

2014

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### Recommended Citation

Le Roux, Gaël (2014) "From Grand dad's to Grand daughter's binge drinking – A recent evolution of heavy episodic alcoholic consumption in Ireland.," *The ITB Journal*. Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 7.

doi:10.21427/D7FF13

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/itbj/vol15/iss1/7>

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# From Grand dad's to Grand daughter's binge drinking – A recent evolution of heavy episodic alcoholic consumption in Ireland.

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## Abstract

*This article is aimed at understanding how female students perceive and explain the feminisation of binge drinking among their age group in Ireland. It focuses on the responsibility of older generations as well as female students' gender and ethnic identity quests as possible explanatory factors for their increasing level of episodic heavy alcohol consumption. This empirical research was of a qualitative nature. 50 female students at the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, Dublin 15, were interviewed individually in 2011 and 2012. The findings might be of significance in order to improve the effectiveness prevention strategies implemented in Ireland to reduce heavy episodic consumption among female students.*

**Key-words:** binge-drinking; episodic heavy alcohol consumption; female students; gender identity; ethnic identity

## 1. Introduction

In Ireland, heavy alcohol consumption within groups is a traditional social fact for men (Stivers, 2000). Regarding women, it is a much more recent phenomenon since it apparently started as a cultural trend around the mid-nineties and has continued to increase since. Even if binge drinking has also increased among youths throughout Europe, it is only in Ireland and in the UK that the level of alcohol use through this means of consumption are the highest (Alcohol Action Ireland, 2014).

This paper includes the expression 'binge drinking' because it is constantly used in the European media to describe youth's drinking habits. However, young people themselves barely use it and the scientific literature contains a very significant diversity of definitions for it. Therefore, the term "binge drinking" might constitute a counter-productive semantic catch-all. The definition I would suggest for it is *episodic heavy alcohol consumption performed in groups*.

How could we explain the evolution of Grand-dad Johnny's binge drinking to the heavy episodic alcohol consumption of his grand-daughter Aoife? In order to answer this question, many keys could be found in the following works by some of the greatest sociologists of the last half-century: *The Consumption Society* by Jean Baudrillard (1970); *The Risk Society* by Ulrich Beck (1986) and *The Malaise Society* by Alain Ehrenberg (2010). These might represent also a good reflection of the evolution of the Irish society in the last 20 years and a relevant overview of exogenous social explanations for the dramatic increase of female binge drinking.

This evolution is going to be considered by using the variable of the identity crisis, both from gender and ethnic perspectives. In the Irish society has experienced an absolute "cultural revolution" within the last quarter of a century. One of the main sources of suffering for many young women, would be caused by the ambivalence they feel at times in front of this double identity quest: 'What is it to be a woman?' and 'What is it to be Irish?'. I argue that

since the beginning of the new millennium, young Irish women and teenagers look for answers to these questions with alcohol or, at least, with their heavy episodic consumption.

## **2. Methodology (data gathering, method and structure of the paper)**

This paper is based on a qualitative research conducted in 2011 and 2012 using 50 participants who were interviewed individually. They were all female students at the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, Dublin 15, and aged between 18 and 25 year old. They studied a diversity of degrees: General Business, International Business, Social Care or Social and Community Development. They were approached through different means: ITB Student Union, lecturers who accepted to act as relays and passed on messages and ‘snow balling’. I also made sure that half of my sample did not know me while the other would have had me as a lecturer. Having received about 70 positive answers, a final selection was made based on different variables: their age, level of studies, place of their main residence and if they were born or not in Ireland. From this selection process, resulted a balanced proportion of participants in terms of age, levels of study and place of residence (urban, periurban or rural, with a further repartition between socially disadvantaged areas and more affluent ones). 36 participants were born in Ireland and 14 abroad (seven in Eastern Europe and seven in sub-Saharan Africa). Recorded interviews were conducted in a meeting room in ITB over a period of seven months and all were transcribed. The interviews aimed at gathering female students’ perceptions about the following topics: the prevalence and contexts of their alcohol consumption (types of alcohol, quantity, frequency, contexts and concomitant drug use); their motivations; social, cultural and economic factors which might have influenced their binge drinking; risks associated to it; their well-being; their identity as a woman and their understanding of what being Irish meant.

