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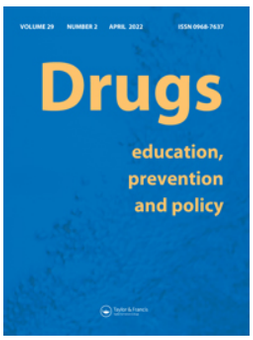

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Magazines as contradictory spaces for alcohol messaging: a mixed method content and thematic analysis of UK women's magazine representations of alcohol and its consumption

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ABSTRACT

Background: Women's magazines provide a space in which gendered norms around alcohol-related practice are (re)-produced. They act as important points of reference for women to draw upon in their own understandings of alcohol use within their identity making. Studying the alcohol-related messages women's magazines disseminate is therefore an important line of inquiry.

Methods: An analysis of textual and visual alcohol depictions, including alcohol advertising, in 70 editions of 20 printed magazines targeted at and read by women, published between August 2020 and January 2021, was conducted using quantitative content and qualitative thematic analysis.

Results: Women's magazines have the potential to disseminate public health messages about the physical and mental health impacts of alcohol use, alcohol's role in gender inequalities and the risk of harm from alcohol use by men. However, they do so in ways that reproduce harmful gender norms and expectations, and overlook the structural causes of alcohol-related harms. Associations between alcohol use and violence against women were simplified, in ways that ignored the root causes, produced victim-blaming narratives and deflected responsibility from the perpetrator to the effects of alcohol. Narratives around drinking and sobriety were underpinned by concerns over appearance, which reinforced social expectations of the ideal feminine body. Health narratives were in conflict with the presence of pro-alcohol messages such as consumption suggestions and alcohol advertising, which promoted alcohol use as a normalised aspect of women's day to day lives.

Conclusions: Women receive a number of mixed and contradictory messages on alcohol use through their magazine readership, which places limits on magazines as educational sources of public health messaging.

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Alcohol use; drinking; women marketing; media; magazines

Introduction

In the UK, men continue to drink alcohol more than women and experience more alcohol-related health and social problems, yet a gender convergence in drinking and related harms has occurred in recent years (NHS Digital, 2019; Office of National Statistics, 2020, 2021; Slade et al., 2016). This is partly an outcome of the shifting social positions of women towards increased economic independence, participation in education and work, and their resultant purchasing power, allowing them to participate in public spaces and leisure activities such as alcohol use that were previously dominated by men (Atkinson et al., 2021a; Griffin et al., 2013). Women have become key targets by alcohol marketers, with the liberalisation of licensing hours, the deregulation of the alcohol industry and the increased affordability and availability of alcohol, resulting in them actively participating in a culture of drinking and intoxication as a form of pleasure (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019).

Women's drinking-related practices are often depicted and perceived more negatively than men's, with women who drink portrayed as lacking femininity and neglectful of traditional gender roles and virtues (e.g. motherhood, self-control) (Emslie et al., 2012; Griffin et al., 2013; Patterson et al., 2016). Furthermore, they are juxtaposed as 'sexually available' and promiscuous, and 'at-risk' of sexual violence when drinking (Day et al., 2004; Patterson et al., 2016). As discussed by Atkinson et al. (2021a, p. 2), in a 'post-feminist' society in which equality between the sexes is taken as given, women's alcohol use and participation in leisure spaces such as the night time environment '*are often interpreted as social progress and as a right to choose, express and enjoy within discourses of individualism, choice and empowerment*' (Gill, 2008; Gill & Scharff, 2013; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019). However, with a re-emergence of feminism in contemporary society in recent years which co-exists alongside post-feminist and health discourses (Atkinson et al., 2021a), increased

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attention has been given to the gendered nature of alcohol-related harms women experience and the inequalities at play in drinking practices. This includes women's risk of breast cancer (Choi et al., 2018) and risk of harm from men's alcohol use, through associations with intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and unwanted sexual attention (Gunby, 2019; Jones, 2019). Thus, women and men have different lived experiences of alcohol use and drinking spaces, with the different social norms that surround their consumption overlapping with expectations of gender appropriate behaviour and wider gender inequalities (Atkinson et al., 2012; de Visser & McDonnell, 2012).

The narratives around drinking that the mainstream media and marketing perpetuate provide a cultural reference point through which 'gender' is learned and performed (Atkinson et al., 2012). Women's magazines are one such space in which normative femininities are constructed, shaped, and regulated (Gauntlett, 2002; McRobbie, 1991). They have been discussed as post-feminist commodities (Gill, 2008; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2009) that exist to generate profit, through narratives of '*empowerment through pleasure, consumption, choice; individual achievement and confidence; female friendship; (hetero)sexual assertiveness; the commodification of appearance; and the celebration of traditional stereotypes associated with "girliness"*' (Atkinson et al., 2021a). As such the information provided regarding leisure and health related behaviours such as diet, appearance, exercise, and alcohol use, are situated within these wider discourses (Barker et al., 2014; Gill, 2008; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 1991, 2009; Swiatkowski, 2016).

At the same time as promoting consumption-based practices such as alcohol use through advertisements, magazines deliver information on health related issues including the harms associated with the consumption of alcohol (Adams et al., 2011; Atkinson et al., 2012; Pitts et al., 2014). Consequently, women receive numerous mixed messages related to alcohol use through their magazine readership, which they draw on to make sense of the role of alcohol in everyday life and in their 'doing' of femininity (Atkinson et al., 2012; Lyons et al., 2006). Women's magazines are thus significant to how understandings of gendered and normative drinking practices are acquired, and do not simply reflect social norms around alcohol, but help construct them (Atkinson et al., 2012; Baillie 1996; Byrant & Zillman 2002). Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that media messages are polysemic and are open to differing interpretations by active audiences with agency to reject, negotiate, and appropriate the representations they engage with (Atkinson et al., 2012; Byrant & Zillman 2002; Gauntlett 2002).

