

# A Word in Your Beer: Examining the Relationship between Positive Beer Drinking Culture, Masculinity, and 'Wellbeing'

*Research conducted by the Social Issues Research Centre 2021-22*

## Table of Contents

<b>1.1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.2 Key Findings: Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.3 Project Rationale, Aims and Objectives.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.4 A Word on the Conceptual Framework .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.5 A Word on the Pandemic .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1.6 A Word on Alcohol.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>1.7 A Word on Methodology .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1.8 Drinking Beer in Historical and Cross-cultural perspective: Change and Continuity.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2. Findings.....</b>	<b>16</b>
2.1 Regularity .....	16
2.2 Taste .....	17
2.3 Beer drinking and male friendships .....	18
2.4 Mental health and Well being .....	19
2.5 Making and sustaining friendships .....	20
Fleeting best friends .....	21
2.6 Round-buying and reciprocity .....	22
2.7 Alcohol content.....	23
2.8 Beer and Gender Identity .....	24
2.9 Beer drinking, talking about emotional topics, and ‘banter’ .....	25
Emotional topics.....	25
Banter .....	27
Beer drinking, comfort, and certainty .....	28
3.0 Findings Continued: Beer Drinking Contexts .....	30
3.1 The Primacy of The Pub.....	30
3.2 Negative impacts of Lockdown.....	30
3.3 Virtual beers 2020-21 .....	32
4.0 Conclusions .....	32
Selected References.....	35

## 1.1 Introduction

Beer drinking has been an important part of human society for thousands of years. Importantly, beer has always been more than a drink: for at least five thousand years (Dietrich et al 2012), beer drinking has been a *social* practice: beer is a drink that is shared, that is given in turn, and that serves as the context for social interaction of various kinds. But what is the significance of beer drinking for contemporary society? In English society, beer drinking has been associated with men, masculinity, and the traditionally male space of the pub – but the parameters of gender identity are changing, and beer drinking practices are changing to reflect this. This research project explores the contemporary social significance of beer drinking with a specific focus on how beer drinking shapes masculinity and male friendships, perceptions of gendered identity (for both men and women), and feelings of wellbeing related to social interaction that involves beer drinking. The project took place between 2019-2021 and involved interviews (n=58) and a national survey involving 1,000 participants. As we outline below, the findings of the research help to complicate the picture of how beer consumption relates to masculinity and sociality in contemporary British society. The project yielded some surprising results in terms of how men and women perceive the importance of beer drinking, not least in relation to the changing social dynamics of Britain during the pandemic. In the report that follows we explore how ‘a word in your beer’ - conversations while drinking - are one among many important social activities that centre around a frothy pint.

## 1.2 Key Findings: Executive Summary

- **Beer drinking remains an important part of social life for a large proportion of both men and women in Britain.** More than half (52%) of survey participants (men and women) suggested that they drink beer twice a week or more. This was much more pronounced among men: 64% of males drink beer twice a week or more, compared with 37% of women.
- **Beer drinking remains essential to male friendships.** The majority of those who drink most regularly (more than three times a week or more) are most likely to see beer drinking as important to male friendships (57%). Beer drinking is considered important or very important for male friendships by a significant proportion of the sample overall. One in five or 20% of all men in the survey agree with this statement, compared with 1 in 10 (11%) of women. This is particularly marked among men in the 30-49 age range, where a quarter (25%) agree that beer drinking is important or very important for their male friendships. Beer consumption appears least important for the over 50s, with 40% disagreeing that beer is important to their friendships.

- **Beer and gender identity:** While the scope of what counts as ‘masculinity’ is now much wider than in the past, many men still consider beer drinking to be an important part of their gender identity, however defined. A third (34%) of all men agree that beer is an important part of their gender identity. More noteworthy still is the fact that the majority of men (66%) therefore do not make a close association between beer drinking and gender identity. At the generational level beer is considered important or very important by between 30-40% of those under 50, but the importance of beer to gender identity drops off significantly for those aged 50-59 (16%) and 60+ (6%).
- While here we make no claim whatsoever for the clinical benefits of beer drinking related to any aspect of good health, **there is a clear *perception* among beer drinkers that it has a positive impact on their wellbeing and outlook.** A considerable majority (60%) of all respondents agree that beer drinking is good for their mental health. This increased to almost three quarters (73%) of 40-49-year-olds and 65% of 30-39 year olds. Men are more likely to perceive a positive impact of beer consumption on their wellbeing (66%), but the majority of women (52%) also agree with the assumption that beer drinking has a positive impact on outlook. Of particular note is the fact that this perception of wellbeing is not directly linked to alcohol. Four in ten (40%) non-alcoholic beer drinkers agree with the statement that beer drinking has a positive impact on their perceived wellbeing. There is an interesting link to be made here between beer drinking, friendship, and positive outlook. If beer is seen as the major facilitator of social interactions, especially among men in the 30-49 age range, it is reasonable to assume that men are associating the positive impact of beer drinking on their lives with its significance for feelings of amity or friendship and belonging.
- **In a time of rapid and unpredictable change, beer drinking continues to be a means of creating stability and comfort.** Of survey participants, the large majority (64%) agreed that beer drinking culture was a source of certainty and comfort. This was felt most strongly by those aged 40-49 at 77%, while 69% of all men and 58% of women see beer drinking as a source of comfort and certainty. On one hand, we might consider how certainty can be found in the predictable rituals and routines of beer consumption. Men and women alike are familiar and comfortable with the ‘rules of engagement’ that give shape to beer drinking practices, and there is stability in knowing these rules and acting them out. This may link in important ways to perceptions of the positive impact that beer drinking has on wellbeing - that men and women (but particularly men) find happiness in the predictability of beer drinking culture. We call this **the ‘Cheers’ effect** - a feeling of being with friends and in familiar contexts, hearing familiar stories and laughing at familiar jokes.

Sometimes - and particularly in uncertain times - you want to go where everyone knows your name, and everything feels and tastes the same.

- **Taste in beer:** Speaking of taste, in spite of the trend towards a more diverse range of beer drinking habits, and towards a more nuanced experience of 'taste' in beer, the old staples of the bar remain the most popular. Among survey respondents, most women drink lager (49%), while for men, 37% showed a preference for lager, 20% for craft beer, 17% for real ale, and 12% drink high alcohol content beer (which, it should be noted, is not necessarily distinct from some of the other categories given the high content of some craft beers and lagers). Returning to the significance of beer as a drink that is for the 'everyman', we see a shift in our data that is generationally defined when it comes to taste in beer. Among under 50s, taste in beer is quite or very important, especially for 40-49 years where more than half 52% agree it is important. We may also infer a classed element to discerning taste in beer: more than half (57%) of those in higher socio-economic groups (AB) note the importance of taste.
- **Making and Sustaining Friendships:** While beer drinking is an important part of social life, it is not the most important means by which most people *make* friends. The most important place for both genders making friends is through hobbies (43%) and sports (39%). Drinking in pubs is still very important for making friends, and was the third most likely context (39%), followed closely by childcare/parenting (33%). If we zoom in on men in particular, however, the picture changes: roughly half of under 50s agree that drinking beer in pubs or bars is how they make friends. This is more pronounced still for 40-49-year-olds (51%). Beer drinking is key in *sustaining* friendships. Among men, hobbies (45%), then drinking beer (42%), then sports (41%) were considered most important for sustaining friendships. When we break these results down by gender and generation, the picture becomes more interesting still. More than half of 18-50-year-olds agree that beer drinking is important to sustain friendships. This is a sentiment felt most strongly by 18-29-year-olds (53%).
- **The Pub and Life under Lockdown:** The social importance of beer drinking is also reflected in its importance as something that was missed most during lockdown. Over two-thirds (68%) of men agree that the pub is the most enjoyable context for drinking beer, while this increases to almost three-quarters (73%) of 40-49yr olds. Furthermore, more than half (51%) of all surveyed agree that one of the major negative social impacts of lockdown was fewer opportunities to socialise with friends through drinking beer. This was felt most strongly amongst under 50s and especially for those aged 40-49 (63%). For some, the removal of a regular context for socialising through beer consumption led to a realisation of how important beer is to male friendships. Again, this was most pronounced among 40-49-year-olds, with

over a quarter (28%) recognising the importance of beer to their friendships when the taps were turned off. Just shy of a third (31%) of men, and more than a quarter (28%) of women agreed that a lack of opportunity to drink beer with friends had negatively impacted on their mental health. This was most pronounced among men aged 40-49 (39%) - another finding that points to both the significance of social beer drinking for this cohort. A final finding of particular interest in this area is that one in five (22%) of both men and women agree that social beer drinking is the thing that they missed the most during lockdown.