This paper will present firstly a brief summary of available data in the literature regarding the prevalence of alcohol consumption in Ireland as well as findings following the analysis of what participants declared in relation to their own alcohol consumption. A brief discussion, based on both my primary and secondary researches, will then follow on the responsibility of their parents’ generation in the increase of Irish young female binge drinking. Finally, the questions of gender and ethnic identities, both at individual and collective levels, will be considered.

## **3. Prevalence of alcohol consumption in Ireland**

The very significant growth of female binge drinking in the years 2000 must be considered within a more general perspective which is the 50% increase of alcohol consumption among the general population between 1986 and 2006. Therefore, it is not really surprising to notice that the number of alcohol related deaths have more than doubled between 1995 and 2004 (Mongan *et al.*, *Health research Board*, 2007).

Despite the increase of alcohol consumption in the nineties and the years 2000, it must be noted however that traditional pubs experience today economic difficulties. From now on, alcohol consumption tends to take place more and more outside this traditional setting that the local pub used to be. However, gigantic bars – I would like to call them ‘drinking factories’ where everything is done for ‘line drinking’ – have grown like venomous mushrooms in Irish urban centres. They don’t seem to notice the economic recession. They aim at attracting the strongest possible diversity of clients, of different age-groups, social classes and genders. In fact, public drinking places in general re-invented themselves to suit a female clientele by working for example on decors, sitting areas and musical backgrounds.

Another type of harmful competition for traditional pubs and off-licenses consists in the multiplication of alcohol selling outlets, for example petrol stations and supermarkets. The latter sell alcohol at very low prices, without making significant profit on them, in order to attract customers to shop with them. This type of competition is obviously perceived as unfair by publicans and off-license owners. For prevention specialists, this is also felt as a very worrying phenomenon, which has certainly contributed to the excessive and uncontrolled alcohol consumption by young people and the lowering of the age of binge drinking initiation. For once, prevention specialists and publicans tend to agree with the necessity of bringing back young people to local pubs.

The huge increase of female binge drinking in the years 2000 resides also in the fact that a wider diversity of alcohol is now available. The alcohol industry has perfectly understood the financial windfall that young women represent and, as for cigarettes after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, it uses advertising strategies where alcohol play a supposedly essential role in the construction of modern female identity, a woman now free from male domination and standing now on an equal footing, including in relation to drinking.

#### **4. Alcohol consumption of young Irish female students**

Even if across Europe young women have increased their level of alcohol consumption, only Ireland and the UK have, within the EU, a higher proportion of female rather than male students who binge drink (EMCDDA, 2011). Female students tend also to drink stronger alcohol than their male counterparts. Girls consume mainly spirits and white wine making them, beyond their greater biological vulnerability in front of alcohol, further exposed during these sessions or afterwards to a wider diversity of physical, psychological and social risks.

The modalities of the sessions are similar for most of the female students who binge drink. Therefore it seems that this means of alcohol consumption has become for them a real cultural “*habitus*” to use Bourdieu’s expression (Bourdieu, 2000). However, this cultural pattern is common mainly to the “native Irish” girls and is not shared by the girls, Irish or not, of foreign origins. These non-native Irish female students even the ones from Eastern Europe where binge drinking is culturally engrained, tend to be very critical and shocked with the levels of alcohol consumption and drunkenness of their native Irish female counterparts. One could therefore conclude that, at least for the time being, the fact of being from a foreign origin constitutes a protective factor against heavy episodic drinking, even for female Eastern European students.

Most of the female binge drinking students interviewed stated they would have on average between one and two binge drinking sessions per week during the academic year. Regarding their frequency, belonging to a certain age group seems to represent a significant variable. Most of the 18-21 students would be drunk twice a week, while those aged between 21 and 25 would tend to binge drink only once a week. However, the vast majority of the 50 participants highlighted the fact that the frequency of their weekly binge drinking sessions increased in December and during the summer.