Limited research has examined how alcohol is portrayed in women's magazines, particularly how they are used to target women with pro alcohol messages. Analysis of the gender roles ascribed to women in alcohol-related advertisements in women's magazines in countries such as Finland, Italy, and Sweden between 1960s and 2000s (Beccaria et al., 2018; Månsson, 2014; Törrönen, 2011, 2014; Törrönen & Simonen, 2015; Törrönen & Rolando, 2017) has found that historically, women were presented as being responsible, set within the domestic sphere and as serving the needs of others (e.g. husbands, family) through a range of consumer roles (e.g. cleaners, interior decorators, caretakers/janitors). Over time, new roles were introduced, acknowledging women's own time and pleasures, independent of men and the family, as well as increasing economic independence and sexual agency through work and access to public (drinking) spaces. Despite notions of equality being used to target women as active and autonomous consumers of alcohol from the 1990s, traditional gender norms have remained and women drinkers continue to be depicted as stereotypically feminine (i.e. slender, heterosexual). Thus, there appears to be both continuity and variability in the gender roles ascribed to women who drink in women's magazines.

UK-based research has reported similar findings. Lyons et al. (2006) examined the discourses present in both male and female-targeted magazines in the UK and reported that alcohol use and binge drinking, were presented as normative, 'cool', adult and professional. Women's drinking was linked to working hard, professionalism, friendship, relaxation, and glamour, as well as sexual promiscuity. Another UK study (Atkinson et al., 2012) comparing the depiction of alcohol in men's and women's magazines found that specific alcoholic drinks were invested with symbolic meaning and associated with particular forms of femininity and masculinity. Women's magazines depicted the consumption of champagne/sparkling wine as a way for women to present a glamorous feminine identity through a discourse of celebrity, whereas men's magazines portrayed beer as a highly masculine commodity and the traditional pub as a male domain that excluded women. Relative to men, women were instructed to be responsible drinkers in line with societal norms surrounding femininity, maintaining their appearance and maternal responsibilities. Conversely, male drinkers were framed as free to engage in hedonistic leisure with little consequence. The authors concluded that magazines help construct and reproduce differential expectations about men's and women's alcohol-related behaviours and reinforce drinking as a cultural practice through which individuals should 'do' or 'perform' gender. UK-based research has also found that alcohol is commonly advertised in women's lifestyle and beauty magazines (Adams et al., 2011; Atkinson et al., 2012; Pitts et al., 2014), demonstrating a range of mixed messages that promote alcohol use alongside messages of restraint and responsibility.

Aims and objectives

Whilst the UK-based research discussed provides some important insights, there is a lack of recent research on UK women's magazines depictions of alcohol. Women's magazines continue to be read by large sections of the female population, and as such remain important points of reference for women to draw upon in their own understandings and negotiations of social norms around alcohol use within their identity making. As purported by Patterson et al. (2016), content analysis of alcohol depictions in media texts cannot tell us if, and how, media messages influence audiences' alcohol-related understandings and behaviours. However, exploring

gendered media representations of drinking '*allows us to examine how shared cultural values around alcohol are articulated and constructed, which might inform efforts to improve media representations, and therefore public understandings, of harmful drinking behaviours*' (Patterson et al., 2016, p. 2). This study explored how alcohol and drinking were depicted in UK women's magazines between August 2020 and January 2021. We were interested in who were depicted drinking and in what contexts, as well as how alcohol use was promoted, what risks and effects were depicted, how these risks and effects were gendered and what 'experts' (i.e. GPs, academics) and 'evidence' (e.g. research) were drawn on to support such claims.

Methods

An analysis of textual and visual alcohol depictions, including alcohol advertising, in 20 printed ($N = 70$ editions) magazines targeted and read by women published between August 2020 and January 2021 was conducted (see Supplementary Table 1). This period was chosen to account for seasonal differences in alcohol representations over the summer and winter months. It is also important to note that this sampling period also fell within the global COVID-19 pandemic. This effected both the availability and social context of alcohol use due to social distancing rules and a number of national lockdowns, which closed the hospitality sector and instructed the UK population to '*stay at home*' other than for a small number of permitted reasons (e.g. to shop for '*essentials*', one daily exercise session) (Atkinson et al., 2021b; UK Parliament, 2020). The period followed the first UK national lockdown (March–July 2020) and fell within the second (November 2020–January 2021) (Institute for Government Analysis). Magazines were selected based on readership figures (ABC, 2020, see Supplementary Table 1) and focussed on topics such as celebrity news, real life stories, fashion, beauty, food, diet, and health. A total of 20 magazines and 70 individual editions were included, which contained a combined total of 2554 texts containing both articles and adverts. Alcohol-related texts ($N = 478$) acted as the unit of analysis.

A mixed-methods content analysis was conducted to systematically code and analyse the magazine content. Following Patterson et al. (2016), a number of steps were taken: developing a coding frame; coding manifest content using the coding frame; establishing the reliability of the data; analysing the quantitative data; identifying aspects of manifest content to examine further using qualitative analysis; and performing thematic analysis of the latent content. The coding frame was constructed based on those used in previous research (Atkinson et al., 2012; Lyons et al., 2006), as well as newly identified codes unique to the sample. A quantitative content analysis was first conducted by the lead author to estimate the frequency of coded content across the whole sample using descriptive statistics (Patterson et al., 2016). This allowed us to analyse the manifest content, defined by Patterson et al. (2016, p. 3) as '*surface-level content [and] coding of which does not require interpretation on the part of the coder such that it can be recorded relatively objectively*'. Each printed magazine was read and all texts (i.e. articles and adverts) referring to alcohol photographed and given a unique number. Each text was logged in Excel using its unique number and each code applied (indicating yes or no). When new codes were identified, they were included, with a description, into the Excel file, and applied to previously and yet to be coded texts. To ensure consistency of coding, another author second coded 10% ($n = 47$) of the sample, with 100% consistency.

Following quantitative coding and analysis, a more in-depth qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of a subsample of texts was conducted to analyse latent messages, to reflect on the underlying meanings and to introduce more interpretation and critical reflection. As defined by Patterson et al. (2016, p. 3), latent content analysis is concerned with addressing the '*underlying meanings of the text, as interpreted by coders in an inherently subjective process*'. The following coded categories were deemed noteworthy and suitable for further qualitative analysis as they were highly gendered in nature; weight, appearance, mental health and harms from others use. All texts that were quantitatively coded under these codes ($n = 85$) were included for subsequent thematic analysis. A secondary close reading and viewing of the 85 articles that addressed these categories was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The photograph of each article was exported into NVivo where notes were taken on the underlying meanings of the text. The categories weight and appearance were collapsed to produce the theme '*regulating bodily femininity*'. The mental health category was explored and became the theme '*Gendered mental health*'. The category relating to risks from others' alcohol use became the theme '*gendered violence*' as these articles predominantly reported cases of violence against women. Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses are presented using examples to critically explore the gendered ways in which alcohol was portrayed in women's magazines in the UK during this period.

