

Binge Drinking Time for Some Clarity

Young people are drinking and fighting less and taking fewer drugs, so there are fewer of them ending up in A&E. Media has gleefully proclaimed this news in recent days and certainly this is good news for society on many levels. Many rather simplistic explanations are being posited for this apparent 'turning of the tide', most of which revolve around young people becoming more sensible and the adoption of a more continental cafe lifestyle. On one level this may be true, but from what we see this isn't the whole story.

The young haven't miraculously changed. The majority still want to have fun and many are still being irresponsible. Nor are they a homogenous group, but from what we can see, there does look to be a pattern of constraints that many are finding, which seem to be influencing their behaviour. The most obvious is financial.

Recession Has Constraints

Five years of recession has had an impact on all sections of society that is likely to change behaviour permanently. This looks to be particularly the case for the young. You need disposable income to get drunk and they still have it, but they don't believe it is as plentiful as in the recent past.

Unemployment amongst the young remains high. While unemployment has fallen to just over 7% (still 2% higher than in 2007), amongst 16-24 year olds it's over 19%.

They see basic living as more expensive than in the recent past, particularly travel, food and accommodation. Because of this, many are opting to continue living with parents and often making it work over long periods. Clearly this has an impact on behaviour, however 'laid back' the parents might be.

Credit is much more difficult to secure if you are young today. They describe looking at a generation that went before them, the debts they accumulated and are still struggling with. Coupled with this, often they express a determination not to fall into the same trap. Tuition Fees appears to be accentuating this sense of caution. This attitude towards those older could almost be described as their generational rejection of parental values.

Big Brother

If ever there was a generation that is aware of cameras, where they are and what you can do with them, it's today's young people. They are very aware that they are being monitored all the time. They understand that monitoring means they are likely to be caught if they step out of line.

This doesn't appear to particularly bother them; often they feel safer because of it. But being 'caught' is something that will tend to be quite personal for them. They are likely to know of someone, if not themselves, who has been 'caught' in the past doing something they shouldn't. We would suggest that the 'knowledge of implications' is much stronger amongst today's young people than ever before.

Social Media Spreads News

If you are the parent of a teenager what you want is one of their peer group to go off the rails (however briefly), because the implications will be shared widely and in depth on social media. The general conclusion drawn by the social group (which tends to be dominated by the 'sensible heads') almost invariably is that you 'don't want to go there'.

For all its introversion, proliferation of trivia and self obsession, social media does appear to be making young people more aware than ever of their own micro society and giving them a greater 'knowledge of implications'. This does seem to be shaping behaviour and decisions at critical moments.

So How Do You Have Fun These Days?

As ever, having fun requires having friends. If you are young, it seems that you are likely to have a lot of your fun with friends at home these days.

A key part of the entertainment often revolves around food. Spending £30 on pizza delivery is a lot cheaper than binge drinking. It also makes you fat and today's young people are the heaviest ever. The companies that supply this market are doing very well, as witnessed by Dominos sales up 14% in 2013 and the £1.5bn Just Eat launch last month.

Calorie consumption also translates to having fun out-of-home. Young people like cheap eating as a way of socialising whether it is Pizza Express, Wagamama or a coffee shop. It is often described as cheaper and more rewarding than going out drinking.

Young people still set out to 'get wasted' and be a bit 'lairy'. That also tends to start at home these days. The cost of going out has spawned the culture of the 'pre', 'pre-load', 'pre-lash', 'pre-game' or 'prinks'.

A night out will start at home with cheap drinks / other substances to 'get you in the mood', before going out. The smoking ban in public places in 2007 has encouraged this as well. Often the 'pre' becomes the 'post', because after a few drinks everyone is having plenty of fun and can't be bothered to move. If they do get out the door, the club or bar may only have the opportunity to sell them the one obligatory drink, guaranteeing their entry. This whole approach minimises the risk of the last venue of the evening being A&E.

Perfect Recipe

Young people seem to be staying in more because they don't feel they have the money. For what money they do have the indulgence of choice is often food and that is making them fat. If they do set out to get drunk, then that often starts at home as well. They are entertaining themselves via technology which is making them more socially aware (at least on a micro level) with a greater 'knowledge of implications'. This is reinforced by a tacit acceptance that they are being monitored.

Have we finally found a way to suppress a generation and make them toe the line? We do hope that we haven't described the perfect recipe for greater social harmony, even if that is what we are seeing.

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