During these sessions, the first phase of alcohol consumption that they call “pre-drinking” takes place usually between 9 and 11pm in a friend’s house (“a free-house”) where parents are absent for the night. Many of them would have had one or two drinks beforehand while getting ready. During the “pre-drinking” phase, the majority of the female students who consume alcohol declared drinking either one bottle of white wine on their own or vodka (usually between 33cl and 75cl) that they mix with sweet non-alcoholic drinks. Leaving the “pre-party” for a night-club, they tend to bring with them in their handbags a “*naggin*” of

vodka (a defined measure the majority of them were not really aware of and described as being between 20 centilitres and half-a-litre). They tend to drink it once in the night club in order not to have to buy too many drinks there. Furthermore, in the night-club, many of these young women will also consume on average between two and five “shots”. After the night club, a minority of them declared going sometimes to an “after” where they will continue to drink whatever they will find.

Considering that the World Health Organisation recommends a limit for women of an average weekly consumption of 14 units of alcohol spread evenly during the week, one can easily understand that the level of alcohol intake of the participants are of a serious concern in terms of public health. In fact, when the majority of the fifty female students were told of the quantity most commonly used in the literature to describe female binge drinking (four units during a session), they found it unrealistic and laughable as such an underestimation could not reflect accurately the reality of their drinking habits. What makes the matter even more concerning is that the majority of them stated that they drink less now than they used to drink when they were 15 or 16. Most of them also declared being “very drunk” for the first time when they were between 13 and 15. Such an early age for alcohol consumption constitutes a significant public health issue (Eliassen, 2009)

They tend to look for cost effectiveness, which means trying to be as drunk as possible, as quickly as possible with as little money as possible (especially for the 18-20 year olds). Along other criteria such as tastes or their desire not to gain too much weight with their drinking, the need to limit their expenditure justifies also their predilection for spirits. According to them, it is also the main reason why the “pre-drinking” in “free-houses” has become a necessary first step of the binge drinking sessions. Comparing their expenditure with their male counterparts during these sessions, they consider spending far less than the boys because the latter drink a lot of beer, pay far more rounds and consume much more drugs than they do.

The feminisation of binge drinking needs also to be related to the high increase in the poly-consumption of psychoactive substances among the 15-25 age group (NACD, 2012). It seems that Irish teenagers have a higher rate of drug use than the European average (EMCCDA, 2011). A significant minority of female students declared also using drugs regularly, particularly cocaine, ecstasy, speed and marijuana. Therefore, within the female student population, there seems to be a “sub-culture” of drugs consumption for which alcohol often played an initiating role.

Concerning the links between tobacco and alcohol consumption, many participants stated that they only smoke when they drink. Others said that they became regular and daily smokers following their habits of smoking when they binge drank. Despite the very positive and unquestionable effects of the 2004 smoking ban in pubs in terms of public health, it seems that it has become counterproductive for this female age-group. According to them, the most interesting and intimate conversations tend to take place in the cozy smoking areas of the pubs and, in order to justify being there without “*looking like an idiot*”, they started to smoke themselves.

As far as their motivations to drink are concerned, most participants declared aiming at being drunk but not “*hammered*”. They consider that it was when they were teenagers that they were deliberately looking to be “*locked*”. The reasons for getting drunk they mentioned the most frequently are “*looking for fun*” and “*making the most of their youth*”. They also feel that their drunkenness is less accepted by their parents than their brothers’ but stated they did

not really mind. Furthermore, a majority of them emphasised that girls try to get drunk more often than boys.

As for the quantities and frequencies of their alcohol consumption, their motivations seem to evolve between 18 and 25. To summarise a bit abruptly, between 18 and 20, which coincide for them with being in first and second years, they seem to experience a kind of post-adolescence phase when mainly socialization, entertainment and search for pleasure matter. Following a process of maturation, these tendencies progressively fade between 21 and 25 as the young women of that age-group interviewed seem to be much more concerned with obtaining their academic qualifications with the best possible grades and declare investing themselves much more in their studies and in a steady love relationship than a few years previously. Thus both their binge drinking and hedonistic search are being conducted now on a smaller scale compared to what it used to be.

However, some of them declare having female friends who are always looking to “*get hammered*” in order to forget their problems. If getting very drunk corresponds to an intention instead of being accidental, this desire is very different than the simple search for pleasure and coincides more with an attempt to regulate a mental suffering. On that note, several participants mentioned also that they were getting drunk in order to be “*somebody else*” and be able to do “*things they would not do normally*”. They also highlight the usefulness of being drunk in order to raise their level of self-confidence and avoid any possible guilt afterwards, in case they would have had a one night stand, argued with a friend or even got into a fight. Concerning their motivations for drinking heavily, many young women insisted on the fact that their binge drinking facilitates the socialization with their female friends. As a matter of fact, some of them assimilated these drinking sessions as a type of perilous adventure in an urban jungle in which female solidarity and friendship can be tested. The girls help each other in order to avoid falling on “moving” stairs and pavements, protect their very drunk friends, against male predators and bring them home safely.