- **Virtual beers:** In the 2020 lockdown, almost a quarter of men (24%) said that they were sharing 'virtual beers' once a week or more with friends, and this was quite consistent across the 18-49 age range. Those above 50 were much less likely to engage in virtual beer drinking with friends. It is noteworthy that this practice was relatively consistent also during the 2021 lockdown, suggesting that 'virtual beers' were not a novelty of our initial lockdown experience but rather a mainstay of the pandemic.
- **A Word in your Beer:** Beer is an important part of both joking relationships and intimate emotional conversations, suggesting a widening of what is considered 'men's talk' in the context of positive beer cultures. Just under half (42%) of all men agree with this statement, which is higher than the proportion of women (31%) who hold the same view. Those in the 30-50 age-range are most likely to agree that beer drinking can be a context for talking about emotional topics. At the same time, joking, jibes, and mockery (or 'banter') were considered an important part of beer drinking for most men (56%), and particularly for 40-49 yrs old (57%). While the proportions are not significantly different, we can see from this data that on balance men more regularly consider beer drinking to be a context for banter than for emotional conversations, but both have their place as part of contemporary conversations over a beer.
- ***Homo Cervisiaences:*** Positive beer culture is particularly important in the social lives and male friendships of men in the age range 40-49. The above key findings suggest that there is a particular demographic of men in the 40-49 age range for whom beer is especially important on a whole range of levels. These men we have dubbed *Homo Cervisiaences*, or 'beer drinking man', in a light-hearted nod to the strong focus that this demographic hold on beer in their lives. *Homo Cervisiaences* are most likely to see beer as important to male friendships, and most likely to agree that beer drinking culture has a positive impact on their wellbeing. Men in this age range also were those to miss beer drinking culture the most during lockdown, even though they participated regularly in drinking 'virtual beers' with friends. Almost a third (32%) of 40-49-year-olds say discerning taste in beer is very important. This may

track against broader trends towards beer 'connoisseurship' in this age cohort. They are also the men most likely to make friends in the pub and to sustain friendships through beer drinking. Almost three quarters (73%) of 40-49-year-olds agree that beer-drinking is important to their wellbeing or positive outlook, linking to friendship. The vast majority of this cohort (77%) also feel most strongly that beer drinking is a source of comfort and stability in a rapidly changing world. Linking to this finding, three-quarters (73%) of 40-49yr olds prefer to drink in the pub – something that they missed the most during successive lockdowns during the pandemic.

### 1.3 Project Rationale, Aims and Objectives

The research provides nuanced narratives of beer consumption in contemporary Britain. Following the research of Dunbar et al (2017) and others, the rationale for the project is that beer drinking should be understood not simply as a hedonic practice or as a means to intoxication, but rather as a complex social and cultural practice that is made meaningful in different ways depending on historical context. Given the rapid changes to British society in recent years, among which are drinking habits and ideas about gender identity, we wanted to explore the links between beer drinking practices and other social changes, specifically focusing on male identities. Much contemporary public and academic discourse associates drinking alcohol with the construction of 'toxic' masculinity centred around aggression, male dominance, and the subordination and objectification of women. The emergence of the 'MeToo' movement in 2018 and more recent concerns about public safety for women rightly create significant public interest in questions of gender inequity in wider society linked to toxic masculinity. This is without question an important issue and one that is legitimately identified as being linked in some cases to certain patterns of beer consumption. Problem or 'disordered' consumption of beer particularly among young men (for example, on US and UK college campuses) has been rightly identified as being part of this culture of toxic masculinity. It is also important to explore other aspects of beer drinking culture that may run counter to a culture of toxic masculinity. Dunbar and colleagues from Oxford University (2017), for example, have noted how what we call 'positive beer drinking culture' is at the heart of feelings of wellbeing associated with a local pub or local belonging. Similarly, the sociologist of beer drinking Thomas Thurnell-Read (2016) points to the positive impact of 'sensible beer drinking' cultures on notions of belonging among real ale drinkers. It is the task of this research to provide an impartial, critical exploration of if and how positive beer drinking cultures emerge for men in contemporary Britain, and to illustrate what potential implications there may be for this kind of social interaction in relation to perceived mental and emotional wellbeing. These are extremely important and topical issues that feed into questions about what it means to be a man in Britain today.

We aim to do this through a mixed-methodological approach (see below) with the following core objectives:

1. to understand better male, beer-related social presentations, interactions and conversations
2. to explore the role of beer consumption in male friendship
3. to consider the potential of beer drinking to provide a positive context for emotional connection and perceived wellbeing among men.

## 1.4 A Word on the Conceptual Framework

Building on the findings from our initial interviews and previous research into beer drinking (e.g. SIRC's *Social and Cultural Aspects of Drinking*), we take as our starting point the notion that beer drinking is never a simple act of imbibing a drink or seeking a means to intoxication. Without any refutation of the significant social and public health issues related with alcohol abuse, our starting point is not that beer drinking is a problem in search of a solution or that the natural starting point for understanding drinking behaviours of any kind is to start with pathology (see Savic et al 2016). On the contrary, beer drinking, as with other symbolic drinking habits, is an essentially social practice that serves to build bonds between those who drink together. Whether done in a ritual context, as was historically the case, or in an informal social context, as in contemporary Britain, beer drinking is a means to social interaction. This is also linked to beer's significance as a focus for reciprocity. Historically, in Britain beer drinking has acted as a form of ritual reciprocity particularly between men and particularly in social drinking contexts like pubs. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss famously articulated the significance of gift exchange practices to human relations: through a variety of exchanges, we are bound to others through an obligation to give, to receive, and to reciprocate in giving of some kind. In this process of reciprocity we are bound to others, with the constant round of exchanges providing a structure to social interactions, friendships, and lasting relationships. Beer drinking is one form of reciprocal exchange that sits at the heart of contemporary British society.

In thinking about beer as a social practice, the anthropologist Mary Douglas puts it well when she suggests,

*The general tenor of the anthropological perspective is that celebration is normal and that in most cultures drinking alcohol is an adjunct to celebration. Drinking is essentially a social act, performed in a recognised social context*

*(Douglas et al 1987:3).*



But why beer? Why not wine, or another alcoholic beverage? Here we frame beer drinking as of central importance to social life for three reasons. Firstly, beer remains a drink of leisure: partly linked to its alcohol content, beer remains a drink that symbolises the end of work and the beginning of time associated with pleasure and friendship. In this sense it has a certain symbolic capital in British society as a marker of the end of the working day or the working week. This also makes beer an essential ingredient in the industrial history of Britain. As work and family life became increasingly separate during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, so did beer drinking become a ritual of relaxation. Beer represents the opposite of toil, and rituals of beer drinking punctuate the difference between work and responsibility, and levity and relaxation. Or, in the words of one of our participants:

*So, we worked on sites back and forth for ten years now. He works for one company, I for another one right now, so Friday night I'll text him. One or the other and go 'right, what a hell of a week that was. Do you want to go for a beer?' We'll go to the [pub name] or something like that and sit in there all night.*

While in other cultures beer might be drunk at any time of day (in Spain, for example, it is perfectly normal to see people drinking beer alongside a snack at around 10:30am), in Britain it is most regularly associated with leisure time. This also explains why it is possible to see Brits drinking beer at any time of the day or night in an airport at the start of a period of leisure we call the holiday.

