

HOW DO BRITISH TEENAGERS AGED 16-18 RECEIVE AND INTERPRET ALCOHOL  
MESSAGES PORTRAYED IN THE BRITISH SOAP OPERA *EASTENDERS*?

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## ABSTRACT

Reception of media texts by audiences continues to occupy a fundamental position in the field of media studies, particularly in the face of the technological advances characterising the contemporary television viewing environment. Through a qualitative approach, this study investigates the reception of health communication messages, in the form of harmful drinking storylines portrayed in the British soap opera *EastEnders*, by sixteen to eighteen-year olds, in a multi-media reception environment. This is in the context of the socio-economic and health burden imposed on the British society by harmful drinking particularly by this age-group.

The study takes a broad approach to reception and as such investigates the main moments of the circuit of culture for a holistic understanding of meaning-making processes by young people. To this end focus group interviews and long interviews were used to obtain views of young people and health experts while *EastEnders* producer and health organisations involved in the creation of alcohol storylines were also interviewed. Findings revealed that popular television in general, and the soap opera genre in particular, are predominantly viewed by both young people and health experts as effective channels to convey health communication for this age-group, while realism and the accuracy of portrayals were seen as paramount in aiding dominant readings.

Contrary to some public discourses and early media theories, findings showed that young people are active and analytical readers of media messages in general and alcohol messages in particular and not passive recipients. Furthermore, second screens (laptops, smart phones and tablets) used during *EastEnders* viewing enhanced their reception, understanding and interpretation of alcohol messages and viewing experience altogether. Notwithstanding the pedagogical value of *EastEnders*, the study unearthed a potential contradiction between soap opera generic conventions and narrative demands, which could possibly impact on its ability to effectively convey health communication messages in general and those concerning harmful drinking in particular.

## DEDICATION

*Glory to God for His grace in enabling the successful completion of this thesis. I am grateful!*

This thesis is dedicated to my beautiful daughter and best friend, **Nicole Thabisile**. You mean the world to me. I would never have done it without you. You cheered me on even when life happened and threatened our dreams. You gave me reason to soldier on during the most difficult of times. You patiently and cheerfully walked the journey with me and made it worthwhile. Your love, faith, prayers, loyalty and encouragement saw me through this journey. Thank you, daughter dearest!

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

The storyline about a young woman, Ruby Allen, who was raped by two men while excessively drunk, was recently portrayed in *EastEnders*, with both men having been convicted of rape in a recent episode. *EastEnders* is working with Rape Crisis on this storyline about sexual consent in the context of vulnerability caused by excessive drinking. This is yet another attempt by *EastEnders* to reflect life and bring social problems into the public domain and educate the public.

A significant body of insightful research has been conducted by various scholars in the field of media studies, on the reception by media audiences of different television genres including soap opera. However, most of the research on soap operas in particular, as the literature review chapter shows, focusses on the general reception of the genre by television audiences. There has been much less research into how specific soap opera messages are received by specific audiences. To help fill this gap, this study is much more focussed on a specific topic, which is the reception and interpretation of health communication in the form of alcohol-related messages portrayed in the British soap opera, *EastEnders*, by young British teenagers. We live in a society with a persistent problem of harmful drinking among its young people, and the social, economic and health impact it has. This is further compounded by the ongoing health and education sectors' funding cuts due to austerity. It still remains to be established what role the soap opera genre can play in conveying messages about harmful drinking to young viewers. This study therefore highlights the complex nature of the reception process among this age-group and reveals the strengths of the genre in conveying health messages. It also seeks to expose the potential contradiction between soap opera genre conventions and health communication, and the limitations the genre faces in its endeavour to reflect real life in a dynamic society. Through a qualitative approach, this study sets out to empirically investigate the above by employing a mixed method of data collection, where both focus group interviews and semi-structured long interviews are employed to obtain the views and perceptions of young people and alcohol experts on how *EastEnders* depicts harmful drinking messages, and how these are received and interpreted.

As this study is about the reception of alcohol messages by British teenagers, it is important to position it within the broad and wider context of alcohol use in society in general and within British society, in particular. While the fieldwork for the study takes place in Nottingham, the study is set within appropriate theoretical and geographical contexts, as such, I highlight how big a problem excessive drinking has become among young people in Europe, United Kingdom and Nottingham, and why it has become a cause for serious concern particularly in Britain. The discussion also unpacks the UK government's response to this problem and the potential contradictions within the response. Neo-liberal discourses, which I argue inform some of the depictions of harmful drinking by *EastEnders*, will also be discussed here. The discussion concludes by arguing that popular television genres could be part of a more effective and engaging strategy for young people. The rest of the chapter highlights the objectives of the study, the questions the study seeks to answer, its significance and rationale and a brief outline of the rest of the thesis.

## **STUDY CONTEXT**

### **Alcohol and society**

Alcohol use is not a new phenomenon as evidence shows that most traditional societies consumed alcohol and incorporated it into various cultural and social events (Hames, 2014:1). Alcohol consumption is also deeply embedded in contemporary social life, particularly as part of celebratory occasions (Hames, 2014:1).

Excessive drinking was condemned by most ancient societies while moderate drinking was associated with health benefits, although, as in modern day society, there was no clear definition of what constituted moderation or excess (Phillips, 2014:23-35). The health benefit of alcohol is widely debated in present day societies, as this study will show, with contemporary health discourses arguing that there is no health benefit from any amount of alcohol intake but instead, all alcohol consumption is now linked to different types of cancer (World Cancer Research Fund, 2018; American Institute for Cancer Research, 2018).

Concerns about the social, economic and health impact of excessive drinking arose in modern societies (Phillips, 2014:23), leading to social movements, which resulted in the prohibition of alcohol in some countries, although this was later reversed due to not achieving desired results (Boyle et al, 2013:9-10). Debates about the position of alcohol in society are ongoing

with calls for further restrictions on the availability and consumption of alcohol still being made (Boyle et al, 2013:9-10).

Research shows that alcohol is consumed in higher quantities in developed and wealthier countries than in developing ones, and that most Western societies have incorporated alcohol into every aspect of their social lives (Jernigan, 2001:2). Furthermore, more young people from developed countries are drinking excessively than those in other societies, although the practice is fast spreading to those in developing countries due to global alcohol promotion and marketing (Jernigan,2001:1). Widespread availability of cheap alcoholic beverages also encourages significant alcohol consumption by young people. Studies further show that young people are starting to drink alcohol at an earlier age than before, with evidence showing that this practice is likely to result in alcohol dependence and associated health-related problems, in the later stages of life (Jernigan, 2001:3).

Concerns about alcohol misuse have occupied centre stage due to the social, economic, health and other damage inflicted by alcohol in societies globally (World Health Organisation, 2014; Lester et al, 2016:67). Evidence however shows that more resources and publicity have been directed towards the war on drugs than to fighting harmful drinking. In the UK, it is estimated that at least £1.6bn a year is spent on anti-drug policy, with little impact on curbing availability and usage (Cowburn, 2017). Furthermore, the UK government is still reluctant to impose strict regulatory measures on alcohol compared to the neo-prohibitionist restrictive regime imposed on tobacco (Cairney and Studlar, 2014:2). This raises concerns about the different treatment of harmful drugs.

The World Health Organisation (2014) estimates the annual death toll caused by alcohol globally at 3.3 million. To address harmful drinking globally and particularly on young people, it has called on all member states to formulate effective alcohol policies and strategies such as setting a legal minimum age of alcohol purchase and consumption, taxation policies meant to make alcohol purchase unaffordable to young people, or regulation of alcohol marketing (Jernigan, 2001:ii). As this chapter will demonstrate, harmful drinking is however still occurring. This calls for effective, culture- and context-specific strategies to curb the practice particularly among young people, as educational and other interventions have shown little impact (Measham, 2006:258). This is in line with the United Nations' sustainable development goals, goal number 3, which focuses on the importance of health and well-being for all, at all ages (Sustainable Development Goals, 2019).

## **Alcohol use in Europe**

Europe appears to have embraced alcohol use in greater quantities more than any other global region, and has incorporated it into its culture more than any other societies have done (Phillips, 2014). Hirth et al (2015:1) note that, according to the WHO report 2014, Europe is the top alcohol consuming region in the world, hence alcohol abuse has impacted it much more than any other continent. Furthermore, alcoholic-related liver disease killed at least half a million Europeans in 2010 alone (Seitz, 2018:1). Within Europe, the United Kingdom has the second highest number of underage drinkers, a majority of whom drank before they reached the age of 13 (Jernigan, 2001:2). Alcohol abuse is therefore not just a global problem but a British one too (Yeomans, 2013:59).