Binge drinking seems also to be used to facilitate sexuality. The participants often emphasised the differences between the drinking motivations of girls who are in steady relationships and those who are not. Several interviewees declared that binge drinking as a sexual strategy would be particularly frequent among female teenagers between 15 and 17. It is a fact that the average age for first sexual encounters has significantly decreased in Ireland in the last fifteen years (Layte *et al.*, 2006). One could therefore wonder to what extent heavy alcohol consumption would not be used by teenagers to have sexual intercourse while they would not yet be ready psychologically (Layte *et al.*, 2006). What seems obvious is that concerns of a sexual nature and the need to perform sexually as a rite of passage exist more among younger female teenagers nowadays compared to the 1990s. Some of the students interviewed declared that, while adolescents, they felt they had to have sex in order to conform to the female peer group. They also considered that regarding their first binge drinking occasions and sexual intercourse, peer pressure, the media and their dependence to social networks were more significant causes than vertical influences such as their parents’ behaviours and viewpoints. However, parents are far from being exempted of any kind of responsibility.

## **5. Parents’ bad example and influence**

Within the Irish media, one often hears adults being alarmed and criticizing the youth for their drinking habits, while forgetting their level of responsibility in this matter, in terms of

their lack of involvement in the prevention of youth binge drinking but also because of their own drinking habits.

Of course, the strong increase of alcohol consumption of the Irish population up to 2006 was linked to the phenomenal but short-lived economic boom of the late 1990s and early 2000. One of the most obvious social causes to the severe increase of the level of alcohol consumption among the general population was the introduction of a Mediterranean type of drinking, which was added to the traditional heavy episodic drinking. Adults started to drink wine while sitting at a dinner table. However, they also continued drinking standing in pubs.

Regarding adult women in the 1990's, the fact that they could drink at a dinner table, within their homes or in restaurants, with and like their husbands, certainly reinforced the acceptability of public female alcohol consumption. Up to the late 1980's, female public alcohol consumption was limited and not very frequent. It was often perceived as socially unacceptable for women to drink more than one or two glasses publicly. For this too, the new association between alcohol and food in Ireland played a significant role.

I argue that, except for the most underprivileged groups, the purchasing power of the Irish during the "Celtic Tiger" improved dramatically thanks to a very low unemployment rate, salary increases, financial and property speculations and a very high level of debts per capita, due to unscrupulous banks. Like expensive cars that one was going to change every two years and the supposedly exotic holidays or the purchase of unbelievably expensive houses, many Irish people who, for the first time, had access to the over-consumption of luxury goods started to use alcohol while eating as another external sign of wealth or at least as a sign of a big climb on a social ladder. These ten "glorious" years became a golden age for restaurant owners, property developers and estate agents. While for so long the pub, besides the church, had been the only "neutral" public place where people, whatever the size of their wallets, could socialize, restaurants with their expensive menus became other common meeting points for this new and self-perceived "middle-class" (perhaps more than in France, the concept of social class seems to depend a lot nowadays in Ireland on the level of purchasing power). The economic boom also generated a frantic property craze, a real "collective hysteria" as Freud might have said. This relatively recent nation-state, for so long deprived of the ability of ownership because of past colonisation and misery, became addicted to property purchasing when the opportunity rose. Once they owned a house they were proud of, many Irish people started to invite one another for dinner in their homes. These new hosts, which tended to define their new social status through what they could financially afford but also what they knew about continental European lifestyles, used wine both as an essential social and self-defining tool. Based on observation, it seemed that many people from this emerging middle-class suddenly became the 'know-it-all' of oenology. Furthermore, many started to appreciate wine, not based on its taste but on its price. A good wine had to be expensive. And considering the importance of VAT on wine, all wines sold in Ireland had to be good because all of them were expensive.