Linked to this, beer is also symbolic of friendship: whether in the pub, at a friend's house, or online, many people (and many men in particular) consider beer drinking and friendship to be so deeply interconnected as to be almost inseparable (as we show below). Secondly, beer remains accessible: in spite of the recent rise in boutique and craft beer consumption and associated beer 'connoisseurship' (see, for example Thurnell-Read 2018), beer remains the drink of the everyman (and woman). Lager and ales remain overwhelmingly popular choices for men and women (as we show below), and this is the case across a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. As one participant noted,

*It seems to be a great leveller too. This is a university city; you can go into a certain pub and you're mixing with all sorts. If you, if you want to refer to a class system, you have academics, working people, all sorts of people. But the bar atmosphere...it gives licence to .... well bad language is one thing and quite often say things you wouldn't normally say. You just mix and mingle; it is like a tribal thing. you all get together. But then when you leave, you might never get to see that person again until you go back to that pub.*

Thirdly, our particular cultural approach to beer drinking - of buying beer in rounds in the pub, of using beer drinking as a context for joking relationships, levity, and fun (again partly

linked to its alcoholic content) mean that beer remains an ideal substance for oiling the wheels of social engagement. As we suggest here, at the heart of the importance of beer for social life in Britain is its role as an accompaniment to conversation, whether pointless, predictable, or poignant in tone. As the same participant later put it:

*“Well, Beer is a social lubricant; it's well known, that. I can go into a bar full of miserable looking bastards and say: 'right, who wants a beer?' It's a starting point.”*

## 1.5 A Word on the Pandemic

The project took place in the period just before the arrival of the global COVID-19 pandemic and concluded in the final months of 2021. This presented some challenges in terms of data collection for obvious reasons and delayed the progress of the research as we waited for an appropriate time, post-lockdown, to explore pub attendance and changes in beer drinking practice. As a result, the unexpected pandemic context also offered some unique insights into the different experiences of participants drinking beer in different social contexts, from traditional interactions in the pub, to drinking at home, to ‘virtual’ beers online. Changes in our experiences of space, time, and social interaction changed society significantly during the lockdown periods of the pandemic, and this is reflected in shifting beer drinking patterns during this time.

## 1.6 A Word on Alcohol

While we make this point above and below on a number of occasions, it is important to stress that while alcohol consumption is of course an important part of the act of drinking beer (and our data provides evidence of this), our focus is on beer-drinking as a *cultural practice* above and beyond its significance as a means of intoxication. Making the above claims for the social importance of beer in no way acts as an apology to the obvious and well-established health and social problems associated with alcohol abuse in any form. Topiwala et al (2021), for example, have argued that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption that does not impact on brain health. This is the latest in a long history of controversial and often politicised research that either regularly decries the impact of alcohol on health, or, on the other hand, suggests that certain levels of consumption may have a net positive impact on health. Our intention with this research is not to propose any new evidence (and certainly no clinical or statistical evidence) for or against previous claims of the health impacts of alcohol. Rather, our research focuses squarely on beer drinking culture and perceptions among drinkers of their wellbeing. As we show below, there is a subtle and nuanced relationship between perceptions of beer drinking and beer consumption. Our own data show that those who are heavy beer drinkers perhaps have a skewed understanding of its positive impact on their lives, while those with moderate beer

drinking habits are perhaps the most likely to reap the social positives of drinking beer as a way of coming together with friends. The latter reflects what we have in mind when discussing 'positive beer drinking cultures' - those that blend the perceived wellbeing and social benefits of beer drinking with a moderate approach to consumption.

## 1.7 A Word on Methodology

In order to address the aims and objectives of the study, the research adopted a mixed methods approach comprising both qualitative and quantitative methods. The purpose of the qualitative component of the study was to describe and explore the social worlds of beer drinkers and to ascertain the extent to which beer drinking and the contexts in which it takes place provide conduits for the formation and maintenance of friendships. The qualitative research involved both group discussions, conversations with friendship pairs and in-depth one-to-one interviews. A total of 58 participants contributed to this component of the project. Within this cohort were participants from a broad range of ages (23 to 70 years-old) and geographical location (Oxford, Coventry, Manchester, London and Edinburgh). The majority of participants were male (M=45, F=13).

In the early stages of the qualitative phase (December 2019 to February 2020) these interactions with participants were in-situ, in pubs and bars. In response to the lockdown restrictions introduced in 2020 and 2021, the majority of the remaining interviews and group discussions were held remotely over video platforms. This was necessitated by both the lack of open venues, but also in order to respect the preferences of participants, some of whom, understandably, were cautious about meeting with researchers face-to-face. During the latter stages of the work, the sample was supplemented by individual interviews and small group discussions held in participants' homes.

All interviews were semi-structured and guided by a standardised discussion protocol. Semi-structured interviews enable specific questions to be asked whilst also giving space for interviewees to raise their own thoughts "rather than being restricted by researchers' preconceived notions about what is important" (Berry, 2002:681). The use of a semi-structured style also allowed us to gain the maximum benefit from the participants as "semi-structured interviews allow respondents the chance to be the experts and to inform the research" (Leech 2002:668). Subject to necessary consents, interviews were recorded using encrypted digital recorders and/or recording facilities incorporated within video conferencing platforms. Where participants preferred not to be recorded, researchers took contemporaneous notes. Recordings, field notes and researcher observations were then collated and incorporated into the corpus of materials for analysis.

The qualitative data derived from interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns with qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a systematic approach comprising distinct stages that start with data familiarisation and leading through a process of initial code generation, the construction and refinement of themes through to the production of a report. To ensure that this analysis was robust the research team worked closely together throughout the fieldwork period, feeding back headline findings to each other as sessions were conducted, and continually updating our approach and thinking as perspectives on beer and masculinity were developed. The analytical process was further aided by the use of NVivo qualitative research software. Analysis of the qualitative data also informed the design of questions for a national survey; the quantitative component of the research study.

While qualitative research and case studies provide detail and nuance that surveys cannot, purely qualitative methodologies, comprising relatively small samples, can and should never claim to provide findings that are generalisable or representative. To address these issues and add rigour and validity to the research, quantitative methods were also incorporated into the project design. An independent online survey specialist, Dynata, was commissioned to script, host and collect survey data in support of this work. Initially, the intention was to launch the survey in Q4 of 2020. Again, COVID restrictions necessitated a revision to this schedule. Given that bar and pub closures (both temporary and permanent) were likely to impact significantly on participants experiences of drinking beer and the contexts in which it was consumed and shared, the research team decided to reschedule this component of the research towards the end of the life of the project (Q3, 2021) to allow time for social lives to return to some semblance of 'normality'.

Derived from the interview material a preliminary set of 21 survey questions was developed and tested by the research team in collaboration with the polling organisation. The survey went live in mid-Sept 2021 and returned 1,000 completes before the end of that month. The resultant dataset comprises responses from across all 12 regions of the UK (including the devolved nations) with a broad range of age (18 to 60+ years old) and Social Economic Classification (SEC – A1 to DE). All respondents were self-reported beer drinkers (consumption varied from 'less than once per month' to '3 times per week or more'). No quotas were set for the sample with regards to respondent sex; rather the sample was allowed to 'fall out' naturally. As a consequence, the sample is slightly skewed towards Male participants (56%) than Female (44%).

## 1.8 Drinking Beer in Historical and Cross-cultural perspective: Change and Continuity

To return to our starting point, beer drinking has been an important part of human civilisation for more than five thousand years. The significance of beer drinking has changed significantly over time, and it is important to consider these changes in order to put contemporary practices into the appropriate context. Others have provided a detailed and fascinating history of beer brewing and consumption (Hockings and Dunbar 2019), and it is not our task to reproduce this long history here. It is perhaps enough to reiterate that the historical record of beer making and beer drinking points to its cross-cultural significance as a medium for social interaction, for ritual practices, that reinforce particular social relations, and as a drink that holds important symbolic importance in different cultural contexts. If we zoom into the history of beer drinking in modern Britain, Beer drinking, and particularly beer drinking in pubs and taverns, has been an essential part of male (and to a lesser extent female) friendship in Britain for centuries. However, these drinking contexts have been broadly 'homosocial' worlds, mainly made up exclusively of men, until more recent changes in beer consumption and culture since the 1970s. Given the age range of our sample in this research, it is worth considering what broad changes have taken place both in beer drinking and notions of masculinity since the second half of the 20th century. For those older participants in our research (60 and above), early experiences of masculinity and beer drinking would have been shaped first by a more traditional post-war era. Signs of changing notions of masculinity would emerge with the counterculture movement of the 1960s and concurrent 'waves' of the feminist movement, but while pop and rock icons like David Bowie were blurring the boundaries of gender identity, for many masculinity remained traditional or hegemonic in its imagining as heterosexual, linked to physical strength, competition and the avoidance of open shows of weakness or emotion. To a certain extent, beer drinking may have acted as a context for reinforcing this stereotype of masculinity, with men's 'homosocial' worlds acting as a feedback loop for men to perform traditional masculinity to one another in a way that would be validating of this kind of male identity. This was the formative context for our participants in the 50-60 age range. Traditional masculine values would remain at the heart of mainstream popular imaginings of masculinity throughout the 1980s, when current 40-49 year-olds were growing up, from Hollywood stars to the hypermasculinity of 'Yuppie' competition on the stock markets. A more complex counterculture of masculinity was emerging in the growing visibility of gay culture and in various subcultural movements that were blurring the boundaries of gender identity. Interestingly, in the 1990s, when our 30-49 year-olds were children, teens, and young adults, we see the emergence both of 'lad culture' and its association with beer drinking, as well as 'metrosexuality' or a more diverse range of ways of performing physical 'maleness'.