Findings

Quantitative analysis

Alcohol and its use were prominent features in the sample of women's magazines analysed. All ($N = 70$) editions referred to alcohol and 19% ($n = 478$) of texts depicted alcohol and/or drinking. A number of content categories were coded, and are presented below under the following broad headings; *consumption suggestions* (defined as the encouragement of alcohol brand sales and the consumption of specific drinks), *drinking contexts*, *effects/consequences*, and *responses to alcohol use* (see Supplementary Table 2).

Consumption suggestions

Alcohol use was promoted in around a third of texts (36%, $n = 173$) through various consumption suggestions. Reflecting magazines as commodified and commercial spaces, women were targeted as consumers through alcohol-related advertisements in both direct and indirect ways, with

alcohol product promotions being the most prominent content category within the sample. A total of 1114 adverts were printed, of which 29% ($n = 137$) related to alcohol. This included printed alcohol brand adverts (4%), but mainly indirect alcohol promotions (16%) such as articles that reviewed newly released alcohol products. For example, *Woman* magazine featured '*Booze News*', providing weekly '*top tipples*' *and* supermarket '*offers*'. A range of alcohol brands were promoted, but were predominantly wine, prosecco, pre-made cocktails and gin products, with many being feminised through pink colouring and designs. A small number of articles (3%) depicted alcoholic drinks as a feminine aesthetic. For example, models were depicted holding sparkling wine flutes in fashion features (*New*), and celebrities discussed drinking pink gin and glasses that matched their outfits (*Ok!*). Products such as ready mixed cocktails were further gendered through framing them as practical solutions to women's busy lives and ideal options when '*time is short*' *(Prima, BBC Good Food)*. Both indirect and direct adverts promoted alcohol availability through encouraging supermarket sales (17%), including through high street and online stores. Non-alcoholic drinks (6%) were also promoted as alternatives to alcohol use, in both direct (i.e. adverts) and indirect ways (i.e. promoted in food columns). Again, these tended to be for gin, wine and cocktail products with many being 'pinked' in their presentation ('*No and Low Booze News … Think Pink', Woman*).

The consumption of specific drinks was also encouraged through drink recipe suggestions (7%) in which women were given the domestic role of hosts and provided with tips to fulfil this responsibility. For example, *Prima*'s Christmas edition provided '*delicious drinks* [that] *are sure to get the evening off to a good start*' and *Cosmopolitan's* '*good time guide*' provided drink suggestions and drinking games for women to '*throw a bash to remember*'. Associations between alcohol use and food preparation, consumption and indulgence were also common, with alcohol being presented as an ingredient to food recipes (e.g. '*Boozy Lollies*', *Red*) and food pairing advice on what alcohol should be consumed with particular cuisines provided (10%). Common examples included *BBC Good Food* which provided '*3 great wines to serve*' with Venison, and *Woman* which provided '*Bargain booze picnic ideas*'. There was also evidence that alcohol culture has infiltrated the wider female consumer market (6%), including the beauty and homeware industry, with a range of novelty products (e.g. alcohol infused facemasks and chocolates, drinks trolleys, novelty bottle stoppers) being promoted and presented as gift and treat suggestions for women.

Drinking contexts

With regards alcohol use, 53% of texts referred to (i.e. visually or in text) individuals consuming alcohol, of which 70% depicted women and 46% men (see Supplementary Table 3). This included celebrities (39% e.g. weekly feature celebrity '*Fridge Raider*', *Closer*), members of the public (26%, e.g. 'real life' stories and readers' letters) and models or TV characters (18%). Alcohol use was presented as a predominantly social activity (21%) and in contexts in which it was presented as an essential and normalised component (see Supplementary Table 2). Drinking was depicted in public venues (12%) and none of the texts presented or encouraged solitary drinking in the home context. When drinking in the home (4%) was discussed it was in a social context (e.g. with food, parties) or within articles reporting increased drinking among women during the UK COVID-19 lockdowns (7%), in which this trend was portrayed as a negative development which overlapped with effects on mental health (see '*Gendered Mental Health*' theme'). The consumption of alcohol also featured as a normalised practice in dating and relationships. Drinking environments provided the main context in which dates occurred, which at times led to sexual interaction (3%). For example, alcohol use was framed as a relaxer and mood setter before sexual encounters in articles in *Cosmopolitan*, in which a reader discussed how before sex '*the wine was flowing, I was comfortable, barely clothed and the mood was just right*'.

Effects, consequences, and responses to alcohol use

Around a quarter of alcohol-related texts (24%, $n = 117$; see Supplementary Table 4) referred to effects and consequences of drinking and as may be expected adverts did not report effects. Despite this, a small number of articles (1%, $n = 4$) discussed the 'benefits' of drinking alcohol on health (e.g. heart and gut health) drawing on a number of research studies. For example, an article in *OK!* drew on the book '*The Japanese Guide to Healthy Drinking*', published by a clinician and industry professional, to promote '*moderate*' and '*healthy*' drinking, suggesting that '*alcohol isn't a poison that needs to be avoided but can, in fact "be the best of all medicines*". *Women's Health* also suggested that two '*alcoholic drinks a day could help preserve brain function in older age',* reporting research that found '*casual drinkers had slower rates of cognitive decline than teetotal peers*' in accordance with findings of a J-Shaped curve (Zhang et al., 2020). *Woman* also provided contradictory advice in an article claiming to provide tips on how to '*live to 100*', in which readers were advised to '*ditch addictions … such as alcoholism,* [which] *can cause a host of physical and mental health problems*', whilst at the same time suggesting readers to '*drink a little wine [to] extend lifespan*'.