To conclude on this section in a less sarcastic and more academic way, I would say that, at many levels, during these Celtic Tiger years, Irish people attempted to act more like Europeans from the continent than Irish on an island, which up to then, had its cultural gates mainly open towards the USA and the UK. Their desire to become more European was not only due to individual aspirations to embrace the perceived cultural identity ("*habitus*") of a social class they thought having reached or because of their country's EU membership. It was also due to the fact that dozens of thousands of Irish, after having migrated in the 1980s to

societies, which were already experiencing hyper-consumption, came back home with tastes and needs acquired during their overseas years.

In this “*End-of-century*” period, this “*Belle époque*”, Ireland, feeling wealthy and desiring to enjoy it to the full, became a big party place and started to live like a singing cricket in a culture of instant gratification. Ireland suddenly became a very addictive society. However, these supposedly “great years” also became the golden age for psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, psychoanalysts and ... psychotics. “Psycho” became a very fashionable prefix. The suicide rate among young men increased significantly, so did female self-harm, depression, anxiety and food disorders, as well as chemical and behavioural addictions. In 2008, when the economic wind turned and Ireland woke up with a big hangover, the adult population stopped singing and dancing but the youth, who grew up with their parents’ hyper-consumerism continued. The level of alcohol consumption of the adult population has been on the decrease since but it keeps increasing among the under 25, especially among the female teenagers and young women.

The feminisation of binge drinking must also be considered within the context of a strong increase of the poly-consumption of psychoactive substances, not only among the youth but also the general population. This drug consumption, whether it is legal or illegal, used for recreational or medicinal purposes, could be seen as a symptom of a society generating more and more anxiety and which requires a growing use of psychoactive crutches for its population. Once again, while drinking excessively or buying their drugs in the controversial “headshops” opened until May 2010, young Irish people might have only expressed the same need for ingesting solutions and quick fix as their parents were doing while taking alcohol in order to have a good time or their prescribed “benzos” in order to sleep and cope with a more and more stressful daily life.

Ireland, like Spain to a certain extent, has experienced in this last quarter of a century a “cultural revolution” with multiple variables. Because of the role of alcohol as a perceived and stereotyped cultural inheritance, it is logical that this product has acted as one of the catalysts of this sudden societal change. This revolution has also been a lay one, weakening the power of the Church as both a social and political institution in Ireland. The numerous scandals involving the Irish clergy significantly speeded up the decline of the religious belief among the population. Half of the Irish young women I interviewed declared that they had no religious faith or were agnostic whereas a vast majority of them declared they were not practicing.

While religious belief is dormant, the belief in consumption is alive and well. A correlation certainly exists between the loss of a religious faith and a new type of “spiritual” quest among these young women through consumption of goods to surround or to fill themselves with. This new “search for meaning” might have reinforced the prevalence of female binge drinking. Drink and drugs are not the only products they abusively consume. So is food for some of them. The level of obesity has increased lately among young Irish people but it is their drunkenness, not the fact that they might be overweight, which makes them unable to walk straight at night from Thursday to Sunday nights. In fact, one could wonder, at times, if binge drinking has not become for many young women an addiction to a behaviour - consumption - rather than a dependence to alcohol.

It seems that a relative insecurity in terms of individual and collective identity prevails among many young Irish women who are currently trying to find a way to belong. They look for entertainment. But through this compulsion to entertain themselves, they might look for

themselves or try to forget about themselves. Without leaning too much on Freud's psychoanalytical theories, the feminisation of binge drinking could perhaps be envisaged as one of the symptoms of a malaise within Irish society. Ireland might have undergone a too abrupt transition from a society regulated by a "collective neurosis" – religion – used, amongst other aims, to alleviate psychic suffering to an era of overconsumption where religious faith has been replaced by a myriad of individual neurosis and symptoms, such as excessive consumptions and addictions, also used to regulate a lack and a psychic suffering. For these young women, one cause of their possible suffering could be related to their gender identity.

## 6. A gender identity crisis?

Like men who used for so long their ability to drink as a way to affirm their masculinity, would the young women of this new millennium not do the same in order to redefine female roles and identity? Firstly, we could approach this gender question by considering the importance that the female students I interviewed seem to give to the perception young men have of them. If one abides to the theories of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan on neurosis – according to him, a symptom of normality – the gender question could be linked to the one the hysteric would seek to answer: "*What does he want from me?*" (Fink, 1999). These young women, who acknowledge sometimes having some difficulties to situate themselves in relation to men of their age-group, might often ask themselves this question.