As we move into the 21st century, arguably we see a blending of countercultural movements that 'trouble' the boundaries of gender identity, and more mainstream understandings of what it means to be masculine. For those in the 18-24 age range and older, this means that contemporary masculinity exists in an interesting space that at once embraces diversity and complexity - including notions of masculinity that incorporate feminist positions - and move away from traditional 'macho' cultures - while at the same time championing much more traditional ideas of what it means to be a man. The aforementioned public discussion of gender and sexual inequity in contemporary British society is proof that certain forms of masculinity remain toxic and can reproduce inequities, disadvantage, and violence towards both men and women. At the same time, men are working out new forms of masculinity that intend to address these concerns and situate men in the world in ways that reflect the changing tides of contemporary society. One of our aims is to explore what is the position of beer drinking in this changing idea of what it means to identify as male or masculine in today's Britain.

Beer drinking culture is both part of the past and the present and future of masculinity as it changes in British society. Beer consumption is now, happily, a part of social interaction between men and women and part of family-friendly activity in pubs across the UK. And yet beer drinking remains a central ritual activity in the friendships of many men. Whether nipping down to the local pub to see old friends and regulars, or finally coming true on a promise with a more distant friend to 'grab a beer', beer drinking serves as the facilitator for a kind of social bonding that does not regularly take place in the same way online or through more formal occasions for social coming-together. The surge of interest in craft beer also indicates an increased interest in beer drinking and beer brewing and craftsmanship, particularly among a male (and younger male) audience. Whether craft beer, traditional ale, or corporate, big-brand lager, in the context of increasingly busy lives beer drinking remains a sacred ritual of relaxation and pause.

More important still, beer consumption is regularly accompanied by *talk*: it is the facilitator for communication that may not occur between men in other settings. Whether in the form of light-hearted banter or in more intense, heart-to-heart discussions of important personal issues, beer consumption may offer the chance for men to open up with one another. One important line of inquiry in this research is to interrogate the extent to which contemporary beer drinking conversations reproduce different forms of 'men's talk' (Gough and Edwards 1998) - the ways that men talk, predominantly to other men, in order to construct ideas of what counts as appropriate or acceptable 'masculine' behaviour. It is important to note at this stage that beer consumption is not exclusively about male friendships; of course, it is not. However, the intention of this research is to focus specifically on male friendships *because* of the broader concern with masculinity in society. This necessitates also talking to

women *about* men and about their perceptions of how beer consumption fits, whether positively or negatively, into women's experiences of men and masculinity. Our research also points to some interesting overlaps between how men and women experience beer drinking as part of their social lives, and some intergenerational differences that suggest more difference *between* men of different ages than between those of different genders in the same age ranges. This, and the other interesting findings of the data collection process, we now turn to.

## 2. Findings

### 2.1 Regularity

What is clear from our research is that beer drinking remains a cornerstone of everyday life for the majority of men. More than half (52%) of survey participants (men and women) suggested that they drink beer twice a week or more. This was much more pronounced among men: 64% of males drink beer twice a week or more compared with 37% of women. Interestingly, 40% of those drinking non-alcoholic beer also drink more than once a week, suggesting a complication of the relationship between regularity of consumption and alcohol content. While there was not much of note in the generational difference in regularity, 40-49-year-olds are most likely to drink once a week (59%), while 45% of 18-29-year-olds drink once or twice a week or more. Those born in the 1990s (30-39-year-olds) drink the most regularly, with 23% drinking three times a week or more.

Our interview data revealed some interesting alternative beer drinking cultures that instead focused around much more episodic drinking. For friends who lived further apart or who didn't see one another regularly, the prospect of a long weekend focused around beer drinking became a concentrated event, often meaning that less beer drinking took place in the run up to the event. Some framed this in terms of weekends away, seeing sports teams or favourite bands, but always with beer drinking as the main activity of the time spent together. One participant, in Coventry, described planning for a trip to Madrid:

*Dan: Yeah, it is, is this is often quite often the only way these days we stay in touch is organizing, on a WhatsApp group, some sort of weekend away somewhere. You sometimes it's birthdays. We've all recently celebrated some big, important birthdays. Forty's that is just like [name] says, gigs and stuff. We are, there's a WhatsApp group at the moment as [name] found one that's in Madrid.*

*Ian: And we had to put it out there because I didn't think anyone would sign it. And now I'm looking at bloody places to stay. But that's how it happens.*

*Dan: it's something that either side of it probably takes up like two months because that would then be the centre point of a good couple of months of your calendar that you look forward to. And then that you're going to have on the beer for the weekend and it's going to be a month or two. You decide, actually, I'm probably not going to do too much because I've got that. And that then becomes what you're going to do in the whole two- or three-month period. You're going to go away with this group and it's going to be on the beer for two or three days. You're going to see each other and that becomes what you've done in that whole quarter or season or whatever.*



There are, then, different ways to think about how beer features ‘regularly’ in the social lives of men. For some, it is about drinking together with male friends regularly each week, while for others it is about drinking beer as the regular point of ending the working day or working week. For others, beer drinking takes on an episodic regularity that reflects their social or spatial distance from old friends. Episodic drinking links to the cycle of gift exchange or reciprocity that underpins social relations, with old friends keeping an implicit or explicit record of episodic drinking, keeping tabs, as it were, on when the friendship may need to be replenished by another social event linked to beer consumption.

## 2.2 Taste

In spite of the trend towards a more diverse range of beer drinking habits, and towards a more nuanced experience of ‘taste’ in beer, the old staples of the bar remain the most popular. Among survey respondents, most women drink lager (49%), while for men, 37% showed a preference for lager, 20% for craft beer, 17% for real ale, and 12% drink high alcohol content beer (which, it should be noted, is not necessarily distinct from some of the other categories given the high content of some craft beers and lagers). Counter to the broad trend towards the growing popularity of non-alcoholic beers, this was not a strong preference for either gender, with only 5% claiming this as their drink of choice. While there was no significant difference over generations of men for craft beer drinking, broadly speaking it is men under 50 in the sample who appreciate craft beers. The over-50s are the biggest lager drinkers, with more than half preferring this type of beer (56%).

Among our interview participants, perspectives varied but broadly reflect the above survey data, with points of nuance linking taste to context and alcohol content. One example was the exchange between Dan and Tom:

*Tom: there’s always a sort of hype now with connoisseurship, whether it’s gin now or whatever it was ten years ago. For me, it doesn’t hold that much importance.*

*Dan: If I know I’m going to go out and have a few beers, I’ll deliberately pick a lower percentage beer. But at home, I’d don’t pay attention to percent, because I’ll only have one. I do like trying different beers and can taste the difference. But I’m not snooty about it. I know what I like... Craft beers have an element of performance.*

Returning to the significance of beer as a drink that is for the ‘everyman’, we see a shift in our data that is generationally defined when it comes to taste in beer. Here we are referring to the notion that one may develop a discerning taste for beer, and that, by extraction, having a discerning taste is important to the quality of beer consumption as a context for social interaction. Among under 50s taste in beer is quite or very important, especially for

40-49 years where more than half 52% agree it is important. More noteworthy still was that almost a third (32%) of 40-49-year-olds say discerning taste in beer is very important. This may track against broader trends towards beer 'connoisseurship' in this age cohort, especially in craft beer culture appreciation of 'good' taste in beer may be of higher social value (Thurnell-Read 2018). We may also infer a classed element to discerning taste in beer: more than half (57%) of those in higher socio-economic groups (AB) note the importance of taste. Overall, just under half (48%) of men agree that taste in beer is important, with slightly fewer women (35%) agreeing.

## 2.3 Beer drinking and male friendships

We have established from the survey data that many men drink regularly - several times a week - and that most prefer more traditional types of beer such as lager and ale. We have also established that regular beer drinking is also a pattern for a large proportion of those drinking non-alcoholic beer. What else, then, might link these regular patterns of beer consumption? As demonstrated in our interview data, the survey data also shows that beer drinking remains an integral part of male friendships for many men. The majority of those who drink most regularly (more than three times a week or more) are most likely to see beer drinking as important to male friendships (57%). Beer drinking is considered important or very important for male friendships by a significant proportion of the sample overall. One in five or 20% of all men in the survey agree with this statement, compared with 1 in 10 (11%) of women. This is particularly marked among men in the 30-49 age range, where a quarter agree that beer drinking is important or very important for their male friendships. Beer consumption appears least important for amity among the over 50s, with 40% disagreeing that beer is important to their friendships. Those drinking high content beer are the most likely to agree (62%), followed by craft beer drinkers (37%). It is interesting to note that 25% of non-alcoholic beer drinkers agree that drinking beer is important to their male friendships, a figure that is higher than the average for all men surveyed in the research. In terms of the gender specificity of beer drinking and male friendship, it is important to note that 25% of women also agree that beer drinking is important to their male friendships - higher than the male average and much higher than the average for men over 50. This may reflect that for the women surveyed, social interactions with male friends more often take place in contexts that involve beer consumption, such as the pub.