## **Alcohol and British society**

For centuries, British society has maintained a very close relationship with alcohol. Alcohol has been seen as one of the symbols of Britishness and a definition of British national identity and pride (Brooks, 2016). Although recent statistics show a significant decrease in the number of pubs in contemporary British society, there is still a high number of drinking places, alcohol outlets and public houses (pubs) in most British cities, testifying to the acceptable culture of drinking (Statista, 2020; Plant and Plant, 2002). It has thus been argued that young people who grow up in a 'wet' society and culture (Newburn and Shiner, 2001:1) such as this, where drinking alcohol is a common, socially acceptable, pleasurable and legitimate activity (Supski, Lindsay and Tanner, 2017:232), need to be taught how to drink and use alcohol in a safe, socially acceptable and responsible manner, to prevent harmful usage in adulthood (Pavis et al, 1997:311).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, British society experienced an unexpected and disturbing increase in the number of excessive drinkers (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007:441), with some scholars calling this dramatic change a new culture of intoxication, fuelled by a determination, particularly by young people, to get drunk and associate fun with excessive drinking (Measham, 2006:258). Readily available and attractive night-club life contributed to the problem (Measham, 2006:260). Recent NHS statistics (2018) reveal that in England, alcohol intake per person, per day, rose to 9.7 grams, an increase of 7.7% in 2016 compared to the previous year. Similarly, the UK household alcohol expenditure has also doubled to £19.9 billion in 2017, up from £9.3 billion in 1985 (NHS, 2018).

The impact of harmful drinking is felt by all sectors of British society. At least one million hospital admissions a year, three quarters of emergency and accident patients every weekend and over 21 000 deaths per annum in England, are a result of alcohol related causes (Mann, 2016). Harmful drinking cost the NHS at least £3.5 billion annually (Mann, 2016). The severity of alcohol misuse in Britain prompted the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to call it the new British disease (Brooks, 2016).

### **Alcohol and Nottingham city**

Findings show that Nottingham city, where this study is located, is one English city with a reputation for having a troubled relationship with alcohol (Hollows et al, 2014:2). It has a very large student population and vibrant night-time economy largely characterised by excessive drinking, mostly by young people. Alcohol-fuelled violence and crime arguably increased in Nottingham city after the 2003 Licensing Act extended drinking hours, in comparison with other cities, which experienced a decrease instead (Hollows et al, 2014:10-11).

In the 2004 BBC *Panorama* episode entitled, “Couldn’t give a xxxx for Last Orders” which highlighted the consequences of the liberalisation of licensing laws in England, Nottingham city was focused on as a particularly problematic place. In Nottingham, the new laws led to the proliferation of drinking places in the city centre and cheap alcohol promotion, marketing and advertising, in a bid to regenerate the city and attract more people into the city centre. While the move may have promoted the desired vibrant late night-time economy, it also encouraged binge drinking which has been detrimental to the city. Public disorder, violence, high crime rate, street littering and high hospital admissions have all resulted from the excessive and harmful drinking in the city. Consequently, the non-binging ‘responsible’ drinkers and citizens, the police force, ambulance services and hospital staff have all carried the alcohol-fuelled burden.

According to *Panorama*, Nottingham City has an unusually high number of drinking places for a city its size, compared to other English cities, which arguably fuels the excessive drinking crisis. 356 licensed premises within one square mile of the city of Nottingham were located. The chaos fuelled by the binge drinking resulting in over 80 000 arrests annually for drunkenness and disorder in the city centre, can be attributed to the licensing law. The police argued that violence appeared to be following the new drinking premises continuously being opened. Concerns have been raised over the reputation of the city. Below are comments from

a senior police officer and a cafe owner in the city, who had to sell their cafe business due to alcohol-fuelled disorder, both were interviewed by *Panorama*:

*“I see a very vibrant city [Nottingham], I see a city that I feel very proud of, but I see a city that...puts at risk its reputation, puts at risk all the good things that are happening here because of the fact that there are too many licensed premises concentrated in too small an area.” (police officer)*

*“It's an ugly city [Nottingham]. It's really ugly. I actually feel sorry for the police and the job they've got. It's just not right. I don't know who's allowed all these bars to open...?” (Café business owner)*

It can be argued that the night-time economy concept might be conflicted. While the goal is to stimulate the local night-life economy and generate revenue from businesses, the concept also creates further challenges for the local authority due to having to police city centres and respond to voters' concerns about any alcohol-related disorder.

In light of harmful drinking facing contemporary British society, it is perhaps no surprise that we have witnessed concerns from different sectors of society.

### **Alcohol representation (advertising/marketing) and young people**

Some of the public concern was fuelled by fears that alcohol producers were increasingly targeting young people and enticing them to drink more through alcohol adverts, leading critics to conclude that British alcohol advertisers are responsible for encouraging extreme alcohol consumption in the country (Measham, 2006:260-261). With the alcohol problem among young people fast approaching international epidemic status, it is considered irresponsible to market alcoholic drinks to young people (Jernigan, 2001:43). Studies further reveal that exposing young non-drinkers to alcohol adverts increased their chances of drinking while those who were already drinkers drank more frequently after the exposure (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009:1). Other studies have reported concerns over an increase in the portrayal of alcohol and drinking scenes in British soap operas compared to previous studies, and in comparison with other countries, with few if any corresponding portrayals of the consequences (Furnham et al, 1997:523-527; Verma et al, 2007:576). Chapter three discusses these studies. Marketing, via the internet, in pubs and night clubs, of cheap alcohol products commonly known as *alcopops*<sup>1</sup> and other pre-mixed alcoholic beverages targeted at young

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<sup>1</sup> The importance of this product lies in the way that alcohol was sweetened and made more palatable for teenagers, that is, it tasted like pop rather than harsh alcohol.

people, has also been blamed for promoting excessive drinking, as these products are known to get young people drunk a lot quicker (Jernigan, 2001:42).

The assertion about the potential impact of television portrayals on viewers is based on the effects the media are alleged to have on their audiences, a view that has been criticised by media theorists. While the researches acknowledge that it is impossible to argue for a causal relationship between alcohol advertising/marketing and the actions of young people, the conclusion reached is that there is a possibility that the adverts are affecting young people negatively and hence the need for regulation to control their content. To fill the gap in the assumptions outlined above, this study develops an empirical investigation into how a real and tangible group of young British people, receive and interpret alcohol messages from the television drama, *EastEnders*, in comparison with the young people implied in these studies. Conclusions drawn from the findings contribute to ongoing debates about the relationship between the media and their audiences.

### **Definitions of intoxication, excessive, harmful, binge, unacceptable and irresponsible drinking**

There is no universal definition of excessive drinking nor a fixed position regarding its perception, as such, shifting views characterise the debates. Most writers associate it with intoxication, perceived as excessive alcohol intake on one drinking occasion usually resulting in anti-social behaviour (Room, 2011:145), or a physiological state that is caused by heavy drinking and is usually known as ‘drunkenness’ (Martinic and Measham, 2008:3).

Subsequent sections of this chapter provide further perceptions of intoxication and binge drinking.

### **Definitions of Alcoholism**

Similar to notions of excessive drinking and moderate drinking, there is no single definition of alcoholism. Below are the most common definitions of alcoholism. Morse et al (1992:1) define it as a fatal and progressive chronic disease which is influenced by genetic, psychosocial and environmental factors. Room (2011:143) holds a similar view which perceives alcoholism as a disease or condition transmitted through an individual’s upbringing and exacerbated by chronic drinking leading to alcohol dependency (Room, 2011:143). Symptoms of alcoholism, which can be continuous or periodic arguably include lack of control over drinking, continued use of alcohol despite severe consequences, inability to think clearly and most commonly denial (Morse et al, 1992:1).

### **Definitions of normal, acceptable, moderate, reasonable and responsible drinking**

Dufour (1999:5) argues that while there is an increased appreciation of the benefits and risks of moderate drinking by scholars and society in general, there is no universal definition of moderate drinking due to, among other things, variations in defining what constitutes an alcoholic drink and different ways of measuring alcohol consumption levels and drinking patterns, all of which vary from country to country. Existing definitions are based on the specific number of alcoholic drinks consumed within a certain time-frame, however, this can be problematic as alcoholic drinks differ and so does the alcohol content in each drink (Dufour, 1999:5). The dictionary meaning of the term 'moderate' suggests avoidance of extreme behaviour, observing limits and exercising self-control (Dufour, 199:12). Researchers argue that moderate drinking refers to much more than the above (Dufour, 199:12).