However, other articles acknowledged the need for caution when interpreting and applying the results of studies suggesting health benefits of alcohol use. Drawing on uncited research published in the *American College of Cardiology*, *Women's Health* declared '*Wine Wednesday*' as being in '*disrepute*', in light of results that suggest one glass of wine a day increased the risk of high blood pressure, and a *World Cancer Research* report suggesting that half a glass of wine a day heightened the risk of breast cancer. Quoting a Professor of Epidemiology and Nutrition from Harvard University, the article concluded that women should '*balance*' the risk of breast cancer with the benefits of drinking for '*heart disease, metabolic health and the pleasures one derives from moderate drinking*'. *Good House Keeping* also presented a cautious account of the evidence on the effects of

moderate drinking on reducing the risk of heart and circulatory disease, and gut health. Asking '*Is red wine good for my heart*?' and drawing on research conducted by the *British Heart Foundation*, the article concluded that the '*risks outweigh the benefits*' and encouraged readers to drink within the UK Chief Medical Officers' guidelines and to consume other foods (e.g. fruits such as grapes) that benefit the gut rather than alcohol to offset the negative effects.

Sobriety was discussed or encouraged in 5% ($n = 23$) of texts, through presenting the lived experiences of individuals in articles, particularly celebrities (e.g. '*Why we're happy to be Sober*'; *Closer*), who had successfully stopped drinking and endorsed abstinence. Harmful alcohol use was not judged moralistically and women experiencing such problems were discussed in supportive or neutral ways. For example, *Closer* magazine printed a four-page feature in which '*the former X Factor singer, Janet Devlin, opened up about sobriety, spending time in rehab and her fresh start*'. Labelling the singer an '*inspiring celeb*', it was supportive of her decision to abstain from alcohol and provided a space to share her experiences with alcohol and the benefits of abstaining, and offered advice for others also contemplating reductions in use. Around a tenth (11%, $n = 52$) of texts offered information on reducing drinking or becoming abstinent (e.g. *Easy ways to drink less, Prima; What happens when I overload my Liver?*', *Women's Health).* For example, articles in magazines such as *Closer* provided guidance on how to '*get a buzz without Booze*', acknowledging an increase in drinking in some population groups during the UK COVID-19 lockdown. The article drew on a real-life story of a reader defined as a former '*party girl*' and author of the book '*Happy Healthy Sober*', to offer '*Top Tips*' on how to reduce or stop drinking, in which '*being alcohol-free*' was labelled '*the new cool, sobriety rocks*!' However, the specific strategies purported by articles to encourage reduced use or sobriety were predominantly individual-level responses (see Supplementary Table 5). As might be expected from a media industry that is supported by alcohol advertising funds, the influence of environmental factors such as alcohol marketing and the pricing and availability of alcohol were ignored. When availability was acknowledged (e.g. *Bella*) the responsibility was again placed on consumers, who were encouraged to avoid alcohol aisles in supermarkets to reduce temptation. Alcohol adverts and promotions were accompanied by links to the *Drinkaware* (UK) website, an industry funded body which promotes '*responsible drinking*', thus further placing responsibility on the individual. Moreover, there was a lack of expert opinion in the sample, with only 4% ($n = 17$) of texts referencing experts (i.e. Professors, GPs, counsellors) and/or evidence (i.e. published research and statistics on the effects of alcohol) to discuss the effects and consequences of alcohol use and/or to provide information to inform and encourage reduced drinking and abstinence.

Qualitative analysis of sub sample of texts

Regulating bodily femininity ($n = 56$)

Reflecting the focus of women's fashion, beauty and lifestyle magazines on diet, weight and the glorification of slimness as the Western ideal of female attractiveness, alcohol use was framed as a threat to femininity through weight gain, effects on complexion (e.g. acne) and the aging process (e.g. *Closer, Bella, Women's Health*). For example, *Slimming World* interviewed a young female reader about her weight loss in which '*cocktails and takeaways*' were blamed for '*putting on the pounds*' during University, and a change in diet and exercise was discussed as a '*bigger buzz than a porn star martini*'. Alcohol use was also blamed for weight gain in *Take A Break*, where a reader discussed their '*flabby body*' in relation to cocktail drinking.

In turn, weight loss was presented as achievable through changes to diet, including reduced and moderate drinking, and abstinence. However, within suggested diet plans alcohol was also framed as a well-deserved '*treat*' (*Closer*) and '*syn*', defined as a '*food or drink that poses a risk to your weight loss*' *(Slimming World Magazine),* in a way that normalised it's use within women's everyday lives. *Closer* also informed readers on how to '*drop a dress size in a month*' whilst '*even having a treat each day- pre dinner nibbles or even a G&T!*'. Others (*That's Life!*) provided advice on preventing weight gain and achieving weight loss in specific contexts. For example, low calorie alcoholic drinks were framed as diet aids, when labelled '*healthier*' '*swops*' to consume during the festive period, and as options that promised to '*cut the alcohol and calories*' and prevent weight gain due to festive indulgence (e.g. '*festive favorites like eggnog that can contain a whopping 350 calories per drink – that's a fifth of your daily calories*!', *That's Life*!). Increased eating and drinking during the COVID-19 lockdowns, due to '*emotional drinking*' and '*boredom*', were also discussed as leading to weight gain, and magazines offered advice on how to '*shift lockdown weight*', through changes to diet and alcohol use (*Slimming World*).

In some cases, the effects of drinking on weight and skin were presented as a '*health*' issue. For example, a *Closer* article entitled '*A Healthier New You*', provided tips on how to reduce alcohol use. Asking '*Not convinced?, '3 more reasons to cut down*' were provided to persuade readers to consume less alcohol, two of which related to appearance. Stating that '*alcohol doesn't only cause serious health issues, such as liver disease and heart problems, it can also play havoc on your weight, mood and skin*', readers were advised to reduce their drinking to '*lose weight*' and were informed that '*your skin will thank you*'. Here a discourse of health is apparent, but anxieties around appearance drawn on to persuade women to abstain or reduce consumption.