Some of our interview participants offered a historical angle on understanding the importance of beer drinking for male friendships. Where beer drinking seemed to have *always* been part of what drew people together, or what defined their lives as teenagers growing up, it was hard to think about friendship without thinking about beer culture (even when not drinking). As one person put it:

*It's always been there, it's always part... On [name] Camp that was with most of them it was the disco, having a drink, or trying to get a drink because we were underage or doing whatever. And then I worked in a pub in town. So, they all came to pubs I worked at... Yeah, so it's always been there. It's always kind of intertwined. You can't separate. I don't think anyone's got a particular problem, but you couldn't separate the two. I think you'd be very alien in the same way that you can't separate lots of things, that they just they just go together. Yeah. quite a few of them came to my birthday last year because we live a bit far out. Some people drank, some people didn't. So, it's not it's not like you won't see each other [without beer], but I can't imagine we'd go to a coffee shop and go to another coffee shop and another coffee shop and another coffee shop and end up in another coffee shop, just played music. That just wouldn't work. I don't think.*

## 2.4 Mental health and Well being

While here we make no claim whatsoever for the clinical benefits of beer drinking related to any aspect of good health, there is a clear perception among beer drinkers that it has a positive impact on their outlook. A considerable majority (60%) of all respondents agree that beer drinking is good for their mental health. This increased to almost three quarters (73%) of 40-49-year-olds and 65% of 30-39-year-olds. Men are more likely to perceive a positive impact of beer consumption on their wellbeing (66%), but the majority of women (52%) also agree with the assumption that beer drinking has a positive impact on outlook. Of particular note is the fact that this perception of wellbeing is not directly linked to alcohol. Four in ten (40%) non-alcoholic beer drinkers agree with the statement that beer drinking has a positive impact on their perceived wellbeing. Craft beer drinkers feel strongly about this too: 68% agree (perhaps signalling a different kind of belonging that comes with beer connoisseurship). That said, those most likely to see a perceived positive impact of beer drinking on wellbeing are those drinking high content beers (83%). This perhaps raises a concern about the distinction between perceived well-being and alcohol intake. While our research did not address a 'tipping point' *per se* in terms of where moderate consumption meets a positive impact on perceived well-being, this would be an interesting future area of inquiry. Most likely to agree about the positive impact on wellbeing are those in higher (AB) socio-economic groups with almost three quarters (74%) seeing this link. In England, 70% of both men and women agree that there is a positive link between beer drinking and perceived wellbeing. There are important links to be made with this finding and the interview data on friendships and male talk, outlined below. As two interview participants summarised it, it may in fact be the relatively low alcohol content of beer that allows it to slowly nurture friendship and closeness, as proxies for wellbeing, over an evening:

*Jeff: Well, what a beer does more than any other alcoholic drink is you can sup it. You can just sit there or at one pint sit down, if it's even on your own or with just one other mate and you don't necessarily feel like you have to [neck it/get on it] ... your shorts, whiskey, you think automatically go to bomb it. OK, maybe wine... you might feel that you should order a bottle of wine rather than a glass of wine, but with a beer, you get your beer, whatever it may be, you sit down at the table and you just sort of talk. And you're not necessarily there just to get drunk...*

*Steve: You are there just to catch up with that person, whoever it may be. And, the beer itself just becomes an extension, shall we say, of that social interaction. And you may only have the one when you say, look, I'm going to shoot off or whatever and not stay out tonight. And other alcoholic drinks don't have that association. Other alcoholic drinks seem to have an association of you drink them to get drunk.*

## 2.5 Making and sustaining friendships

Having established that a large proportion of both men and women perceive that positive beer drinking cultures impact positively on their wellbeing, we were also interested to explore how this 'well-being' might manifest. Above we make the case that beer is important to many male friendships -and is it not controversial to assume that friendship is generally an important part of wellbeing. It is important to highlight that while beer drinking is an important part of social life, it is not the most important means by which most people *make* friends. The most important place for both genders making friends is through hobbies (43%) and sports (39%). Drinking in pubs was the third most likely context overall for making friends (39%), followed closely by childcare/parenting (33%). If we focus in on men in particular, however, the picture changes: roughly half of under 50s agree that drinking beer in pubs or bars is how they make friends. This is more pronounced still for 40-49-year-olds (51%). Correlative to our finding above about over 50s giving less importance to beer drinking in friendship, these were the men least likely to make friends in the pub. That said, just under half (47%) of all men agree that drinking in pubs is an important way to make friends. While the figure is lower for women, it is still significant: Just under one third (29%) make most friends in the pub.

As with perceived feelings of wellbeing, there may be an interesting tipping point between how easily friends are made and regularity of consumption. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who agree that beer is important to their male friendships are also most likely to feel confident about making friends and this increases the more one drinks regularly. Frequent drinkers find it easy (58%) and those drinking high content beer find it most easy of all (71%).

While, as above, beer drinking does not constitute the principle means of *making* friends, it is key in *sustaining* friendships. Hobbies (45%), then drinking beer (42%), then sports (41%) were considered most important for sustaining friends. When we break these results down by gender and generation, the picture becomes more interesting still. More than half of 18-50 yr olds agree that beer drinking is important to sustain friendships. This is a sentiment felt most strongly by 18-29 year-olds (53%). Just under half (48%) of all men and a third (35%) of all women agree that beer drinking is a context for keeping friendships going.

Of course, it is also important to explore the interactions between the different activities that make and sustain friendships for men. Our interview data, demonstrated the obvious links between, for example, sports and beer drinking. As one male participant noted,

*Me and beer is drinking on weekends away with these guys, whether that's a few gigs or in some of the cases where we've got away to cities home and sometimes abroad as well. And football matches is a big one. If we go to a football match that might involve a day where we have a couple of beers or it might be a part of a weekend away where we've then had a few more.*

Another participant made a similar point:

*For me, [beer drinking with male friends] it's pretty major, actually, because it's my life. The very fact that I managed to get these guys together for me speaks volumes about what I do socially. I have other social life [sic] as well. But [beer drinking] it's a mainstay, especially during rugby season and, you know, it's pulls us together...It's all wrapped up in the same package really. If you're in the pub, watching sport with your mates, having a beer. That's the thing, that's the complete package.*

### Fleeting best friends

The above data suggests, then, that beer can both make and sustain male friendships, often for many years, and even when there are considerable gaps (see also Maclean 2016). A contrary interesting point from our qualitative data is that beer drinking also facilitates friendships that are momentarily important but fleeting. This resonates with an archetypal 'pub friendship' that may only last an afternoon or evening but which resonates long after. One participant described this kind of fleeting best friend in the following terms:

*If I am in London, I like certain pubs that I like to go into on my own and have a beer and I know I will have a good time. You listen for a bit, Beer loosens the lips, and you slip in there with a bit of a crippler and you are their mate - be only for that afternoon, not for life. You are not going to swap Facebook addresses; you're not going to do anything like that. You are my mate; you are my best mate at this point in time.*

## 2.6 Round-buying and reciprocity

The fact that beer drinking culture remains an important arena for sustaining friendship leads us to another question: how does this work? In what ways does beer drinking culture keep friendships alive? In our conceptual framing we drew particular attention to the importance of beer drinking as an essential form of reciprocity in British culture. If the give-and-take of reciprocal exchange is an integral part of social interaction, then beer is a particularly significant means of representing this reciprocity. The survey results reflect this through a reflection on the specific practice of round-buying. This practice was considered most important to more than half of 40-49yr olds (52%), and it is interesting to reflect on how lifestyle in this stage of life may complicate the nature of reciprocity in round-buying. In the busy balance of work, relationships, and family life, for example, those in the 40-49 age range may be more likely to *delay* reciprocity across multiple beer drinking stints. One friend may buy a 'quick' beer for another, knowing that in a few weeks' time the round will be repaid. Round-buying is recognised across the generations as an important aspect of maintaining friendships over time. Even in the 60+ age range, a third (34%) agree. Again, it is noteworthy that there is no great discrepancy in perspectives on round-buying according to gender. Just under half of all men 49% of men agree, while the same is true for 37% of women. While this might reveal something of the gender politics of round-buying in British beer drinking culture (eg that men might be more likely to dominate the purchasing of beer), it also shows that men and women alike see the importance of this act of reciprocity as part of friendships.