Furthermore, the concept is characterised by debates on what is considered moderate. What may be considered moderate alcohol consumption to one person may be excessive to the next (Dufour, 1999:12). Similarly, the effects of alcohol vary from individual to individual due to differences in blood alcohol levels of each individual (Dufour, 1999:13). Biologically, women would be more affected by the same alcohol level consumed than men, while younger people will be less affected than older ones (Dufour, 1999:13). Despite varying definitions and perceptions, moderate drinking can arguably be considered as risk-free, sensible drinking that does not attract negative effects (Dufour, 1999:12-13). Although moderate drinking is sometimes mistaken for social drinking, Dufour (1999) argues that the two notions differ in that not all social drinking levels are necessarily moderate or risk free.

Yeomans (2013:58) argues that moderate drinking is predominantly socially constructed as a counterpoint to excessive drinking and that its definition is fluid. Further compounding the understanding of the concept is the lack of scientific evidence and general agreement on the nature and amount of alcohol consumption that can be said to be safe, responsible and causing an acceptable level of risk (Yeomans, 2013:58). Attempts to define moderate drinking often result in associating the practice with adjectives like, safe, low risk, sensible and socially responsible, an approach which is arguably unreliable as the meaning of these words is subjective (Yeomans, 2013:60). Yeomans (2013:66-67) cites evidence by a Royal College of Physicians (RCP) committee member who suggests that the then alcohol limits in force were not based on firm scientific evidence but an agreed figure to use as a guideline for

moderate drinking. The guidelines on recommended alcohol units could be paralleled with the government advice on eating five portions of fresh fruit and vegetables a day, a recommendation that may arguably not be scientifically grounded, but acts as a simplified public health guideline. This approach to simplify public health messages is part of the public health and safety communication strategy. In public health communication, health risk information and health recommendations are communicated in a way that avoids “asserting certainty when tentativeness and degrees of probability would be more accurate” (Guttman and Salmon, 2004:541). This means that information used in public health messages may be tentative, incomplete or subject to different interpretations (Guttman and Salmon, 2004:541).

Despite the above views on moderate drinking, recent debates and evidence suggest that there is no risk free or safe level of alcohol consumption (Boseley, 2018b), as all alcohol drinkers risked getting seven types of cancer (World Cancer Research Fund, 2018; American Institute for Cancer Research, 2018; Cancer Research UK, 2019).

### **Young people and alcohol in the United Kingdom**

Young people are defined by the United Nations as those that fall in the 15-24 age-group (Roberts, 2004). While the age range may differ in different countries, sectors or societies, this seems to be the most commonly accepted definition which this study will also use. As discussed, evidence shows that the UK has one of the highest percentages of underage drinkers, excessive drinkers and frequent users of cheap, fruity alcoholic beverages (Davies et al, 2018). Moreover, significant research on the drinking habits of young people in England and Scotland points to a rising culture of determined drunkenness and heavy intoxication (Measham, 2006:258). This practice is commonly termed *binge drinking* ((De Visser et al, 2013:1461), a term now particularly used to refer to the heavy drinking habits of young people rather than those of any other age-group in the UK (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007:441; Norman, Armitage, and Quigley, 2007:502). There is however no consensus regarding the definition, use and measurement of binge drinking (De Visser et al, 2013:1461). Early views described it as drinking to intoxication over a prolonged period of time, while others see it as exceeding half the recommended weekly units set by the government in one drinking session. High alcohol intake in one session appears to be the most common definition, although there is still no agreement on how much alcohol intake constitutes ‘high intake’ that would qualify as binge drinking (Szmigin et al, 2008). The popular use of the term particularly by the government and press, has been met with criticism as it is seen as an ‘emotive, unclear and

politically charged' term, which arguably does not take into account the social aspects of alcohol use and the pleasure young people derive from it (Szmigin et al, 2008:3). Szmigin et al (2008:7) prefer to use the term 'calculated hedonism' to describe the drinking practices of young people which are organised around the pleasure derived from drinking. Young people can arguably choose when, where and who to drink with, meaning that even when they drink excessively, they are still in relative control. This notion of drinking is also sometimes called 'controlled loss of control' (Murphy et al, 2017: 399). The concept of calculated hedonism was typically located within the hedonism (unbounded) of the rave era, where excessive drinking particularly by young people was an integral part of leisure and pleasure seeking (Fry, 2011:1).

Martinic and Measham (2008:1) on the other hand propose to call the drinking patterns and behaviours of young people, '*extreme drinking*', because they are multi-dimensional and involve heavy and excessive drinking accompanied by intoxication, injury, social disturbances, violence and sometimes even death. Such behaviours are motivated by the desire to take risks, excitement and pursuit of pleasure (Martinic and Measham, 2008). Extreme drinking therefore takes into account the motivation for young people's heavy, excessive and unrestrained drinking and the behavioural element, which includes possible actions, outcomes and risks that can result from such drinking (Martinic and Measham, 2008:2). They further argue that while intoxication characterises most extreme drinking behaviours of young people, common terms used to describe such drinking behaviours, such as 'binge', 'heavy episodic', 'excessive', 'harmful' and 'hazardous' drinking, still do not adequately define the practice, hence 'extreme drinking' remains the only umbrella term for such drinking patterns as it goes beyond merely focussing on consumption levels to describe the processes and patterns of consumption too (Martinic and Measham, 2008:2,8).

Studies conducted in Manchester, North West England, Scotland and elsewhere in the UK all reveal that the 16-24-year-old age-group were the heaviest drinkers, making them the most vulnerable to alcohol-related health, social, personal and criminal problems (Windle, 2003; Measham, 2006:262). Of particular concern is that most young people seem to be aware of sensible drinking campaigns and the acceptable alcohol units that constitute sensible drinking but choose to ignore this information, which suggests that educational campaigns so far have not been particularly successful in changing alcohol consumption patterns (Measham, 2006:262).

### **Why young people binge drink**

Studies carried out in England and Wales revealed that most young people viewed excessive drinking as part of wider British culture, endorsed by their families and peers and hence a socially acceptable routine (Engineer et al, 2003:25). The practice has become so ingrained in their social lives that it has become a habit and norm. They also binged on alcohol for pleasure, mood alteration, stress relief (coping), escapism, peer pressure (to fit in), to boost self-confidence as well as a lack of experience about when to stop, resulting in non-deliberate bingeing (Kuntsche et al, 2005:841). Those who drank for social reasons drank moderately, those who drank to enhance confidence were heavier drinkers while those who used alcohol as a coping strategy were associated with alcohol-related problems (Kuntsche et al, 2005:841). Excessive drinking by young people in certain contexts has been associated with anti-social behaviour, criminal offences (rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment) and risk taking (unprotected sex with strangers) (Pavis et al, 1997:320). Furthermore, some young people tend to view binge drinking as an excuse for bad behaviour and thus treat the negative behaviours associated with it as part of the fun (Engineer et al, 2003:27).

Changes in the licensing laws and the expansion of the night time economy in most British cities have arguably resulted in a change in the culture of alcohol use in the UK, and an increase in the number of young people participating in the night culture and excessive drinking associated with it (De Visser et al, 2013:1460), as revealed by the *Panorama* investigation discussed earlier. Concerns have thus been raised by the government and the media regarding the health and social consequences of these developments (De Visser et al, 2013:1460). It is argued that on the one hand, young people were the main targeted participants of the night-time economy, but on the other hand they were also blamed for increasing public disturbances (Supski, Lindsay and Tanner, 2017). Echoing the above sentiments, Smith (2013:1073) posits that for most participants in his study, the night-time economy had become the norm and not an exception, while pubs and bars had become places where friendships and relationships were developed and sustained. Participation in the night-time economy can also be said to be part of youth cultures and collective identity formation as well as the desire to fit in and become part of a social group, that is, bonding (Smith, 2013:1072). This view is echoed by De Visser et al (2013:1461), who argue that drinking and drunkenness constitute a key part of the social lives of many young people and that the pleasure of individual intoxication often leads to togetherness or bonding.

### **Moral panics and concerns about the impact of alcohol on young people**

While the above concerns about young people's excessive drinking gave rise to moral panics, excessive drinking is nonetheless a real problem that one should approach in ways informed by evidence as this chapter reveals.

Goode (2017:1) defines a moral panic as, "an intense, heightened sense of exaggerated concern about a threat or supposed threat posed by deviants presumably responsible for menacing the physical safety or the culture or way of life of society or sectors of society." The objects of moral panics can be new social practices or disguised versions of traditional social 'evils' that have resurfaced, and are feared to be detrimental to the moral fibre of society (Cohen, 2011: vii). The term 'panic' is viewed as problematic as it connotes irrationality and being out of control and that while the social practice in question may be real, the reaction by society to its supposed seriousness, threat, risk, damage, significance and extent may be exaggerated, unwarranted and irrational (Goode, 2017:1; Cohen, 2011: vii). Moral panics stemmed from the fear that young people were going to be victims of harmful drinking because they lack drinking experience (Measham, 2006:262) and also have a desire for experimentation, risk-taking and succumbing to peer pressure due to their age (Engineer et al, 2003:48).

