if someone buys you a drink to go to the bar with them and see them pour the drink.

Interviewer: That’s very detailed advice ....

Interviewee: She’s very paranoid.
It was by no means unusual to find that interviewees’ first recollection of drink-spiking involved conversations with their mothers. This is deeply suggestive of the extent to which DFSA is implicated in a complex process of gendered socialization and risk acculturation. Acquiring the social rules concerning drink-spiking is, in other words, not simply a matter of keeping safe, but a means of marking one’s femininity. The discourse of male drinking might urge men to learn to ‘drink like one of the guys’; today, women are no less acculturated into a drinking culture—one that allows them to ‘drink with the girls’.

Conclusion

Fear of having one’s drink spiked in a club or party setting appears to be high among the college students in our surveys. The overwhelming majority was aware of so-called ‘date rape’ drugs, and significant numbers reported first- or second-hand knowledge of such incidents. Students in many cases judged certain bad-night-out episodes (loss of memory, blackouts, ill feeling, dizziness) as likely to be related to tampering of drinks rather than the quantity of drink itself. This transference of suspicion from alcohol to drugging might be seen as curious, given the amount of public health promotion about binge-drinking. Certainly, few in the US sample endorsed the idea promulgated by American college health authorities and other agencies that ‘alcohol is the biggest date rape drug’. Given the lack of evidence that drink-spiking is commonly implicated in sexual assaults—especially in comparison to excessive alcohol consumption—we believe that the preoccupation with DFSA needs explanation. This pilot research suggests that the threat of DFSA has certain attractive features as an account for disproportionate loss of control. Since alcohol is voluntarily consumed, it appears to be less desirable as an explanation of vulnerability, even though, particularly for ‘Freshers’, alcohol consumption is far from voluntary in real, social terms. Moreover, concern about the long-term, negative effects of alcohol may well be displaced by concern about drink-spiking because of the latter’s more immediate efficacy in helping to negotiate social experience—as well as, of course, the functionality of alcohol in aiding social interaction and solidarity amongst students.

Particularly in the UK sample, it appears that a new morality of caution is emerging among students, where someone who expects strangers and even acquaintances not to spike their drinks is seen as naïve or foolhardy. As this boundary of ‘good sense’ is established, the value of ‘drinking with the girls’ is reinforced as a norm. Not making yourself vulnerable to spiking, and all else—regardless of the amount of alcohol consumed and the inebriation that follows—seems to be reasonably prudent. In fact, the transference of threat from excessive drink to drugged drinks can be seen to operate as a form of solidarity. Women, in the course of drinking, believe that they are protecting themselves and their friends by being vigilant about the spiking threat. Further, taking certain specific actions—perhaps even rituals—is not too strong a word here—is seen to ward off both threats: that of spiking and of rape. Yet, open-ended answers about particular spiking incidents that respondents had experienced or heard about very

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5 However, in other US surveys, students do indicate some awareness of the effects of alcohol in excess (Wechsler et al. 2002). This may reflect a culture still somewhat prohibitive against alcohol and where stigma remains compared to the United Kingdom.
rarely included reference to sexual assault. More common was the narrated ‘near miss’ in which a spiking victim was discovered or shuffled away by friends before the drink-spiker could do them any further harm. In this way, the importance of female vigilance is reinforced.

If DFSAs provides an outlet for anxiety while shifting focus away from alcohol, it also distorts the central elements of sexual assault: the intention of an assailant to exert power over and violate the victim, and the loss of autonomy that the victim experiences as a result. The entire set of claims about why a victim was intoxicated is bound to smuggle back in blame of the victim and displaces attention from the perpetrator’s violence. It is significant that perpetrators play almost no descriptive role during interviews and focus groups. In reality, sexual assault upon intoxicated victims is overwhelmingly opportunistic in nature, where the victim consumes the drugs or alcohol knowingly and the assault is thus easier for a perpetrator to carry out (Horvarth and Brown 2007).

The broad preference for spiking explanations belies the best scientific evidence to date. Although only small-scale, this pilot research suggests that DFSAs anxiety does perform certain functions for coping with uncertainty and ambivalence about risk, personal safety, social trust, the age-old desire for the abandonment of inhibition that accompanies intoxication and the proper social space of modern women. At the same time, it may also represent a defence of excessive drink among young adults at a time when authorities are calling for sobriety.

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**References**


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