In our qualitative data, many provided stories of the complexities of round-buying. Some noted that 'everyone knows' the person in a friendship group less likely to buy a round; and time, this lack of attendance to the rules of reciprocity can impact negatively on friendships. As one person explained, smiling:

*A guy when you're at a bar, he would drink, be a part of rounds, but he would never pay. So, he was nicknamed crime. As in crime never pays.*

On the other hand, participants noted that the importance of round-buying - of engaging in the unwritten rules of beer reciprocity - could transcend any other social bump in the road while drinking. One participant, David, put it this way:

*David: I think it's also, you know, it's because all they will talk about it's just football. You can't have a wide-ranging conversation with all sorts of mad stuff like I can with these guys. We've had a full-blown argument over politics in the bar, you know, but it didn't mean anything, really.*

*Joe:...But we're still buying each other beers while we have it out....*

*David: you can be raging at each other, but the exchange of beers is something that's going on anyway - a mark of friendship.*

Back in the pub with Jack, he recounted a story from his army days:

*I was in the Army...buying rounds [and noticed] every time we got a round, we bought one for the RSM. And of course, you're fortified. It's does up the level of bravery. So, my mates said: "Go and tell him ". So, I went up to him and said: "Good evening, sir. The other Sergeant and I have been buying rounds you have been receiving a drink every time, do you reckon it is your round now. " he used to be a wrestler. He grabbed me by the front of my shirt, and he lifted me off my feet and he said, nobody tells me when it is my round'. 'Yes. I just didn't want anybody saying any disparaging remarks about you'. He said: "in my office 9:00 tomorrow morning'. Anyway, he did buy a round...*

Others described what came to be an embodied 'rhythm' to round-buying between friends a kind of pace setting that would mean all friends in a group would maintain the same pace of beer drinking. As David, above, put it:

*I think if you are in a round situation you do pay more attention ...it might be different here where you can [get one in]. but you tend to keep an eye on it and say: 'come on, keep up, you're next...*

*Jo: ...it's also a case of because you are socialising together, you sync up with each other.*

## 2.7 Alcohol content

A common assumption about beer drinking is that its function as an alcoholic drink is paramount to its importance for individuals. However, our data produced an ambivalent message about the importance of alcohol content. For many, it was indeed an important part of their choice to drink beer with friends, while an almost equal number disagree. Just over one third (37%) agree that alcohol content is important or very important to their beer consumption, while a similar proportion (39%) agree that it is not important. In the interview data above and below, participants make reference to the importance of alcohol as part of the beer drinking experience, but for some it is the slow-and-steady pace of moderate alcohol-content beer that allows it to serve its purpose as a social lubricant.

## 2.8 Beer and Gender Identity

As explored in the section on historical context, beer drinking in Britain has been for many years a 'homosocial' act: an act that brings principally men together with other men, often in spaces that exclude the presence of women. We have noted the significant shifts in the spectrum of gendered identities in that have taken place in recent years. While the scope of what counts as 'masculinity' is now much wider than in the past, many men still consider beer drinking to be an important part of their gender identity, however defined. A third (34%) of all men agree that beer is an important part of their gender identity. More noteworthy is the fact that the majority of men (66%) therefore do not make a close association between beer drinking and gender identity. At the generational level beer is considered important or very important by between 30-40% of those under 50, but the importance of beer to gender identity drops off significantly for those aged 50-59 (16%) and 60+ (6%). Beer is considered important to gender identity for just under one in five women (19%). For both genders, beer consumption is considered most important to ideas of gender identity in London (30%).

What is clear from the data is that beer drinking remains a 'homosocial' activity for the majority of men. However, a similarly large proportion of men surveyed (49%) drink in mixed company, further complicating the picture of how beer drinking serves as a context for friendship in general as well as for male friendship. As one interview participant suggested,

*Whether you are a guy or a woman it much exactly the same. OK. Doesn't matter. A friend of mine I've known for 20 years. And we're still saying we really do need to catch up. I know what's going to happen is that we'll catch up and she will end up missing the last train back to [name] and staying on my sofa because she does this every single time she's here.*

Just over half (51%) of men agree they mostly drink with people of the same gender/sex, while just under one quarter (23%) of women agree with this statement. This suggests, then, that beer drinking as an experience for women is much more likely to be in the company of mixed genders. The fact that a large proportion of men still only drink with other men suggests that beer consumption acts largely as a context for 'men's talk' as suggested above - talk between men that reflects and reinforces ideas about masculinity.

Some of our interview participants reflected the interesting tension drawn out in the survey data about beer drinking contexts as mixed gender in some cases, but also closely associated with 'men's talk' and masculine cultures. As some of our Coventry participants suggested:

*Ian: Just like when, if we go out in a mixed group, it's hard because they a lot of times the girls don't get the kind of sense of humour and the banter that comes out of*



*going out. And it seems that we can we can have a laugh and a joke and we can kind of wind each other up and then we can have the laugh and then it's left, often forgotten about or just move on to the next topic and then someone else is going to get in the neck or something happens.*

*Dan: And it's quite hilarious. What I've seen, women try to do banter or try to get involved. But they always...kind of hit the wrong tone or it gets a bit kind of close to the bone. And I don't understand what well, it's just different. So, you kind of try and stay clear of that because you just don't want to get to say something that will get you in trouble, I think is the best way.*

It was evocative to reflect on the way that men articulate their own understanding of what counts as 'men's talk' and banter, and how they interpret this as being something that is difficult to translate across gender identities. This speaks to the notion that there are hidden, even perhaps 'secret' rules to the kinds of talk that men engage in when drinking beer; and that there is an assumption that in some cases those of another gender are not able to enter into this discourse without the risk of transgressing the subtle rules of engagement. This is far from an assertion of the truth of this assumption, but the fact that men see the unique quality of their interaction over beer as being essentially 'male' is telling of the significant link between beer drinking cultures and masculinity.

## 2.9 Beer drinking, talking about emotional topics, and 'banter'

### Emotional topics

Linking to our finding above, we were interested to explore the extent to which talking about emotional topics is associated with beer drinking culture. Traditionally 'men's talk' has not included intimate or emotionally open conversations, as this kind of emotional engagement might normally be considered to run counter to an ideal of 'hard' masculinity. It is interesting to note that our data show something more nuanced. Nearly half of all survey participants agree that beer drinking is an important context for talking about emotional topics. Just under half (42%) of all men agree with this statement which is higher than the proportion of women (31%) who hold the same view. Those in the 30-50 age-range are most likely to agree that beer drinking can be a context for talking about emotional topics, perhaps suggesting a shift among men in this age range in terms of what may fall within acceptable 'men's talk'. In terms of class differences in perceptions of this aspect of beer consumption behaviour, those in higher socio-economic groupings (AB) are most likely to see beer drinking as a context for talking about emotional topics (53%) and twice as likely as those in lower socio-economic groupings (DE) (26%). This may indicate a classed difference in the relationship between beer drinking and friendship, but also between masculinity and class.