While we need to be aware of the danger posed by moral panics, we should not overcompensate by downplaying the real harm caused to young people by alcohol. Evidence highlights that they are likely to be more severely affected by excessive drinking than any other age-group, as early alcohol use can lead to dependence in later stages of life and also increase the risk of psychological and physical problems (World Health Organisation, 2014). Consequences of alcohol abuse by young people include: reduced performance at school, reduced productivity at work, vandalism, accidents, injury, loss of valuables, relationship problems, risky sexual behaviour, criminal activity and violence (Jernigan, 2001:5). Further compounding the problem is that many young people take both alcohol and recreational drugs when drunk, something they would not do when sober (Armstrong et al, 2014).

### **Government's response to binge drinking**

The British government has acknowledged in all of its three alcohol strategies in 2004, 2007 and 2012 (Yeomans, 2013:59) that binge drinking has become a big health, social and financial burden to society and have ranked it as high priority requiring a multi-sector approach to curb the problem (The Government Alcohol Strategy, 2012). Furthermore, the

then Prime Minister, David Cameron argued that binge drinking, “drains resources in our hospitals, generates mayhem on our streets and spreads fear in our communities” (The Government Alcohol Strategy, 2012:2). Despite existing alcohol regulation in England, critics believe the government is not doing enough to address excessive drinking, even with figures showing its detriment to society (Mann, 2016). Of particular concern was the government’s decision to drop the minimum unit pricing policy, preferring to impose a ban on below cost selling of alcohol instead, a strategy criticised as ineffective (Brennan et al, 2014:1).

There seems to be a contradiction between alcohol regulation and revenue creation, as the government are arguably prioritising profits from the alcohol industry, over its harm (Gilmore and Daube, 2014; Brooks, 2016). For instance, the English and Welsh alcohol legislation regulates consumers only while retailers have a free rein, unlike in Scotland where tight restrictions are placed on alcohol marketing and promotion strategies perceived to be encouraging excessive drinking, such as the ‘happy hours’ and ‘drink all you can’ offers targeting young people (Measham, 2006:264). The Licensing Act of 2003, in particular, which extended alcohol outlets opening hours, has attracted huge criticism for encouraging and escalating the binge drinking problem (Measham, 2006:264; Critcher, 2011).

Compounding the problem is the alcohol industry which is blamed for underplaying the need for alcohol marketing and supply regulation to curb alcohol-related harm in order to protect their profits (Buykx et al, 2015:372). Professor Adam Winstock, in an interview with *The Guardian* on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2018 expressed his concerns, “The alcohol industry which makes profits from selling its product will never embrace anything that might lead to people drinking less. A self-regulated industry will always regulate to optimise profits not public health” (Boseley, 2018a).

The alcohol industry opted instead to defend moderate consumption while deploring excessive drinkers (Casswell, 2013:680), a view that sits within neo-liberal discourses which tend to attribute alcohol problems to the individual (Room, 2011:143). To the advocates of the liberalisation of alcohol controls and regulation, alcoholism was seen as a disease, attributed to genes or an individual’s upbringing (Room, 2011:143). Those classed as ‘moderate’ drinkers, who drank responsibly were seen as having a right to enjoy alcohol and not to be subjected to excessive alcohol controls (Haydock, 2014:10-11).

Room (2011:144) notes a contradiction built into the contemporary ideology of consumer sovereignty regarding alcohol consumption. While it is acknowledged that when consumed excessively, alcohol can impact on the individual's capabilities and performance in various societal roles, a huge responsibility is still placed on them to balance their consumption with other societal responsibilities (Room, 2011:144). Haydock (2014:13) argues that government discourses and alcohol strategies over the years have made it clear that all responsibility was placed on the individual.

### **Health promotion and neo-liberalism**

Ayo (2012) echoes the above arguments about the individualisation of health matters in most present-day western societies due to the influence of neo-liberal ideology. Of the five basic tenets of neo-liberal reality Ayo (2012:99) cites, I have referred to two which are relevant to this study: minimal government intervention and individual responsibility. These principles are embedded in contemporary health promotion discourses (Hermes et al, 2017:598). Under neo-liberalism, the government downplays its own and industry's responsibility for effecting change and instead transfers responsibility to the individual by placing them at the centre of the health promotion strategies and making them accountable for their own individual health choices and practices (Ayo, 2012:102). All social issues are made personal issues and any failings by the state to provide social systems that have a direct impact on health outcomes are construed as individual failures. This is problematic as broad social-political and economic structures that impact health issues like unemployment, poverty and illiteracy are completely ignored and instead everything is attributed to poor individual choices (Ayo, 2012:102). Arguably, these discourses did not materialise out of nowhere but were constructed and led by government policies. This happened in the UK in the mid to late 1980s and reached their peak in the early New Labour years.

The textual analysis and study findings indicate that neo-liberal discourses are at play in the depiction of harmful drinking by *EastEnders*, and that key genre conventions lend themselves to a neo-liberal worldview, as I will show.

### **Proposed solutions to curb harmful drinking**

One of the proposed solutions involves putting in place effective alcohol policies like taxation, price hikes, increasing the legal drinking age, alcohol marketing and advertising restrictions as well as reducing the quantity of drinking outlets and opening hours (Grube and

Nygaard, 2001:43). Ironically, the number of drinking premises has been increased and alcohol outlets' opening times extended by the Licensing Act of 2003, a move criticised as aggravating the problem.

Effective communication which reinforces sensible drinking messages, and highlights the risks of excessive drinking, with the aim of behavioural change, is perceived as another solution (Engineer, 2003:vi). To be effective, campaigns should consider the wider socio-cultural contexts of young people and their reasons for drinking, rather than generic messages (Measham, 2006:262). Other views are that total abstinence is the only solution to excessive drinking, as safe drinking campaigns and conventional school-based alcohol education have not been particularly effective so far, and also most young people are already aware of the legal limits but actively choose to ignore them (Measham, 2006:262). Davies et al (2018:3) and De Visser et al (2013:1460) posit that studies conducted in the United Kingdom with young people aged between 13 and 25 years revealed that they found alcohol interventions patronising, preaching or providing information they already knew. However, further findings revealed that young people preferred multi-faceted alcohol interventions that utilise modern technology and new media and also pay more attention to the pleasure obtained from drinking rather than focussing more on risks and harm to health (De Visser et al, 2013:1461). Findings from my study have shed light on the above views and assumptions about the nature of alcohol knowledge that real young people possess or lack, the reality about access to alcohol-related information by young people, the current status of government-funded alcohol intervention strategies targeted at this age-group and young people's views about school-based alcohol interventions (see chapters six and seven).

### **Health communication and funding cuts**

Evidence shows that the UK government has reduced funding in most sectors of the economy due to austerity. The health and education sectors are among the most affected sectors. According to The Health Foundation's (2018) analysis of the 2018 budget, while the NHS overall budget may appear to have been increased, the department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) budget, which includes funding for Health Education England, is set to fall by at least £1bn in 2019/2020, further impacting the already affected service delivery (The Health Foundation, 2018). Funding cuts have thus contributed to the demise of government funded health education programmes as local authorities can no longer afford to deliver or fund alcohol awareness programmes in local schools under their care. Alcohol recovery centres

have also been impacted and can no longer afford to visit schools to deliver alcohol awareness lessons at all or as much as they need to.

Education funding in general and secondary and sixth form expenditure in particular have also been significantly cut, making the 16-18 age-group the most affected group (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2018:7). Funding per student in this age-group was cut by 20% in 2017-2018 while secondary school expenditure per pupil has also decreased significantly since 2015, which is arguably the worst reduction in 20 years (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2018:30). The cuts have resulted in tight budgets for schools leading to the reduction and in most cases, complete removal of non-core activities, including health education intervention programmes from schools' expenditure.

The impact of funding cuts was evident in my study findings in that the majority of the young people interviewed could not recall having internally or externally delivered alcohol awareness programmes. The health education experts interviewed echoed these sentiments citing funding cuts as the reason for the absence of health education interventions in most schools, as discussed in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

### **Significance of the study**

The above context has revealed how big a problem teenage drinking is in society in general and Britain in particular. It has also highlighted the need for new interventions. While evidence shows that harmful drinking is indeed a growing concern for the UK government, funding meant to be channelled towards curbing this social problem is continuously being cut, leading to a paradoxical situation. Television health communication has thus become even more crucial as it is now filling the gap created by funding cuts, making it one of the few sources of alcohol education that young people can still access, albeit indirectly. Moreover, soap operas in particular are perceived to be an excellent way of conveying social messages such as the consequences of binge drinking to adolescents, through entertainment-education (Brown, 2000).