An important component of this narrative was a focus on celebrity diet and appearance, with readers being provided with diet tips based on celebrity lifestyles in which sobriety was discussed as an important component of achieving weight loss and maintaining a desired body shape. For example, in a *Bella* article entitled '*Hollywood Bodies*', the diet and exercise routine of actor and singer Jennifer Lopez was discussed. She was reported as '*not drinking alcohol for years*', and was quoted as attributing alcohol abstinence to their youthful looks when suggesting that they '*don't drink or smoke or have caffeine. That really wrecks your skin as you get older*'. *Closer* also printed an image of model *Kate Moss* in a bikini looking '*healthier than ever*' denoting her appearance

to '*quitting booze*'. In articles entitled '*Our Simple DIET TRICKS*' (*Closer*) and '*Stars share their body secrets*' *(Closer*) a female TV presenter discussed how being '*tee total*' ('*No booze, fewer snacks*') and '*ditching the booze*' formed an important part of her plan to loose '*the lockdown stone*'.

Whilst some celebrities indicated abstinence as a cause of their sustained desired body shape, weight loss, and associated body confidence, others framed the maintenance of their '*stunning figures*' to moderation. For example, moderate drinking was encouraged by another female TV presenter who stated that she '*enjoy[s] a glass of red wine or a gin and tonic, but you've got to be really careful with alcohol as there's a lot of wasted calories in it. I'd rather waste my calories on a tray bake' (New)*. This further framed alcohol as a treat and encouraged a personal health cost benefit analysis between indulgence and calorie intake when deciding whether to consume alcohol. The association between alcohol use and weight was also common in reader stories. For example, *Bella* reported how one reader made '*big lifestyle changes*', altering their diet and reducing their alcohol intake. Providing before and after descriptions of their daily food and drink in take, a reduction in their daily diet from three to one glass of wine per day was presented as an important aspect of their five stone (32 kg) weight loss, resulting in an '*end to unhappiness*'. Magazines thus framed femininity as a bodily attribute that required controlled alcohol consumption for regulation, with slim(mer) bodies being attributed to femininity and female happiness.

Despite a focus on the relationship between alcohol use and appearance, messages that encouraged reduced alcohol use to achieve a desired appearance were in conflict with those underpinned by indulgence previously discussed (e.g. '*calories don't count at Christmas*', Closer), and counterpoised by the extent of alcohol adverts within the sample. Yet, alcohol brand promotions also drew on the relationship between weight and alcohol to promote products. *Hard Seltzers* (e.g. *Tesco magazine*) were promoted as '*reduced calorie*' options containing '*100 calories*' and one of '*20 guilt free snacks 150 calories and under*' (*Bella*), and alcohol-free products were promoted through a focus on their reduced calorie content. For example, *Woman* magazine promoted '*Another great tasting alcohol-free wine alternative*' with '*only 33 calories per 125 ml glass*'. '*Skinny Tonic-the natural slim line*' product was also promoted *(e.g. Cosmopolitan) as* '*the perfect accompaniment to your favourite gin*' and for those embarking on a '*healthy living*' '*who do not want to compromise on taste*'. As such, the reduced calorie content of products was used to target women with both alcoholic and no and low product promotions, which reinforced weight and appearance as the predominant concerns for women.

Gendered mental health (n = 18)

Alcohol use was associated with a number of mental health issues, and mental health management was framed as an important reason to reduce or abstain from alcohol. It was reported as being used as a coping mechanism in managing symptoms of anxiety and depression, but at the same time making those symptoms worse, leading to the development of problematic use. Magazines played an important role in raising awareness of the links between alcohol use and mental health, encouraging women to consider their mental health in relation to their drinking and to make changes to their consumption to improve wellbeing and overall happiness (e.g. *Closer; Cosmopolitan, Good House Keeping*). For example, *Good House Keeping* magazine included a feature written by a GP, entitled '*Your mental health masterclass*', in which readers were informed that '*excessive alcohol use*' was a '*behavioural symptom*' of stress, which they were advised to reduce through increasing their number of alcohol-free days and drinking non-alcoholic drinks as a replacement, whilst being redirected to the *Drinkaware* drinks monitoring App. The lived experiences of female celebrities were also drawn on to highlight the role drinking can have in negative mental health issues such as stress and anxiety, and to frame sobriety as a positive lifestyle change that can improve overall wellbeing ('*Why were happy to be sober*', *Bella*). Such articles did not only focus on the negative effects alcohol can have on mental health, but focussed on the benefits of abstinence in a way that framed sober identities in a positive light ('*Giving up was liberating*', *Bella;* '*I'm in a really good place*', *Bella;* '*I've found a new me since giving up alcohol, Closer;* '*I'm finally in a good place*', *Closer*). However, at times, the contexts in which alcohol use was framed as both a casual factor and outcome of mental health, were gendered, and reflected norms and expectations regarding the roles and responsibilities women occupy in society.

Importantly, women were encouraged not to use alcohol as a coping mechanism during the COVID-19 pandemic during which they were discussed as drinking alcohol to cope with stress and anxiety ('*How giving up booze can help you through lockdown*', *Closer*), and the extra burdens on their daily lives such as the home schooling of children (*Bella, Closer*). They were also warned that changes to their domestic routines (e.g. returning to the school run and shopping) as a result of the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, labelled by *Bella* as '*re-entry anxiety*', could potentially lead to increased alcohol consumption. Similarly, the mental health impact of special occasions, for which women take a leading organising and hosting role, such as birthdays and Christmas, was discussed as leading to the increased use of alcohol to cope with these additional domestic pressures. For example, the '*mental load*' of organising Christmas was acknowledged, and women were offered advice (e.g. reducing alcohol intake) on how to deal with these pressures to prevent negative impacts on their mental health. An article in *Heat* titled '*Avoid a Festive Freakout*' provided advice for planning Christmas celebrations during the brief uplifting of lockdown restrictions and advised women to avoid the '*temptation to knock back too many Proseccos to diffuse anxiety, which can be counterproductive if it leads to emotional scenes*'. Whilst attempting to offer mental health advice, the longstanding gender stereotype of female hysteria is produced here. Similarly, *Chat* provided women with alternative coping methods to alcohol use to deal with the stress of the Christmas period, advising readers to engage in healthy eating, spending time with family and going for walks as an alternative to alcohol when attempting to manage additional stress. These articles aim to prevent the unhealthy use of alcohol as a way of coping with additional stress;

however, they fail to acknowledge the unequal distribution of domestic duties at play and in turn reinforce these as the responsibility of women.