Therefore, binge drinking could constitute for them a strategy aiming at facilitating the relations with the opposite sex, particularly in terms of seduction. Listening to the participants, especially those aged between 18 and 21, to be a woman at their age is still first and foremost through the young men's eyes. As the New-Zealander sociologist Antonia Lyons states: "*Girls who drink don't try to be like men; they try to be liked by men*" (2008). In fact, it would be difficult to persuade oneself of the opposite while looking at the type of clothes they wear when they get drunk. From the age of 12 and 13, their going-out outfits are ultra-sexual. In fact, they often shock the non-native female students, including the Erasmus ones.

Embracing some traditional male habits, such as an increased risk-taking, would constitute a paradox as it might express in fact an attempt to look more "feminine" and correspond to a search for a new form of female identity at this gender recomposing time. If young Irish men tend to consume much more drugs, it might be due to the fact that they are trying to drink and smoke less today compared to 15 years ago. Besides the reality of a greater availability and diversity of drugs, it could also be because drinking beer gives a belly, which is not "*cool*" to have while pumping biceps in a gym. You could also get quickly out of breath with tobacco which would make you look ridiculous on a football pitch. Men are becoming more and more concerned with their physical appearance and dressing codes. At that level, their concerns tend to be more and more what used to be attributed to women in the past. Cosmetic companies are developing male beauty products, such as eyeliners and moisturizers. Marketing campaigns have highlighted for a while now the image of the young "motherly" father playing with his toddler; the fashion industry is also designing more feminine lines and colors for male clothes. It is also perceived as more acceptable and even encouraged for men to show their feelings and sensitivity, an attitude which traditionally was perceived as feminine (Bourdieu, 2000). The macho and tough attitude is not attractive anymore as it is not really perceived as an expression of strength but rather as an expression of insecurity and psychological weakness.

Confronted by this gender “re-designing”, young women might be trying unconsciously to masculinise their behaviours as new forms of seduction strategies. The feminisation of binge drinking might correspond to one of these attempts. Drinking sessions in mixed groups might play the role of a neutral and possibly transitory ground, which would facilitate this progressive gender osmosis. Already, in Ireland, girls under 20 are drinking more than boys.

The gender ‘re-designing’ expresses itself too in relation to gender adult roles. In a society, at last, much more egalitarian than in the past – even if a lot still has to be done – young women do not feel as much subjected to male domination. Once again one could use Lacan’s nomenclature to illustrate this aspect (Lacan, 1979). From now on, the question “*What does he want from me?*” tends to be progressively replaced by the question which obsessive neurotics, traditionally mainly male, spend their lives trying to answer: “*Who am I?*” (Fink, 1999)

It is interesting to note that the vast majority of the female students do not reject traditional gender roles but try to delay them as long as possible. However, all of them give priority to their desire for a fulfilling professional career. They all want a “*good job*”. However, most of them would also like a family, consisting of a husband and children, but only while they are well into their thirties and settled professionally. Furthermore, most of them would prefer to be married to the father of their children than not. So nothing very different compared to how their mothers felt when they were their age. It is interesting to note however that the young Irish women I interviewed are very critical of the women over thirty who binge drink, especially when they have young children.

Considering that some of them have part-time jobs, they consider it is the period of life up to thirty rather than their student’s years which constitutes a type of playful and carefree parenthesis in their lives, a kind of “*social offside*” to use Bourdieu’s expression (Bourdieu, 2000). It is about delaying as much as possible adult life by developing a post-adolescence phase, which will allow them to “*live life to the full*”. They want to experience a “*total freedom*” that they feel they will lose once settled in both a professional and family life. For many of them, female adult life starts with motherhood. At this stage of their life and in terms of gender roles, it seems that they currently define themselves more as “*youth*” than as “*women*”.