Entertainment-education, also known as 'edutainment' or 'infotainment' (Pan American Health Organisation, 2004:1), is a health communication strategy often used to communicate health messages to young people (Scott, 2005). It is a hybrid genre which combines information, education and entertainment (Pan American Health Organisation, 2004:1), to

maximise the reach and effectiveness of health messages (Rogers et al, 2000:81). As an instrument for social learning, 'entertainment-education' seeks to influence social values and behaviour, particularly those of adolescents often through the use of television and radio soap operas (Pan American Health Organisation, 2004:1).

The strategy is premised on the assertion that education does not have to be dull but can incorporate entertainment formats to promote pro-social attitudes and behaviour (Waisbord, 2001:7). As previous studies and this study show, most young people find conventional health communication strategies unappealing and instead prefer to consume entertainment media. It is therefore hoped that the entertainment-education concept will help resolve challenges faced by health communicators (Waisbord, 2001:7). To this end, health communicators are engaging different communication strategies, the media and popular television included, as explained by Guttman and Salmon (2004:551), "even television entertainment programmes such as soap operas and sitcoms have health messages strategically infused into their plots or scenery, for the purpose of influencing viewers". The media are thus viewed as an efficient and effective channel through which to impart knowledge, generate emotion, garner support and stimulate information seeking in audiences defined on the basis of health risks (Winett and Wallack, 1996:174). Furthermore, individuals learn behaviour by observing role models, particularly in the mass media, with the hope that negative role models and the negative behaviours associated with them will be condemned by the viewers and positive ones emulated (Waisbord, 2001:7). Role modelling of characters in health soap operas is also intended to stimulate discussion of sensitive topics by members of the audience, as discussed in more detail, in subsequent chapters of this study.

This study is therefore crucial and timely as it enhances an understanding of how young people are receiving and interpreting the health messages conveyed by popular television in general and *EastEnders* in particular. Through a qualitative approach, views and perceptions have been obtained from young people in focus group interviews on how *EastEnders* depicts alcohol-related messages. Further perceptions were obtained from alcohol experts in long interviews, to establish their views on how the alcohol messages are portrayed by *EastEnders* and how they think the messages will be received and interpreted by the real young people. Both groups provided insightful assessments which will no doubt inform future research and enhance the quality and effectiveness of popular television health communication.

### **Why *EastEnders*?**

One of the strategies employed by the government to address excessive drinking among young people, is through a multi-sector approach (The Government Alcohol Strategy, 2012), with the media being one of the sectors due to its capacity to reach large audience groups and set the agenda for public debate (Buykx et al., 2015:372). It is in this context that social issues like harmful drinking are incorporated into some soap opera storylines to raise awareness and stimulate debate. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)'s *EastEnders* is one such programme.

The BBC is a public service provider (Swann and Forster, 2011), constitutionally established under a Royal Charter (Yoshiko, 2007:56). It is publicly funded mainly by license fees paid by television set owners (Yoshiko, 2007:56). Due to the nature of its funding, the BBC has a public mandate to fulfil. To this end, the institution's goal is to serve all sectors of the British public with programmes that inform, educate and entertain (Swann and Forster, 2011:79). These values are drawn from the Corporation's first Director general, John Reith's public service broadcasting philosophy, now commonly known as the Reithian trinity (Enli, 2008: 107). *EastEnders*, as a BBC programme therefore serves to fulfill this mandate. Unlike some other soaps, it has an educational role that needs to be satisfied. While it is acknowledged that the soap opera has a wide viewership, it remains to be established how young people receive and interpret alcohol messages portrayed and if they are incorporating the representations into their own lives, hence this study.

*EastEnders* has been selected as the focus for the study because, in addition to its educational role, social realism and bold stance in portraying sensitive and sometimes controversial social issues, it has a mixed but predominantly young audience in comparison with its counterparts. As Buckingham explains, this is due to its significant cast of strong, young and predominantly teenage characters, which enables it to tackle teenage-related social issues and by so doing appeal to a similar age-group. Since its inception in 1985, *EastEnders* has always intended to appeal to younger viewers in order to retain this audience group for as long as possible, as well as to fill the gap left by its counterpart at the time, *Coronation Street*, whose cast of older characters appealed more to older viewers (Buckingham, 1987:16). Furthermore, Buckingham (1987:154-155) sees the fact that *EastEnders* was used by teachers in schools as a teaching aid in Social Studies and English lessons as evidence that it has been successful in attracting young people. More young characters continue to feature in *EastEnders* in comparison with most

locally grown soap operas. While Buckingham's comments date back to the 1980s, more recent comments by one of *EastEnders*' producers interviewed for this study in 2017 confirmed that the pattern continues. While the interviewee was unable to divulge specific statistics and figures relating to current viewer demographics for reasons of confidentiality, they acknowledged that, although the soap opera aims to address social issues affecting all age-groups, in line with its mandate, it can be said that its focus since inception has been to capture young audiences more than other home-grown soap operas can. Their comments on this follow:

*“EastEnders’ audience comprises a vast age range. Whilst not a show for young children, our viewers span from early teens right up to octogenarians and beyond! The format of a soap means that in any given episode there will be a portfolio of stories – some sensational, some human-size, some touching, some thrilling, some dramatic and some humorous. Similarly, with a large cast of varying ages – all of whom need to be served across the year – some of these stories will tap into elder experiences, some centre on middle-aged characters and some on the younger protagonists. This means that within our mix we can play stories that are relevant to our young viewers (e.g. Bex and her school bullying, teenage sex, sexting, etc.) as well as giving our older viewers insight into what their siblings, children and grandchildren are having to navigate in their young lives. Traditionally, compared to our main competitors our viewer demographics have skewed to the younger viewing segments because, since its inception, EastEnders has seemed comparatively edgier, more urban and more real. Pragmatically, if we can engage viewers at a younger age then hopefully, we can keep them watching throughout their lives.”*

Furthermore, *EastEnders*' frequent portrayal of alcohol storylines particularly those involving young people, makes it appropriate for investigating the reception of the same by the study's target audience, the young people. Furnham et al (1997:521) found that of all prime-time British soap operas analysed as part of a study carried out to establish the frequency of alcohol scenes and heavy drinking in British soap operas, *EastEnders* had one of the highest instances of alcohol scenes, as chapter three will show. Moreover, recent concerns have been raised over the portrayal of more alcohol imagery and drinking scenes by some British soap operas when young people are watching television, raising fears that this might negatively impact young viewers and encourage them to take up drinking or drink excessively. These were findings from the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol studies (UKCTAS, 2018) study. *EastEnders* was again cited as one of the perpetrators of excessive drinking portrayals.

### **Rationale for the study**

Previous studies in the field focus predominantly on the reception of soap operas in general, that is, how soap opera audiences generally receive soaps and why they are popular (Ang,

1985; Buckingham, 1987; Livingstone, 1988; Hobson, 1989; Middleham and Wober, 1997; Wheatley, 1999; Madill and Goldmeier, 2003). In contrast, this study focuses on the reception of a specific message carried by the soap opera, thus developing a more distinct emphasis. Furthermore, most current and previous empirical research studies in the audience research field involve older participants (Ang, 1985; Livingstone, 1988; Hobson, 1989; Madill and Goldmeier, 2003) and very few include young people (Buckingham, 1987; Atkinson et al, 2013). This study, which is about the reception practices of young people, will address this gap. As chapter three will show, most studies on the representation of alcohol in the media in general and soap operas in particular tend to analyse content rather than reception (UKCTAS, 2018; Furnham et al, 1997; Verma et al, 2007). Views on how the messages were essentially received by the young people were not obtained. Only one study carried out by Atkinson et al (2013) (see chapter three) went beyond content analysis and investigated the reception of the alcohol messages by young people. Notwithstanding the significant contribution of Atkinson et al (2013), the current study will be one of the few studies to empirically and holistically investigate the depiction of alcohol messages on popular television and their reception by young people in England and thus contribute to the limited body of research that exists.

Moreover, most research in the field so far, was conducted before the proliferation of digital technologies which have arguably transformed the contemporary media audience. This means there are limited insights into the reception of media texts, particularly soap operas, in this current environment. This study will therefore be the first to explore the reception of a specific soap opera message by young people in a multiple screen reception context and offer new insights in the area.