Associations between alcohol consumption and mental health also intersected with the theme of managing bodily appearance, further reinforcing social expectations of what is regarded as the ideal feminine body. Articles made associations between celebrity alcohol use, mental health, and body image, with reductions in alcohol use framed as leading to better mental health due to weight loss. For example in *Heat*, a female celebrity discussed swapping their mental health '*coping mechanism of booze binges for exercise*', a technique which was reported to have resulted in achieving a size 6 body size, and them finally conquering their mental health '*demons*'. An article (*Closer*) informing women on ways to cut back on alcohol use during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce stress and anxiety, also paradoxically drew on women's anxieties over appearance as a persuasive tool, reminding them that alcohol use also '*causes wrinkles*' and is '*packed with calories*'. Such articles reiterate the prioritisation of appearance in women's magazines, with the impact of perceived improved appearance on mental health being used as an incentive for women to reduce their alcohol consumption.

Moreover, alcohol use by women and its impact on mental health were underpinned by concerns regarding the behaviour of women in public drinking spaces, particularly celebrities, who were interviewed or presented as case studies to warn women of the effects an alcohol involved social life can have on their mental health. This included discussions around celebrities' attempts at giving up alcohol due to anxiety over their intoxicated behaviour in public. For example, in *Heat* magazine a female reality TV star was discussed as failing to give up alcohol use despite attempts to do so due to shame surrounding her behaviour on nights out ('*Embarrassed Lauren giving up drink, maybe it will last this time*', *Heat*). This narrative was also apparent in articles offering general advice, such as *Cosmopolitan* magazine, which made reference to the anxiety some women may experience after a night out drinking due to shame over their drunken behaviour, labelled '*hangxiety*' and '*beer fear*'. A psychotherapist was quoted stating that '*when we drink, our prefrontal cortex [the part of our brain responsible for executive decision making] becomes suppressed and the child part of our character comes out to play, sadly without the guidance it needs*'. The emotive use of the adverb '*sadly*' here is used to induce judgement and shame, which are commonly placed on intoxicated women. Whilst acknowledging the common experiences of alcohol induced anxiety, these articles draw on women's anxieties over societal expectations of feminine conduct as a persuasive technique, whilst at the same time attempting to raise awareness of the links between alcohol use and mental health issues such as anxiety itself.

Women as victims/survivors of gendered violence (n = *12*)

Women were positioned as victims/survivors of gendered violence, specifically domestic and sexual violence, in which alcohol use by male perpetrators was implicated in a number of ways. First, use by men was framed as a contributing factor, excuse, and as a literal weapon in physical acts of violence, with drinking vessels being thrown at women by perpetrators (*Chat*, *OK!*). With the exception of one article recalling allegations of domestic violence perpetration by a male celebrity with problematic substance use (*OK!*), discussion of gendered violence, and the role of alcohol use within it featured within '*real-life*' stories. These followed a set narrative structure: the classic fairy-tale notion of love and romance at the beginning of a relationship when men are idealised by women, followed by the uncovering of an abusive side of the man's personality and behaviour, often as a result of alcohol consumption. For example, in an article in *Chat*, entitled '*His last supper – he did this to me then went for a kebab*', a 37 year old woman, shared her experiences of domestic violence by a male partner, discussing how '*At first, things were great between us*', but how she '*noticed that he changed after having a few drinks*' (*Chat*). Alcohol was framed as a contributing factor to domestic violence incidents, and as an excuse for violence, with perpetrators offering apologies and promises to 'change' when sober (e.g. '*I'm sorry, he/ grovelled, once he had sobered up*' (*Chat*)). Similarly, in *Chat*, a female survivor of domestic abuse recalled how '*The drink was part of him. Often it made him angry*', suggesting a causal link between use and aggression. In another article reporting a sexual abuse scenario, in which a 32-year-old woman was repeatedly beaten and eventually raped by her boyfriend, alcohol use was drawn on by the perpetrator to justify their abusive behaviour. Prior to the incident, the survivor recalled how the man had framed alcohol use as an aphrodisiac stating – '*you know how horny I get when I've had a drink*'. Claiming that the woman should '*know*' suggests an expectation of sex by the man when intoxicated, and this as a justification for force when consent was not given ('*Then I couldn't fight him off*', *Chat*).

Whilst in the latter example, grief following the death of a baby was provided as an explanation for increased alcohol use and subsequent abuse, the more structural causes of domestic and sexual abuse were ignored. Moreover, despite focussing on individuals' alcohol use, by focussing on alcohol as a substance with psychopharmacological effects that caused changes in personality and behaviour, the articles deflected personal responsibility to some extent. Some articles (e.g. *That's Life, Chat*) did describe more structural determinants of gendered violence, such as a need to educate men from an early age on how to respect and treat women equally ('*I'm raising my sons to respect women. I don't want them to be anything like their father*', *Chat*), but these were rare and placed the responsibility of preventing violence onto women – particularly mothers. Alongside the framing of alcohol as a casual factor with undertones of excuse, this framing further deflected male-perpetrator responsibility and accountability.

Second, alcohol intake by victims was reported to precede sexual assault and rape. In such cases, articles highlighted how perpetrators encouraged and forced use to coerce and control victims, grooming young females with alcohol in the lead up to abuse, and acutely 'spiking' (*Good Housekeeping*)

women's drinks (sometimes in combination with drugs such as cocaine) with the intention of incapacitation ('*The Jury was told that he had plied his victim with alcohol before abusing them', Take a Break*). For example, one article reported how in a sexual abuse case '*The court heard he's groomed three girls, aged between 12 and 15, giving them booze, drugs and money before abusing them*' (*Take a Break*). In such cases, the use of alcohol for these purposes highlighted the perpetrators' planned intent to commit the offence, and positioned alcohol as a dangerous substance when in the wrong hands, and as calculatingly being used by dangerous men to abuse women. Third, alcohol use by women was discussed as a response to sexual abuse trauma, with women recalling drinking as a coping mechanism. For example, in an article reporting a women's experiences of child abuse by her father, the survivor recalled having drank alcohol to cope, and having stopped drinking as one response to address her trauma ('*I stopped drinking, and lost weight … and reconnected with my family*', *Chat*).