Some interview participants suggested that bringing up serious or emotional topics was a subtle and nuanced process that depended on group size and context. In one conversation, participants recognised the tension between wanting to open up to one another, and feeling the weight of unwritten rules that make this socially unacceptable for men. The length of this interview excerpt is justified by the poignant message that those talking make:

*James: I think if you meet somebody on a more serious note, you share a beer. I wouldn't do that in a group. So, I think I'd phone [name] and see if he wanted to go for a beer. then I'll probably, after a couple of beers, say what I was going to say. you get nonsense out of the way, you say, 'look, yeah, shit happens. And this is what has happened'.*

*Andy: And sometimes you'll go home, quite often, and wish they had discussed it earlier. So that's when the next day you might send your mate a text message ' what's going on'. So, it's quite often after the event...*

*Interviewer: You just get a little window on it.*

*James: Yeah. You go, you've got a little bit of a light. You know, Jesus, he said so and so, I'll check him out tomorrow. Don't do it in the pub because he's going to have to talk about it in front of all of his mates.*

*Andy: this goes back to the whole the mental health issues and men. it's OK not to be OK. Yeah. Because men are notorious for never talking. And I was one of these people just never spoke about it.*

*James: So, we don't talk about it.*

*Andy:...and it's the rule, you just said: "I don't want to talk about that in the pub, or not in the pub, you don't want to hear it, so you just don't talk about it...I've got my own stuff, so I don't want to hear yours. I'm not interested. So, no one talks about it and then they wonder why someone might go away and commit suicide. Because the rule is you don't talk about it.*

*Interviewer:... so, your saying people might give you a little inkling, but not actually say, they just suggest it and then think you might pick up on it. Andy: but it's up to you to pick it up.*

*James: Yeah. You have to be receptive to it.*

*Andy: but of course, if you're completely ignorant of it, as many are, it's kind of just going to sail over their heads*

*James: it seems okay now. you know, let's talk tomorrow. You might never do it. Yeah, but at least there's as you say, the little windows can open suddenly, and I think it's getting better.*

Another group of male friends shared a similar kind of sentiment about what they described as the 'calculus' of a conversation that reveals sensitive topics:

*Tom: It's not like I feel like I need to ask a friend out for a drink to open up with them. It's to catch up personally, and go wherever the conversation goes.*

*James: Friends who I don't see often, they'll use a drink as an excuse to meet in a way we seldom do. The context acts as an excuse to have a sensitive conversation.*

*Luke: We'll talk about personal stuff straight away, then as the beer wears in, the laughter and silliness will start.*

*James: when someone brings up something I don't expect them to talk about, you do a sort of calculus, how to be kind? And beer is a part of that calculus...I've not been so drunk that I've aired my darkest secrets. But maybe I've slipped and been a bit more honest than I should have been.\*

*Luke: I've definitely had conversations in a pub where afterwards I've thought, I'm so glad we talked about that, I feel so much better.*

## Banter

We have also noted, however, the importance of beer consumption as a context for levity, joking relationships, and 'banter'. Joking, jibes, and mockery (or 'banter') were considered an important part of beer drinking for most men (56%), and particularly for 40-49 yrs old (57%). While the proportions are not significantly different, we can see from this data that on balance men more regularly consider beer drinking to be a context for ribaldry and banter than for emotional conversations, but both have their place as part of conversations over beer. The net finding here, then, is that 'men's talk' around beer is more complex than previously thought. Beer drinking can initiate conversations that may be puerile, predictable, or poking fun, but men may share intimate thoughts and concerns over a pint.

In our interviews, the importance of joking relationships was very clear. While perhaps strange from a different cultural perspective, the men interviewed had a nuanced understanding of 'taking the piss' as a sign of social intimacy while drinking beer. The below interaction between Steve and Jack demonstrates this:

*Steve: As long as there is a beer on the table, then they are fair game. If I am talking to people, then they will have to put up with my quick-witted repartee.*

*Jack: Yeah. If you're in the room, he will rip the piss out of you and you take it, and you give it back..and that's part of that, what makes friendship.*

*Steve: Yeah. Yeah. Because it becomes a social exercise for want of a better word.*

*Jack: I find it funny because when I first started coming, four and a half years ago I met you [name] through [name] and people like [name]. The first few times. I came here, I didn't know [name] from Adam. And so, I didn't know about his fair game thing...But once you realised that he's just taking the piss and he does that to everybody, you know, you've made it. You know, that's just normal.*

*Interviewer: it's that argument that if you take the piss so you're close enough...*

*Jack: Just got to be close enough to give it back.*

Jack is a good example of the fine balance between banter and jocularly as elements of men's talk while consuming beer. Jack's perspective is clearly that 'emotional' topics are unlikely because male friendships in the pub involve a certain amount of 'bravado'; but at the same time, he notes the positive impact on feelings of wellbeing that social interaction in the pub can have. As he later remarked in the same interview:

*Interviewer: do you ever find that like this kind of situation that leads to more, a heart to heart?*

*Jack: I think that's a male thing, you're coming to a pub and you're going to put on the bravado. And even though you may be hurting, you probably pretend you're not until you get into a situation, maybe with a really good mate say, that you are actually going to crack.*

*Interviewer:...if you're down, then you don't necessarily need to have deep discussion with someone about it. But the banter is actually what brings that opportunity...*

*Jack: you know, a crap day at work say, end of the day you walk in here within about 20 minutes, you're back again and you go: 'yeah, it doesn't matter'. Yes, it's gone now. It's history.*

## Beer drinking, comfort, and certainty

A connected theme emerging from the qualitative phase of the research was participants' discussions of certainty and uncertainty. Social scientists make the compelling claim that we live in a VUCA world - Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. VUCA conditions may be articulated in the rise of populist and unlikely political figures such as Donald Trump, in

drastic political and economic change as in the case of Brexit, in the current moment of environmental crisis, and of course in the uncertainty and profound change wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Amidst all this change, it is perhaps no surprise that people are looking for ways to reconnect and reconvene in spaces and through practices that are familiar and comforting to them. We were interested to know if beer drinking presented one of these comforting, stable practices in a world of change. The results were striking: of survey participants, the large majority (64%) agreed that beer drinking culture was a source of certainty and comfort. This was felt most strongly by those aged 40-49 at 77%, while 69% of all men and 58% of women see beer drinking as a source of comfort and certainty. On one hand, we might consider how certainty can be found in the predictable rituals and routines of beer consumption. Men and women alike are familiar and comfortable with the 'rules of engagement' that give shape to beer drinking practices, and there is stability in knowing these rules and acting them out. This may link in important ways to perceptions of the positive impact that beer drinking has on wellbeing - that men and women (but particularly men) find happiness in the predictability of beer drinking culture. We can add a critical angle here by suggesting that there is some risk that this certainty comes from retreating to more traditional framing of masculinity that may be exclusionary or even hostile to women. Or, conversely, we might consider this certainty and predictability to relate to the well-worn habits of beer drinking in familiar company. While some may consider hearing the same old stories at the bar a source of boredom or stasis, many in the survey seem to find happiness and comfort in this predictability. Linking to the continued primacy of the pub and the significance of drinking with friends, we might call this the 'Cheers' effect - when drinking beer, people want to go where everyone knows their name (see also Dunbar 2017). As one participant suggested,

*I know I can go into [pub] when I am in that part of town and know someone, especially the publican. It's like a comfort zone.*

It is revealing to link this finding about the 'comfort zone' of beer drinking (particularly in pubs), the link to beer drinking and friendship, and the concomitant link between beer drinking and perceived wellbeing. There is a clear sense emerging from the data that in a world of rapid change and uncertainty, beer drinking with friends in familiar places provides a kind of predictability that, rather than being boring or repetitive, is deeply comforting.

## 3.0 Findings Continued: Beer Drinking Contexts

### 3.1 The Primacy of The Pub

This more complex picture of how men interact while drinking beer leads us to the question of *where* these interactions take place. Our findings on contexts for beer drinking and friendship are perhaps not overly surprising: over half (68%) of men agree that the pub is the most enjoyable context for drinking beer, while this increases to almost two thirds (73%) of 40-49yr olds. This is also a view shared by more than half of women (57%) of women. Least likely to agree are 18-29yr olds, but this still represents more than half of this cohort (56%).

Beyond the atmosphere and conviviality of the pub, some of our interview participants gave other reasons for why they wanted to go a space that was specifically for drinking beer and socialising:

*Yeah, I think also you haven't got distractions as well [at the pub]. So, if you're at home, you feel people just chat or they'll be distractions, or you'll be on PlayStation. Whereas when you're in a pub, there isn't anything else to distract you. ...You can actually just sit in a pub. Nothing else to do apart from having a beer and talk to the person... actually end up catching up more. Whereas in a house...there are going to be partners or kids or there'll be a whole host of other people we didn't know going to be there. And it won't just be as intense.*

The sense of focus or intensity of interaction possible at the pub was seen as something that could not happen in the same way in the home, where domestic life and social life were entangled in ways that might not allow for focused time for friendship and talk.

### 3.2 Negative impacts of Lockdown

Of course, pub attendance was dashed during the pandemic and particularly during the long periods of lockdown. It seems that for many, this was one of the principal negative impacts of lockdown. Overall, more than half (51%) of all surveyed agree that one of the major negative social impacts of lockdown was fewer opportunities to socialise with friends through drinking beer. This was felt most strongly amongst under 50s and especially for those aged 40-49 (63%). More than half of men held this opinion 56%, and the proportion of women agreeing is not dissimilar at 45%.