Furthermore, this study will be one of the few studies which attempts to investigate all moments of the original circuit of culture proposed by Hall (1980), which are the production, content and reception moments, for a holistic understanding of the generation of social meanings by media texts (Philo, 2007:195). Although the main focus is the reception/audience moment, effort has been made to interview one of the programme producers to get an insight into production processes. Textual analysis was also conducted to enable a comparison of textual discourses with those of the audience and thus gain a better understanding of how meaning is produced at the text/audience interface. One should note that the circuit of culture originally proposed by Hall (1980) has been modified by other

writers (Johnson, 1986:283-284; Du Gay et al, 2013:3). Johnson (1986) amended Hall's (1980) circuit of culture to include four moments; production, texts, reading and lived cultures (Johnson in Buckingham, 2008:98) and argued that all four dimensions feed into each other. This model has since been modified and expanded by Du Gay et al (2013). Du Gay et al's proposed model consists of five interrelated processes namely; representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation (Du Gay et al, 2013:3). The current study focusses on the production, text and consumption processes as they are the most relevant to the study objectives. Although it does not provide a detailed outline of the regulation processes surrounding *EastEnders*, as it is beyond its scope, it does however highlight key regulatory elements governing the BBC as a Public Service Broadcaster.

### **This study: objective, research questions and outline**

To investigate how young people from different socio-cultural contexts receive and interpret alcohol messages portrayed in *EastEnders*. Given the above context and background, it is therefore the aim of the study to ask the following questions:

1. How do young people from diverse social, cultural, religious, racial and other backgrounds, interpret and negotiate alcohol messages in *EastEnders*?
2. How do the alcohol representations compare with their lived experiences and their own alcohol practices, and are the messages incorporated into their everyday lives?
3. How do young people perceive or view the use of the soap opera genre to convey alcohol-related messages?
4. What role do second screens (smart phones, tablets and laptops) play in young people's viewing and interpretation of alcohol messages portrayed in *EastEnders*?
5. How do alcohol professionals evaluate the pedagogic value of *EastEnders* and what knowledge do they use to arrive at their views?

### **Thesis outline**

The thesis consists of eight chapters. This first chapter positions the study within broader debates about harmful drinking particularly among young people in Europe in general and the United Kingdom in particular, and thus exposes the magnitude of the problem among Britain's young population. It establishes a justification for the study by highlighting the significance of television health communication at a time of austerity when alcohol intervention programmes targeted at young people have reduced significantly. The rest of the chapter outlines the objectives, research questions and significance of the study.

*Chapter Two* discusses the theoretical framework informing the study, which is reception analysis and second screen theory, a subsidiary theory which the study also draws on, in line with calls for contemporary media audience studies to position their reception studies within the current multi-media viewing environment. The field of reception analysis argues that the reception of media messages is a complicated process because media audiences are active recipients of messages, capable of interpreting messages in multiple ways due to different factors including socio-cultural and economic influences, race, gender, age, religion, lived experiences and profession. Second screen theory, on the other hand, postulates that the contemporary media reception environment has been complicated by the emergence and active use of portable multi-media devices called second screens (smart phones, tablets and laptops) by television audiences in general and young people in particular during television viewing. The simultaneous use of second screens during television viewing has raised concerns about their potential impact on the reception of media messages by contemporary audiences.

*Chapter Three* reviews the literature informing this study using it to provide a brief history of the soap opera genre and how it generates meaning and appeal to its audiences. It critically discusses previous soap opera reception studies and those relating to *EastEnders* in particular, and in the process exposes the gap which this study will fill. Chapters two and three form the theoretical basis informing the study.

*Chapter Four* details the methodological framework underpinning the study, which is the qualitative methodology, chosen because of its suitability to answer the research questions. Focus group and semi-structured long interviews are the two main data gathering methods used to obtain views and perceptions of the study participants, due to their ability to produce rich and in-depth qualitative data. This chapter also outlines the Framework Analysis approach used to analyse the data collected for the study.

*Chapter Five* presents a textual analysis of *EastEnders* by highlighting messages which the text is foregrounding and thus giving priority to, in order to enable a comparison of textual discourses with those generated by audiences during reception, as required by reception analysis.

*Chapter Six* and *Seven* present the study findings and discussion. *Chapter Six* discusses the results of the focus group interviews held with young people. *Chapter Seven* discusses the views presented by alcohol experts regarding the portrayal of harmful drinking by

*EastEnders* and further highlights the complex nature of the reception process and how messages can be attributed multiple meanings by similar and different audience groups alike.

*Chapter Eight* presents the conclusion and recommendations for further studies.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORISING THE AUDIENCE

#### Introduction

This chapter presents a critical analysis of the theoretical and conceptual framework that informs the study, which is reception analysis. It argues that the relationship between media texts and their audiences is not linear or straightforward, but complicated. There is no singular meaning derived from media messages due to their polysemic nature (openness to multiple readings) (Fursich, 2009:243). Moreover, audiences are also not a homogenous group of people who receive media messages in exactly the same way, and as intended by the producers, but are active and heterogeneous in their interpretations, depending on their lived experiences and contextual factors such as their age, gender, culture, religion, education and race (Livingstone, 2013:7). Reception analysis thus allows for the investigation of the reception and interpretation of media messages by different groups of people in different socio-cultural contexts by comparing the discourses of the media messages/texts with those of the audience obtained through empirical audience research (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:218).

Given the current changes in the media consumption environment, triggered by the emergence of portable multi-media devices, it has been argued that contemporary media audience research should keep up with emerging trends of media consumption and usage by the contemporary audience, in order to remain relevant (Livingstone, 2012:1). To heed this call, the study draws on second screen concept to investigate how technological advances have impacted on contemporary television viewing, particularly by young people, who are technologically savvy and use second screens during television viewing more than any other age-group (Blake, 2016:2 and 51; Ofcom, 2013). Second screen concept posits that technological advancements have empowered contemporary media audiences in new ways, in that, unlike traditional audiences who only had access to television programmes in their living room, as and when they were screened, the current audience can choose what they want to watch, where and when they want to watch it and how to watch it (Napoli, 2011:1). They are also able to look up more information about the programmes on their second screens, as they watch them, and also discuss them with an external audience on different social networking sites (Blake, 2016:51). This practice may have implications on the reception of media messages and meaning construction as audiences are increasingly drawing

on other texts, discourses and online platforms in their interpretation of media texts. This study will therefore explore this theory in relation to the reception of alcohol messages in *EastEnders* by young people.

While the study is primarily informed by reception and second screen theories, I found it necessary to contextualise my chosen theories by providing a brief critical outline of the major media audience theories that have been fundamental in shaping the field of audience studies over the years and no doubt moved it forward, in that, through the criticism the work attracted, developments to the theories were made and new insights emerged resulting in improved conceptualisation of the relationship between the media and their audience in the current reception environment. Reception theory needs to be situated in relation to media audience theories that preceded it. To this end, I discuss some major media traditions, in order of their historical development, which are: the effects tradition (as it laid the foundation for audience research and paved the way for more robust audience theories), uses and gratifications, cultural studies and the reception analysis theory, which informs this study (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990). I have also reviewed recent work arguing for alternative approaches to audience research, to move the field forward. The last section of the chapter highlights the impact of technological advances on the contemporary media audience (Napoli, 2011:8). Second screen theory will also be discussed here as part of the technological advances.

### **Effects Tradition**

The effects tradition is a media audience research approach that emerged during the twentieth century in response to the emergence of new media technologies and the possible harm they were feared to cause on supposedly weak minds such as those of children, women and the uneducated (Silverstone, 1990:177; Moores, 1993:5). The tradition assumed that the media are powerful and their messages had the power to negatively impact on the behaviour of those exposed to them, particularly violent television programmes. Media messages were thus seen to have a “linear, causal effect on a passive, homogenous, mass audience” (Livingstone, 1998:4). Due to its concern about the direct relationship between the media and the behaviour of the audience, it can be argued that the tradition asked the question, ‘what do the media do to their audiences?’

Both the theoretical and methodological approaches of this behavioural tradition have been questioned and heavily criticised as insufficient and misleading with critics suggesting that it is impossible for any research method to determine the ‘true’ relation between media violence and any possible effects, “Epistemologically, no-one can prove through research on human behaviour and attitudes, a definite and final conclusion when it comes to causality, be it effects of media violence” (Barker and Petley, 2002:137). Theorists associated with this tradition include Frankfurt School theorists, liberal pluralists working within the behavioural effects tradition, critical theorists, political economy approaches to the media, and psychoanalytic theories of text/audience relationships, best represented by what has come to be known as the ‘British Screen Tradition’ (Strelitz, 2002).