Globally, their binge drinking does not seem to express a feminist political struggle, at least of the type carried by the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Their behaviours would relate more to the ones of the “*phallic girls*”, as Angela Mc Robbie described the young English women of the years 2000 (McRobbie, 2009). They are career-driven; they demand a professional, social and sexual equality but at the same time, they would seek to have a family life while experiencing also romantic love, sensuality and seduction. They want it all but wonder how they can manage it all. In a way, they are confronted by contradictions and ambivalences that they have difficulties to resolve and that force them to adopt masculine behaviours in some aspects of their lives while expressing a hyper feminine identity in others. Risk taking and heavy episodic alcohol consumption in groups would represent an attempt for these young women to resolve this ambivalence as it would allow them to prove to their male counterparts that they are their equals while trying at the same time to please and seduce them.

The feminisation of binge drinking would therefore symbolise an attempt to redefine a female identity beyond social classes. In a more and more individualised post-modern society providing a freedom of choice and where everybody is from now on obliged to construct their

own biography as it is no more imposed on them, the gender identity quest is becoming far more arduous than it used to be. Of course, this phenomenon is not specific to Ireland but it is possibly more radical than in other Western societies, such as in France, for example, which had a full 20<sup>th</sup> century - mainly the 1920's, 60's and 70's - to allow feminine condition to evolve, while Ireland would only have had a quarter of a century. However, the heavy episodic drinking of these young Irish women might also represent a means to fulfill another quest which is the one of ethnic and national identity.

## 7. Ethnic and national identity crisis

Once again, the ethnic and national identity crisis experienced by some Irish students of both sexes, who are not protected anymore by their insularity, could be summarized with the question: "*Who are we?*" As for gender identity, young women might also look to alcohol consumption for an answer to this question. In a globalised Western world and in a growing multiethnic and multicultural Ireland, feeling that, through binge drinking, they belong to an ethnic community might represent an easy and simple way to resolve their individual identity quest. Within this caricature of what an Irish person is or should be, alcohol, once again, is going to play a crucial role.

The links between female and Irish identities have significantly evolved in two generations. From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1980s, for a significant proportion of Irish people, "being Irish" meant first and foremost being a "good Catholic". Being catholic was not only the expression of a sincere faith but also a political statement for this young nation-state in opposition to the British former coloniser and neighbour. From a social perspective, this religious affiliation was particularly vivid among women. During this period, and with a slight evolution mainly from the 1960s and 1970s, women played to a certain extent the role of representative of the priest and the church within their households. According to the vast majority of the young women I interviewed, religion has no place in the construction of both their gender and national identities. For them, it would rather be heavy and regular drinking, rather than Gaelic language or Catholic faith, which would stand up as a symbol of Irish identity.

Historically, of course Irish men were drinkers but they were not the only ones. In fact, up to recently, the Irish were far from being the people who drank the most in Europe. Grand-dad Johnny, because of a radically different purchasing power, tended to display levels of alcohol consumption which were lower than the one of his grand-daughter today. Furthermore, with 23% of the adult population who have not drunk alcohol in the last year, Ireland still has one of the highest rates of abstinence in Europe (Slàn, 2009)

Because of the enormous presence of both American and British culture in the Irish media and the communication revolution led by new technologies, this nation has lost what it had left of cultural insularity. Young Irish women might now embrace the cliché of the drinking Irish, present within the American psyche. At this level, they would react like one of Jean Genet's characters in his play *Les Nègres* (1958) who states: "*We are what they want us to be; we will behave this way until the end, absurdly*" (p.19).

Today, young Irish people, women included, would identify themselves collectively, as did generations of Irish migrants in the USA, by transforming positively a stereotype originally negative and racist in order to be accepted and survive socially in their host country. Many of these young women seem happy now to perform the role of the "female funny and drunken Paddy". For them, alcohol is no more a symbol of masculinity but a symbol of ethnicity.

In a country which is increasingly becoming multicultural and multiethnic, binge drinking seems now to create a cleavage within Irish youth by highlighting two types of subcultures: the one of the *'native Irish'*, who drink alcohol heavily, and the one of the *'new Irish'*, who immigrated to Ireland and who do not drink or drink a little. To a certain extent, heavy alcohol consumption would therefore express a political statement. The majority of the young women I interviewed make a big difference between the concept of *'Irishness'* and Irish citizenship. *'Irishness'* would correspond to the ethnic identity of the *'native Irish'*. They would be able to identify collectively through their ability to drink heavily, having a good time, *'live life to the full'*, and joke continuously. For them, having an Irish passport does not mean being a *'real Irish'*. Therefore, it seems that they feel one is Irish in terms of ethnicity rather than in terms of nationality and it implies being able to drink. They are prisoners of simplistic clichés, which could also mean politically that they would reject more or less consciously the increasing multicultural and multiethnic face of Ireland.