Some of our interview participants also noted that even when pubs did reopen and in principal normal beer drinking cultures could resume, the regimens of social distancing and

Covid-safe measures significantly diminished what they liked most about pub environments: the opportunity for spontaneity and close social interaction. As one participant said,

*We went for a lunch meal, so it was a bit different, but there were people drinking outside and that looked OK. But the inside looked miserable was people checking in when they walked in and the staff were quite busy going around spraying tables, making sure they're sanitized, which is all totally understandable. But it just takes away from some of the sort of casual freedoms that you expect in a pub. And it makes it a bit more formal. And that's okay. I totally get it. But I can see you. It's a bit of a turn off. Outside, it's a little bit more relaxed because people are sitting at tables. They may be being served at those tables and it's not so visible stuff that's going on inside. So that's fine. But when the weather stops being as good as it is now, then probably it is going to fall away a bit.*

For some, the removal of a regular context for socialising through beer consumption led to a realisation of how important beer is to male friendships. Again, this was most pronounced among 40-49-year-olds, with over a quarter (28%) recognising the importance of beer to their friendships when the taps were turned off. Slightly fewer men in general (24%) were of the same view, which broadly mirrors our findings above in terms of the number of men who consider beer drinking culture to important or very important to their friendships.

While we have seen some general consistency in data for men and women in other areas of the research, there was a distinct difference of opinion here. Fewer than one in ten women (8%) agreed that lockdown had made them realise a greater significance of drinking beer to their friendships.

Linking to our findings above about perceived mental good health linked to the social aspects of beer consumption, here we also saw clear evidence of the perceived negative impact on mental health of a decline in beer drinking with friends during lockdown. Just shy of a third (31%) of men, and more than a quarter (28%) of women agreed that a lack of opportunity to drink beer with friends had negatively impacted on their mental health. This was most pronounced among men aged 40-49 (39%) - another finding that points to both the significance of social beer drinking for this cohort, and the negative impacts of its removal during lockdown. On the other hand, more than a third (38%) of 30-39yr olds reflected that beer drinking has become less important as a result of lockdown, suggesting lifestyle shifts away from beer drinking culture.

A final finding of interest in this area is that one in five (22%) of both men and women agree that social beer drinking is the thing that they missed the most during lockdown. Of further interest is the fact that 47% of respondents with a high alcohol content preference and 38%

of non-alcoholic beer drinkers agree that beer drinking was the activity missed the most during lockdown.

### 3.3 Virtual beers 2020-21

Of course, some found innovative new ways to socialise around beer drinking even though we were confined to our houses and the pubs were well and truly shut. A regular alternative to meeting for a pint with friends was the 'virtual beer' - meeting with friends via Zoom or another online meeting platform to share a drink and talk. In the 2020 lockdown, almost a quarter of men (24%) said that they were sharing 'virtual beers' once a week or more with friends, and this was quite consistent across the 18-49 age range. Those above 50 were much less likely to engage in virtual beer drinking with friends. It is noteworthy that this practice was relatively consistent also during the 2021 lockdown, suggesting that 'virtual beers' were not a novelty of our initial lockdown experience but rather a mainstay of the pandemic. Numbers did drop slightly among the 40-49 age range however, perhaps suggesting 'Zoom fatigue' after many months of sharing a beer at a distance.

Interview participants gave us a window into the possible endurance of virtual beers as a new kind of positive beer culture. Especially for those who had reverted to more episodic drinking with friends, the prospect of a more regular virtual beer, even post-pandemic, seemed a positive one. As Dan suggested:

*Dan: It [a virtual quiz and pub] lasted three months though, a long time, I think a lot of people binned theirs off end of May, June, and we were still doing it until the pubs opened and even beyond. We have started talking about maybe doing a midweek, with different frequency. I think we certainly haven't just sort of drawn a line because we think we realize we don't see each other that much. And then from [a point] where we see each other, let's say forget Covid, a few times a year. And it's usually big. As [name] said, it's a big focus point and it might be a trip away. But then Covid actually gave us the opportunity to have these meetings every week*

Dan's comments are evocative of the challenges that male friends encounter in sustaining their relationships, especially when changes in the lifecourse - marriage, children, careers or geographic distance get in the way. A valuable future avenue for research would be to explore if virtual beer drinking culture endures beyond the lockdown, perhaps even becoming a mainstay of positive beer drinking culture among men.

## 4.0 Conclusions

This project has aimed to explore the relationship between masculinity, male friendships and perceived wellbeing as it relates to 'positive beer drinking culture' - the term we have



used to capture the rich nuance of beer drinking as a social practice aimed at making, sustaining, and deepening bonds, particularly between men. The historical and cross-cultural examples at the beginning of this report establish that beer drinking cultures have existed for thousands of years and have taken various forms. In more recent years, we have considered how beer drinking cultures have changed and evolved to reflect the changing nature of the social relations that beer drinking can facilitate. What is more, the nature of beer drinking has changed in subtle ways to reflect generational shifts and changes in how men and women make sense of gender, and masculinity in particular. The findings of this report suggest that positive beer drinking cultures play an important and complex role in the lives of many men and women (but rather more men) in contemporary Britain. We have also indicated that as gender identities shift, and as the boundaries of masculinity change, so too does the significance of beer consumption as a medium for articulating masculinity and of beer culture as a means of making and sustaining male friendships.

This research suggests that beer drinking cultures remain an essential part of social life for those in our sample, and that this is particularly the case for men aged 40-49 – who we have nicknamed *homo cervesiaensis*, the beer-drinking man. For this group of men, who were likely introduced to beer drinking as teenagers and young adults in the shifting sands of lad/metrosexual masculinity of the 1990s, beer is an important part of social life on many levels. It is important for making and sustaining friendships; it is an important part of intimate talk and joking relationships; it is a regular or episodic part of social life; and drinking beer in the pub was the thing that *homo cervesiaensis* missed the most during life under lockdown. We have shown how beer drinking is considered important for male friendships, and we have explored the role of beer drinking in both making and sustaining friendships. We have also considered how beer drinking cultures are perceived to have a positive impact on wellbeing for both men and women. We have been clear throughout this report that our findings do not support any kind of simplistic positive message about alcohol consumption and objective measures of wellbeing. On the contrary, our interest is in the *perceptions* of those involved in the research as they pertain to beer drinking *cultures* - the broad social practices and rituals of beer drinking that include, but is not limited to, the drinking of alcoholic beverages. Certainly, our qualitative and quantitative data provides evidence of those engaged in what might be called problem drinking, binge drinking, or even alcohol abuse. However, the large majority appear to be engaged in what others have described as ‘sensible’ moderate drinking habits that are not oriented principally towards intoxication. Indeed, for some the appeal of beer drinking is exactly that it provides a form of social drinking that can be moderate in its intoxicating effects.

We have seen also that participants associate beer drinking with a sense of comfort and predictable behaviour in a world that is increasingly unpredictable and chaotic. This was reflected in the negative perceptions of wellbeing associated with disrupted beer consumption patterns during lockdown, and in the data suggesting that 20% of men and

women felt that social drinking was the aspect of 'normal' life that they missed most during periods of lockdown in 2020-21. While we have raised critical points about how exclusionary masculine cultures may also feel 'comfortable' or 'predictable' for some men, we have also pointed to what we call the reassuring 'Cheers' effect of being in familiar company, with familiar banter, and familiar friends, all framed around the consumption of beer.

Returning to the central question of our research, we have seen how beer drinking cultures and associated 'men's talk' have changed to reflect the new realities of contemporary masculinity. Participants suggested that beer drinking culture is associated both with conversations that open men up to emotional and intimate conversations, as well as more traditional interactions focused on banter and ribaldry. Some noted the enduring tensions about performing masculinity through beer drinking, and the inability of men to articulate serious emotions in beer drinking contexts that were seen to be restrictive in the kinds of male social interactions they offered. Others explored the nuance between joking and serious conversation, and the hope that beer drinking cultures were increasingly a context where men can open up to one another. Certainly, there is further research to be done to explore how beer drinking culture may be changing to embrace new forms of masculinity and masculine friendship that allow for this kind of emotional openness. Perhaps, with further investigation, it is in the near future of male beer drinking cultures that we will see a further development of indicators of wellbeing and good mental health.

Finally, this research provided the unexpected insight into drastic changes in living and drinking patterns during the pandemic. Certainly, for those under 50, the prospect of virtual beers has become a mainstay of social life, often interspersed with more intensive episodic time together with friends. What remains to be seen is whether or not virtual drinking cultures are here to stay, and how this shift too will help us to better understand the social lives and identities of men in contemporary Britain.

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