### **The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) tradition**

This tradition emerged in the 1940s, about two decades after effects research and as an alternative to some of its main precepts (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:210). Its origins are linked to empirical research carried out by a researcher named Herta Herzog on the gratifications that radio listeners derived from daytime programmes like soap operas and quiz programmes (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:210). It arose due to the dissatisfaction with the mainstream media audience research of the effects school and the realisation that audiences were not passive objects, to whom things happened, but had the ability to select, analyse and even reject media messages (Morley, 2003). The tradition investigated how audience members used the media on their own terms and obtained gratifications from them. Thus, while the effects tradition asked, ‘what do the media do to their audiences?’ U&G instead asked the question ‘what do the audience do with the media and why do people use the media?’ (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:210). It can thus be said to have reversed the concept of the passive media recipient to that of the active, powerful media user. The active audience could be said to have been born in this tradition.

The tradition’s key argument is that media audiences are oriented differently towards media messages due to; social circumstances and roles, personality dispositions and capacities, actual patterns of mass media consumption and the process of effects itself. This means that they can interpret messages in a different way to that intended by the producer and can also interpret messages in ways that differ from other audience members. Like the effects school, this tradition has been criticised for being sociologically naive in that it looks at media audiences in isolation from the socio-cultural context of media use and also attributes

differences in interpretation to personality differences and psychology (Morley, 2003:51). Furthermore, its idealisation of audience freedom has been criticised as overlooking key factors that affect media reception and usage such as ideology and social structure, and the culture and sub-cultures from which interpretive codes are drawn (Moore, 1993:7).

### **Cultural Studies**

The field of cultural studies is broad. However, the British strand of cultural studies that emerged between the late 1950s and the early 1960s at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies played a foundational role for the field and is most relevant to my study. The Birmingham School drew on the seminal work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams but was also heavily influenced by Levi-Strauss, Saussure, Barthes, Foucault, Althusser and Gramsci (Turner, 2005:33). It was arguably the work produced by Stuart Hall between 1968 and 1981 that contributed most significantly to the study of mass communication and culture (Lull, 2014:5).

The tradition adopted a critical Marxist theory which argued against the economic determinism of culture and instead maintained that culture was relatively autonomous and capable of influencing economic and political relations (Turner, 2005:8). It also viewed culture as ordinary and embraced everyday and popular culture as important social resources (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:213). The tradition was influenced by structuralism, semiotics and post-structuralism and drew mainly on de Saussure's theory of language and semiotics to explain how culture generates meaning used to construct and interpret social realities (Turner, 2005). This significant focus on the role of language in understanding culture as a signifying practice in the study of mass communication, was termed the 'linguistic turn' by scholars like Hall (1996).

The early strand of cultural studies was text-centred and influenced by Althusser's theory of ideology. Althusser viewed ideology as a process through which people interpreted and made sense of their social surroundings and perceived reality. As such, ideology was fused into language, media texts and representations, enabling media texts to construct preferred readings or a range of subjectivities for the reader in a subtle and unconscious way (Hall, 1980; Turner, 2003). Textual analysis of media texts was therefore seen as a vital means of understanding and unpacking power relations in industrial societies as media texts were viewed as being part of the larger ideological system (Turner, 2005). Together with other

ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), like the legal system, the education system, the family and the political system, they were seen to be responsible for transmitting the dominant ideology infused into them by the dominant culture to media audiences. The structure of the messages was thus said to have an ideological impact on audiences (Kellner, 1981). This paradigm has been criticised for its ideological determinism and being text-centred in that it focussed only on the analysis of how the form and structure of the media text produced cultural meaning and how the subjective meaning inscribed in texts by the dominant ideology affected the audiences, while wider contexts in which they are read were ignored.

Dissatisfaction with this paradigm led to the development of yet another critical paradigm which went beyond the text to study the wider context of text readers. It was Gramsci's theory of hegemony that influenced this approach (Turner, 2005).

Gramsci argued that social stability was achieved through both force (domination) and consent (hegemony). While the media were arguably the most popular means of transmitting ruling class ideologies in society, other civil society institutions like the church and school also perpetrated domination or hegemony by inducing consent to the rule of dominant groups (Durham and Kellner, 2009). Gramsci's theory also maintained that in every hegemonic order, counterhegemonic ideas and forces also existed, which could potentially challenge, context and even overthrow the dominant hegemonic force (Durham and Kellner, 2009). The media were thus viewed as a site of competition between different social forces as opposed to being a mere transmission channel for ruling class or dominant ideas. Unlike Althusser, Gramsci believed in hegemonic competition as opposed to ideological dominance and considered that people had the power to resist the dominant ideology and were capable of transforming history. The Gramscian critical paradigm ushered in a more fruitful model of text-audience relationship which acknowledged that media texts may have dominant ideology encoded into them but, because audiences were active decoders, they would not necessarily accept the meanings and positions prescribed by the text (Moore, 1993:6). It can therefore be argued again here, that while the early cultural studies approach asked what media texts in industrial societies can do to audiences, the later strand of the tradition was concerned with investigating what the active media audiences could do with media texts, given that they had potentially unlimited ways of making sense of them. This assertion marked what has been known as the ethnographic turn to qualitative audience research (Dahlgren and Corner, 1997).

Stuart Hall's (1980) seminal article, 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse' originally written in 1973, is said to have marked the move from textual determinism to qualitative empirical audience research (Alasuutari, 1999:26). In it, Hall argues that the communication process can be viewed as a continuous circuit with different moments, the moment of production/encoding and that of consumption/decoding (Hall, 1973:2). At the production stage, producers draw on wider socio-cultural and political structures, as well as institutional, professional and other practices and routines to construct messages (Hall, 1973:2). These all come together to produce a particular discourse which is then distributed for consumption by television audiences. At the consumption/reception stage, Hall argues that, for the message to be effective and the communication circuit completed, receivers have to translate and transform the message and incorporate it into their everyday social practices, however, if they cannot make sense of the message or articulate it in their everyday lives, then communication would have failed and the message can be said to be ineffective (Hall, 1973:3). Hall argues that it is important to note that each moment of the circuit has its own modalities and conditions of existence making it relatively autonomous. Hence there is no guarantee that the message encoded/constructed and circulated by the producers will be decoded/received as intended, as it is not fixed or permanent (Hall, 1973:9). He thus suggests three possible readings of media texts by audiences; the dominant or hegemonic, the negotiated and oppositional readings and argues that the three are all dependent on the reader's position in relation to the dominant ideology (Hall, 1973;1980). The dominant or hegemonic code (Hall, 1973:16) is when the media message is decoded in line with the preferred reading. The negotiated code (Hall, 1973:17) is when the message is read partly in line with what the sender intended, but at the same time part of it is rejected. The oppositional reading (Hall, 1973:18) is when the message is decoded in a way contrary to the preferred reading.

The article portrays mass communication as a complex, non-linear signifying process (Hall, 1980; Casey et al, 2002). It calls for communication to be taken holistically by studying the encoding/production and decoding/reception moments and the socio-cultural processes influencing each stage (Wood, 2007:76). The encoding and decoding model, which is a shift from the behavioural models of mass communication to a more interpretive one (Hall, 1973:5), has become a reference point for most reception studies in the field of mass communication and can be said to have laid the foundation for qualitative audience reception

studies. After this model, many empirical studies on the reception of television programmes emerged, David Morley's (1980) *Nationwide* study becoming the first (Wood, 2007:76).

David Morley (1980) presented a more complex model of audience and text relationship than the one articulated by Hall. His work further challenged the structuralist mass media audience theory that had dominated the tradition. While Morley (1980), like Hall (1980) acknowledged that media texts may carry dominant ideology or preferred readings, he argued that audiences were active and their interpretations were heterogeneous and not restricted to the interpretation inscribed in the text. They could also draw on other texts and discourses thereby influencing the meaning derived from the texts (Morley, 1980). Also, media texts are 'polysemic', that is, they have multiple meanings that audiences could potentially read from them (Fursich, 2009:243).