Lastly, nightlife spaces were presented as contexts in which male violence towards women may be initiated following alcohol use by both parties ('*They invited us back to their flat for a drink*', *Take a Break*), and within such articles subtle examples of 'victim-blaming' narratives were apparent, mainly from female victims/survivors themselves. Women recalled their experiences with undertones of regret and guilt, which again deflected blame away from the perpetrator, and the structural determinants of violence. For example, in an article in *Take A Break*, a woman recalled her experience of being kidnapped, along with her friend, following a night out drinking in the night-time environment. Placing responsibility onto herself, she discussed how '*I wish we'd gone straight home when we left the bar. But I can't turn back time*.' In another article, more active victim-blaming was reported at the institutional level, with one woman expressing feeling judged by the court system for attending a (drinking) event with her young daughter, at which she was followed and sexually assaulted by an intoxicated male stranger attending the event. The women recalled how '*When it was my turn to speak, the defence ridiculed me about staying late at the barbeque. 'Why would you not take your daughter away?' his lawyer quizzed me. 'Where was your mother's instinct?' It was horrendous*' (*That's Life!*). This account suggests moral judgement of the women by the defence, for being perceived as failing to meet societal expectations of ideal motherhood. This highlights how when a woman is assaulted in a context in which alcohol is available and consumed, a parallel is drawn between her engaging in this social activity and regressing in maternal responsibilities.

Discussion

The paper presents findings of an analysis of alcohol depictions in UK women's magazines over a 6-month period between 2020 and 2021. It found that pro-alcohol messages continue (Adams et al., 2011; Lyons et al., 2006) to be a prominent feature of female targeted publications, with these spaces being used to promote alcohol use as a pleasurable, social and feminine activity through alcohol brand adverts and various consumption suggestions such as recipes and food pairing. However, a dichotomy in alcohol depictions was apparent. Women's magazines disseminated health messages around the effects and consequences of drinking, and sobriety was presented as a positive lifestyle choice, whilst also suggesting alcohol use can have health benefits in some instances. Moreover, health messages were overshadowed by pro-alcohol and commercial messages within alcohol product adverts in gendered ways (e.g. pink products, low calorie options), and the health-related messages presented were underpinned by the various gendered expectations placed on women within society (e.g. beauty expectations, domestic responsibilities, and controlled public behaviour). This dichotomy is consistent with what Griffin et al. (2013) refer to as the 'dilemmatic space' of drinking that women inhabit, whereby they are simultaneously encouraged to drink as a marker of consumer empowerment and femininity, whilst negotiating their drinking within the expectations of femininity, and the inequalities and harm they may encounter within their drinking practices (Griffin et al., 2013).

Messages around reduced drinking and abstinence were predominantly underpinned by celebrity struggles with alcohol and weight. Whilst past research found moral judgement and ridicule of female celebrities with problematic use of alcohol (Atkinson et al., 2012), the current research found more of an empathetic and supportive narrative, which encouraged moderation and sobriety as a form of self-care. Similarly, unlike previous research (Atkinson et al., 2012), there was no evidence of an outwardly judgemental tone and shaming of celebrity weight gain and loss as a result of their alcohol consumption. However, generally women were encouraged to cut down or abstain from alcohol in line with gendered expectations around weight and appearance. This reflects how women's magazines are commonly discussed as placing social pressure on women to adhere to (unrealistic) beauty ideals in ways that promote restrained consumption, body dissatisfaction and in turn poor ill psychological health through the glorification of slimness and the internalisation of the thin ideal (López-Guimerà et al., 2010; Mooney et al., 2009; Swiatkowski, 2016; van den Berg et al., 2007). However, to date, the role of alcohol within such messaging has received only a small amount of attention (Atkinson et al., 2012; Lyons et al., 2006). Our findings support that of past research (Atkinson et al., 2012; Lyons et al., 2006) that found UK women's magazines warned readers about the detrimental effects alcohol use can have on women's appearance through increased weight and poor complexion, and that such messaging is less concerned with health than in regulating femininity and are indicative of wider cultural constructions of conventional femininity. This narrative also appears to have infiltrated promotions of no and low alcohol products, which were framed as diets aids. Thus, both articles and adverts continue to frame alcohol use in relation to appearance, which ultimately positions alcohol use as implicated in the creation and presentation of feminine identity. Such femininity is reduced to the body, with alcohol use being framed as threatening to the ideal of slimness, and immaculate and youthful complexion. Whilst the body positivity movement

has widened the variety of body shapes on show in media such as magazines, and there was evidence of this within our sample (e.g. '*11 women who prove wellness isn't 'one size fits all*', *Cosmopolitan*), slender bodies and encouragement to achieve this ideal dominated the magazines analysed. Diet and weight related articles addressed readers as women who aimed to lose weight, with this ambition being implicated by their alcohol use.

Importantly, the association between alcohol and appearance has been incorporated into individual level health information campaigns that draw on weight, calories, and facial appearance to persuade consumers to reduce alcohol use. Indeed, a focus on the impact of drinking on appearance reflects research that has found that perfecting appearance is highly important to women within their drinking cultures, with much 'beauty work' being undertaken by women to meet social expectations of feminine appearance in preparation for a night out drinking, and the regulation of appearance in the display of drinking photos on social media (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Lennox et al., 2018; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Nicholls, 2019). As such, magazine and public health campaigns reporting alcohol use as detrimental to appearance are likely to resonate with women's' lived experiences. From an intervention development perspective, physical-appearance framed messages may increase the salience of more immediate adverse effects of alcohol use, but whilst these have shown increased engagement with alcohol screening assessments, there is no evidence which suggest that this leads to changes in alcohol consumption (Sallis et al., 2019). From a critical perspective, it is also important to acknowledge that such approaches, when targeted at women, could reproduce gender stereotypes such as slimness and beauty as a defining a feature of femininity, and create stigma and anxiety among those who do not conform to these ideals (Farrugia, 2017). Thus, by drawing on, and perhaps enhancing women's body image anxieties, magazines, and similar public health approaches may address one health issue (i.e. alcohol use) by propagating another (i.e. body image concerns and anxiety) (Farrugia, 2017). This is important when we consider the negative relationship between mental health and alcohol use (Puddephatt et al., 2021), as reported in our sample.