However, one has to be very careful with this theory, which would make these young Irish women embracing the political theories of European extreme right wing parties. I argue that this search for a supposedly ethnic identity would rather exist as a means to finding a very simple and easily understandable way of self-identification in front the complexity of individual and female roles of today's Ireland. By using the concept of *'Irishness'*, these young women I interviewed might also attempt to provide a hypothetical explanation for a drinking habit that they perceive themselves as self-harming and problematic. Despite being aware of the significant risks associated with it, this strategy would act as a form of "denial" in order to help them to avoid any form of guilt and being able to continue drinking. *"Being Irish"* might therefore act as an excuse to justify a heavy alcohol consumption they have difficulties to live without and to contain, due to the purpose it serves in their individual lives. For them, belonging to drinking groups might be more meaningful than belonging to the Irish community.

## **8. Conclusion**

The increase of young female heavy episodic consumption is not specific to Ireland and it is a trend which is being noted throughout the Western world. However, in Ireland and in the UK this social fact has taken incomparable and unprecedented scales. While adult alcohol consumption has continuously decreased since 2006, binge drinking has significantly increased among the 15-25 year-old, particularly for girls and young women. It seems that it has become one of the main "habitus" within Irish young female culture while, according to both the participants and the EMCDDA (2011), the consumption of other types of psychoactive substances tends to progressively become as attractive as alcohol for young men.

Parents' changing attitudes towards consumption during the Celtic Tiger years, a short-lived economic boom, which also reinforced the acceptability of public female heavy episodic alcohol drinking, constituted undoubtedly one of the most significant factors in the increase of Irish young female binge drinking.

As for the general adult population, there seems to be a growing need for and dependence to psychoactive crutches among the youth to achieve a certain well-being. This might highlight a decrease of the general mental health in Ireland. Conscious motivations and types of drugs consumed might differ between the under and over 30 but this social trend seems to reveal an underlying and growing need for self-medication common to all age groups. However, this need seems particularly vivid among young women for whom the questions of both gender

and ethnic identities appear to be significant and could represent an underlying reason for the increase of their binge drinking.

This potential growing link between heavy episodic alcohol consumption and mental suffering among female students might constitute in fact one of the symptoms of an “Europeanisation” of this nation-state. A recent study.....From a modern society where the concept of community still had a real meaning, Ireland has experienced in the last quarter of a century a very abrupt transition to an over-consuming society where the individual is both a king without a kingdom and a lost subject, characteristics of what sociologists referred to as ‘post-modern’.

For a significant proportion of the participants, binge drinking is used more or less consciously as a form of self-medication and might be strongly correlated with an identity crisis, both at a gender and ethnic levels. It might be used as a tool for their search for meaning and their attempt to ‘belong’. For many young Irish women, binge drinking has become also a means of prolonging adolescence before the big jump into adult life, perceived as heavy, fun free and dutiful. In their daily lives, where communication seems to take place more and more through the means of new technologies, drinking sessions might represent for the youth one of the last face-to-face social bounds.

These findings might be of significance in terms of prevention, whether in educational settings or for media campaigns. Prevention programmes tend to aim at reinforcing protective factors more for individuals within groups than for groups as entities: reinforcing young people’s ability to resist peer pressure, helping them building a higher self-esteem and self-confidence or reconstructing their perceptions of role models (Peretti-Watel, 2009). To a certain extent, it is hoped that by influencing individuals’ perceptions, one might change youth culture. These prevention strategies adopt mainly a psychological perspective. Without denying the relevance of such an approach, this paper’s findings would suggest that a combined sociological approach would also have its merits in the prevention of alcohol and drug use, abuse and misuse. It would help children to reflect from an early age on questions such as “*What does it mean to be a woman or a man?*” and “*What does it be to be Irish?*”. Gender studies and political sociology have also their role to play in the prevention of heavy episodic alcohol consumption among young Irish people.

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