A QUALITATIVE STUDY
OF
BINGE DRINKING
AMONG
FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS
AT
AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

Sera Murugiah
(B.A. Media Studies; M.A. Communication Studies)

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts with Honours
in the School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences,
the University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales

21st July 2009
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis or any part of it has not been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree. I certify that, to the best knowledge, any help received in preparing this thesis, and all the sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

SERAVANEN MURUGIAH
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my supervisors, Associate Professor John Scott and Dr. David Gray for giving me an opportunity to conduct this research. Without their guidance, this thesis would have been impossible. I am also grateful to Dr. Steven Thiele, Professor Kerry Carrington, and Miss Margaret Pereira for their support. I thank my parents for their love and support. Finally, I thank Mr. Stephen Maxwell, who has always been there to assist me.
ABSTRACT

Binge drinking is a prevalent practice among Australian university students. According to the health professionals, binge drinking refers to hazardous drinking. While there are many medical references to binge drinking, most medical models refer to binge as consuming an arbitrary number of drinks in a single session. This paper examines Wechsler’s definition of ‘binge’ drinking, which is, consuming more than five drinks for a man and more than four drinks for a woman in a single sitting. This definition is also known as the ‘5/4’ measurement. Although the ‘5/4’ measurement informed this study, this paper did not utilise this measurement to investigate the perilous effects of binge drinking, but rather the thesis adopted an interpretive approach to examine how students comprehended the phenomenon of binge drinking.

A total of twenty female university students from the University of New England participated in face-to-face interviews to describe their drinking behaviours and perception of binge drinking. The study found that binge drinking is a prevalent activity in student cultures, informing the experience of being a student. However, understandings of ‘binge drinking’ vary widely, with most participants defining the activity qualitatively as a ‘state of behaviour’, rather than quantitatively. In this way, they did not apply medicalised understandings of binge drinking to describe this activity. Moreover, most students did not regard themselves as binge drinkers.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**DECLARATION** .......................................................... ii

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS** ................................................... iii

**ABSTRACT** ....................................................................... iv

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** .................................................... v

**LIST OF FIGURES** .......................................................... vii

**INTRODUCTION** ............................................................ 1

**CHAPTER ONE: COMPREHENDING ‘BINGE’ DRINKING** .......... 6

  INTRODUCTION .................................................................. 6
  SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM ............................................... 7
  LABELLING THEORIES......................................................... 12
  ANTI-BINGE DRINKING STRATEGIES .................................. 22
  PUBLIC DISCUSSION OF THE NEW POLICIES ....................... 27
  CONCLUSION ...................................................................... 32

**CHAPTER TWO: USES OF ALCOHOL** ................................ 33

  INTRODUCTION .................................................................. 33
  DEFINING ALCOHOL ........................................................ 34
  SOCIO-CULTURAL USES OF ALCOHOL ................................ 34
  ALCOHOL AS SOCIALLY PROBLEMATIC ................................ 39
  CONCLUSION ...................................................................... 45

**CHAPTER THREE: DRINKING IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES** 46

  INTRODUCTION .................................................................. 46
  ONSET OF DRINKING IN AUSTRALIA .................................. 46
  ALCOHOL DRINKING IN UNIVERSITY SETTINGS .................... 52
  FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ........................................ 67
  CONCLUSION ...................................................................... 70

**CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY** .................................... 71

  INTRODUCTION .................................................................. 71
  PREVIOUS STUDIES .......................................................... 71
  METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH ......................................... 76
  PROBLEMS .......................................................................... 80
  CONCLUSION ...................................................................... 81

**CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS (PART ONE)** .............................. 82

  INTRODUCTION .................................................................. 82
  UNE STUDENTS IN GENERAL ............................................... 82
  DRINKING EXPERIENCES .................................................. 84
  CONCLUSION ...................................................................... 99
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Relationship between Self and Society ----------------------------------- 9
Figure 2. Sensationalised Heading and Lead Story --------------------------------- 30
Figure 3. Liquor Licences in Armidale ------------------------------------------ 119
Figure 4. Population Density---------------------------------------------------- 120