The UK Government (Alcohol Health Alliance, 2020) has recently proposed to introduce a requirement that alcohol products include calorie content on their labelling, and it will be useful to measure the gendered impact of such approaches. Some experimental research has suggested this type of labelling has no impact on consumption (Maynard et al., 2018), and our current and other analyses (Atkinson et al., 2021a) found that some brands already include such labelling as a marketing strategy to instigate sales of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks among weight conscious consumers, and that female targeted brands and magazines are used to promote these products to women. It could be argued that when presented in this way in magazine adverts and articles, these products are an extension of the diet industry (Atkinson et al., 2021a) which draws on women's weight anxiety and calorie counting for commercial purposes, and that the commercial use of such messaging by the alcohol industry may undermine the public health purposes and impact of this approach. Whilst such approaches have 'good intentions' to improve health, evidence of their long-term effectiveness and their acceptability by women is limited, and the way in which they constitute gender has been questioned and accused of potentially reproducing, rather than reducing, a range of harms, and producing unintended adverse effects (e.g. seeking out high strength drinks to consume more alcohol for less calories; Farrugia, 2017; Maynard et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2020).

Our research is unique in that it was conducted during a period in which the UK was subject to a number of COVID-19 socialisation restrictions. We found that magazines expressed concern regarding increased use by women within the home during this period, and raised awareness of the associations between alcohol use and mental health, which was presented as impacting on women in unique ways. However, associations between alcohol use and mental health were related to the social expectations around women's domestic responsibilities as carers and their behaviour in public drinking spaces. For example, advising women to control their alcohol use during stressful periods such as Christmas, when they typically take on additional domestic responsibilities, ignores the root cause of the problem (i.e. alcohol use to cope), and reinforces such duties as a women's role. Whilst these messages may be useful in raising awareness around the link between alcohol use and mental health, and reflect women's lived experiences, they also reinforce potentially harmful gendered expectations that may lead to poor mental health in the first instance. Moreover, whilst messages around reducing and abstaining from alcohol use due to social embarrassment again may act as a preventive message, they reinforce expectations of traditional femininity which determine that women should be controlled and passive, particularly in public spaces (Griffin et al., 2013).

The gendered vulnerabilities and inequalities present in drinking practices were also drew on, with women being presented as at risk of harm from alcohol use by men, through associations with gendered violence such as domestic and sexual abuse, and drink spiking (Jones, 2019). Alcohol use was framed as both a behaviour change agent leading to male violence and an 'excuse' for violence perpetration, as well as a functional tool to coerce and incapacitate women with the intention of harm, with the resulting trauma leading to problematic alcohol use as a coping mechanism by victim/survivors. These representations reflect research which shows that alcohol use by perpetrators and survivors is often implicated in domestic and sexual violence, how both parties often consider alcohol use to have a direct effect on behaviour and how consumption is often viewed as an exculpatory factor, particularly for men (Jones, 2019; Office of National Statistics, 2021). Whether alcohol use plays a causal, contributory or other role remains an area of debate (Jones, 2019). Nevertheless, an absence of reporting on the root structural causes of domestic and sexual abuse, such as engrained traditional gender norms and experience of adverse childhood experiences (Jones, 2019), alongside victim blaming narratives and a deflection of responsibility from the abuser to

alcohol itself, resulted in an over simplified account of the association between alcohol use and gendered violence.

The research has a number of strengths including providing an updated analysis of alcohol depictions in UK women's magazines, the large and varied sample of magazines analysed, and an analysis that moves beyond a focus on quantitative methods. A number of limitations should also be acknowledged. First, whilst a large sample of magazines were analysed over the summer, autumn, and winter months, this was over a six-month period and representations may differ throughout the year. Second, although a variety of magazine were included, the findings cannot be applied to all women's magazines. Third, an analysis of magazine content cannot ascertain the ways in which women might interpret, perceive and negotiate magazine messages. The extent to which media messages influence and inform audience behaviour is an area of significant and on-going debate, and audiences are not passive recipients of media messages or uncritical readers (Atkinson et al. 2012).

Conclusions

Women's magazines have the potential to disseminate public health messages about the physical and mental health impacts of alcohol use, and alcohol's role in gender inequalities such as associations between alcohol use and violence against women. However, they do so in ways that reproduce harmful gender norms and expectations, and within a wider narrative of commercial alcohol marketing messages. For example, framing alcohol use as harmful to femininity in relation to diet/weight, and appearance reinforces the normative conception of evaluating women on the basis of appearance and the monitoring of drinking practices as a way of disciplining the body (Atkinson et al., 2012). This led to contradictory messaging, for example, attempting to raise awareness of the mental health benefits of reducing or abstaining from drinking, whilst simultaneously playing on women's anxieties around weight and appearance to promote behaviour change. Moreover, whilst raising awareness of the role of alcohol in gendered violence, the 'real-life' story nature of this narrative which overlooked structural factors and failed to provide educational advice, reduced them to entertainment and missed opportunities to provide support for women with lived experience. Importantly, narratives around reduced drinking and sobriety were in conflict with the presence of pro-alcohol messages such as consumption suggestions and alcohol advertising, which promoted alcohol use as a normalised aspect of women's day to day lives. Whilst advice on reducing drinking were provided, these were predominantly individualised behaviour change responses that have been shown to be some of the least effective means of reducing alcohol related harm (Burton et al., 2017). Considering the importance of alcohol advertising revenue to magazine publishers (Adams et al., 2011), this may be unsurprising.

We conclude that women's magazines continue to be contradictory spaces (Gill 2007) that juxtapose commercial marketing messages and health discourse. Alcohol and associated leisure practices are promoted through advertising and pro-alcohol messages, suggesting alcohol is a key component of pleasure and feminine identities, whilst encouraging women to monitor their drinking in relation to the associated health harms, and traditional notions of femininity (Griffin et al. 2013). Health responses should consider how media depictions such as those presented promote drinking and undermine health messaging and avoid replicating media messages that are underpinned by gender stereotypes. These have the potential for unintended effects on health and wellbeing, through enhancing body image concerns and related anxiety, and purely focus on individual responses to addressing alcohol use and related harms. A gendered and feminist critique to media and public health campaigns is crucial to consider the potential negative effects of such messaging, and we argue that official public health campaigns should consider how their own messaging could produce unintended effects in similar ways.

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