For a holistic approach to understanding the relationship between media texts and their readers, and how meaning is produced, Morley (2003) called for the investigation of the wider socio-cultural contexts of reception or what he called a cultural map for targeted audiences. Morley's (1980) ground-breaking empirical work, particularly the *Nationwide* audience study, marked an important era in reception studies. The study set out to investigate the different ways in which different audiences of the public affairs television programme *Nationwide* negotiated and resisted its messages. Morley argued that there are more factors than social class that influence the different readings of media texts and that the differences in interpretation reflected the audiences' position in relation to gender, domestic relations, race, socio-economic, educational and cultural institutions, among others (Morley, 2003; Curran, 1990). He also discovered that media texts were put to different uses, some of them subtle, within domestic family relations (Morley, 1980). His work further demonstrated how socially constructed notions of gender relations for instance, impacted the viewing of television programmes in families as well as the effect of socio-economic influence. He concluded that Hall's three categories of reading were therefore simplistic and that he had overemphasised the role of social class in reception of messages and underestimated the variety of readings that could be made (Fiske, 1987).

As it developed, cultural studies increasingly sought to study mass communication as part of everyday practices, and this calls for the positioning of media texts within the wider socio-cultural and historical contexts of reception. Through cultural studies, an interdisciplinary

approach to the study of media audiences can be said to have been born. This is an approach that acknowledges the active relationship between media texts and their audiences and the importance of studying both empirically within socio- historical contexts as practiced by Reception Analysis.

### **Reception analysis**

Reception analysis, also called reception theory or audience analysis (Costello and Moore, 2007:125), can be defined as an interdisciplinary qualitative media audience tradition that draws its theoretical and methodological framework from both the humanities and social sciences (Schroder et al, 2003). It has significant similarities to traditions discussed earlier, mainly cultural studies and uses and gratifications traditions. Like cultural studies, it views media messages as culturally coded and media audiences as agents of meaning production capable of decoding media messages in multiple ways and even opposing ‘dominant’ or ‘hegemonic’ ideologies (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:217). It also shares the view held by uses and gratifications that audiences are active individuals capable of consuming, decoding and using the media in a variety of ways. Hence it is argued that reception analysis re-addressed and furthered some theories started by the U & G tradition, mainly those on how audiences use the media as part of their everyday lives (Alasuutari, 1999).

While early audience traditions tended to lean towards social scientific methodologies, reception analysis uses methods from both the humanities and social science disciplines in its approach to the study of media audiences thus enabling a holistic approach (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:217). As such, it emphasises the need for comparative empirical analyses of media discourses/content with audience discourses and interpreting the results using the socio-cultural system where the reception is taking place (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:218). Thus, the tradition can be said to have an audience-cum content analysis approach which is both qualitative and empirical. This is evident in the methodological approach used by the many qualitative audience reception studies that emerged after Morley’s (1980) empirical study, which include; Ang’s (1985) *Watching Dallas: soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*, Hobson’s (1982) *Crossroads: the drama of a soap opera* and Katz and Liebes’ (1984) *Once upon a time in Dallas*, some of which will be discussed in detail in chapter three of this study. Livingstone (1998) argues that reception analysis has successfully furthered the diverse traditions from which it developed.

The main questions that the tradition explores are; how do audiences make sense of media messages and how do socio-cultural and historical contexts of individuals affect the reception of media messages? In other words, how do different social positionings and cultural competences influence the decoding of media texts and what is the role played by lived experiences in reception; and how do readers actively decode media texts and integrate them into their daily lives? (Pitout,1998:65). These questions suggest that meaning making is a complex process embedded in the context of everyday practices in which the media are used (Schroder et al, 2003). Meaning is therefore never just transferred from the text to the receiver but is produced during the interaction between texts and readers situated in different socio-cultural contexts shaped by ethnicity, gender, the family, the school, peer groups, class and lived experiences (Wood, 2009:4; Livingstone, 2013:5-6).

While the active audience tradition is commended for making strides in advancing audience research theory and methodology, its early strand has been criticised for arguably overemphasising audience autonomy and activity (Streliz, 2002; Seaman,1992), while ignoring questions of power, social structure and ideology (Silverstone, 1990). Critics also argue that the approach is unclear on what triggers resistance to particular ideological constructions by audiences or if the resistance results in the transformation of relationships perpetuated by the ideological constructs or not (Seaman, 1992). Notwithstanding the intelligence and sophistication of some audiences, proponents of the active audience theory have been accused of completely dismissing the possibility of some television programming having some form of effects on the audience or audience community, despite its sophistication (Seaman, 1992:305). It is noteworthy that some of the criticism levelled against the active audience tradition, for instance, by Seaman (1992) that race, class and gender interests have been overlooked by the tradition, has since been addressed by the latest developments in active audience research in the form of reception analysis, where race, class, age and gender among other variables are all taken into consideration.

This study draws on the active audience theory in general and reception analysis approach, in particular, to unpack how young British viewers make sense of *EastEnders* and how their different socio-cultural contexts influence their readings of alcohol-related messages depicted in the soap opera. The study will thus also draw on some aspects of cultural studies, particularly the critical strand of the tradition, commonly known as the ethnographic turn to

audience research represented by David Morley, which in my view, gave birth to reception analysis.

The literature reviewed here highlights that work carried out in mass media audience research so far is split into two broad disciplines; humanities and social sciences. The methods of enquiry used have also been split between qualitative and quantitative techniques associated with the two disciplines. Future researchers in the field are encouraged to move towards an interdisciplinary approach that will draw theories and methodologies from both disciplines and study the mass media and their audience in a holistic way (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:232-233). Other views support a multidimensional approach that looks at the whole circuit of culture (Ronald,1996). This research is answering such calls by drawing on the humanistic and social scientific approaches encapsulated in reception analysis to investigate the reception of *EastEnders* by young people. This empirical study goes beyond textual analysis and looks at how members of a specific audience group located in a broad socio-cultural context of England in general and Nottingham in particular may differ in their social construction of meaning.

Notwithstanding the above views on media audiences, further views have arisen regarding how media audiences should be studied going forward and the direction future media audience research should take. The section which follows will critically discuss the main arguments in this area before moving on to discuss second screen theory which also informs this study.

### **Discourse and audience research**

While acknowledging that the latest paradigm of active audiences championed by reception analysis has gone a long way in defining media audiences as playing an active role in creating and defining their own reality in the context of both micro and macro environment, some views suggest that the field has reached a 'crossroads' and needs new areas of inquiry to move it forward (Livingstone, 1998; Butch and Livingstone 2013). Studying discourses about audiences is arguably one such promising angle that the field can take. This entails a comparative approach to understanding dominant discourses about media audiences on a macro-social level in different discursive contexts which include, but are not limited to; political, economic, social and religious contexts (Butsch and Livingstone, 2013:1). By focussing on the discourses used to construct audiences, it can be possible to unpack how the

positive and negative constructions of audiences lead to a particular imagined perception about the audience and in turn lead to particular imagined behaviour of audiences.

In this approach, discourse is seen as a powerful tool, a means of social control with the ability to define reality in a way that is not neutral but that promotes one view of reality over other views (Butsch and Livingstone, 2013:1). Discourses are however not static but are continuously being transformed, challenged and resisted. In light of this, the media are viewed as modern institutions of discourse involved in defining audiences, using different discourses in different social, historical and political contexts (Butsch and Livingstone, 2013:1).

Arguably, while this approach contributes critical insights to the field, it is not a new approach but a different way of approaching media audience studies, which integrates the main arguments raised by some of the audience traditions discussed above, particularly Althusser's dominant ideology thesis. The authors do acknowledge this by arguing that the different audience theories (discussed earlier in this chapter) constitute certain discourses about audiences. This study draws on this aspect of the discourse theory, to unpack the concept of 'young people' as 'vulnerable' (Martinic and Measham, 2008), as seen in the discourses used by the state, the media, television programme producers, among other sectors of society to define this audience group, vis-à-vis, the real young people empirically investigated by the research. This is also in line with the assertion that empirical work on audiences can help to challenge implied and presumed perceptions of audiences by disciplines and institutions that rarely study the nature of actual audiences (Livingstone, 1998).

### **Media audiences as 'users'**

Another approach argues that contemporary media audiences have transformed due to social, cultural and technological changes that have impacted European communication practices (Napoli, 2011:4). A new media audience discourse has thus emerged within this approach which is the concept of media audiences as 'users' (Carpentier et al, 2013:5). This is because audiences are now actively creating, using and engaging with media content, multi-media technologies and digital platforms even going as far as impacting actual media text narratives through feedback channels, a lot more than ever before (Blake, 2016:40). The arrival of new media technologies and the many ways in which they are used has arguably empowered

audiences. Audiences now have control over their media consumption patterns and practices, are no longer restricted content-wise or confined to the living room, but can choose what to watch, where to watch it, when to watch it and how they want to consume the media content (Napoli, 2011:4-5). Different terms have arisen to try and define this modern media landscape, which include; 'media convergence', 'media culture', 'cross media' and 'media ecology', all of which point to the complexity of the contemporary media audience (Livingstone, 2012:7). Furthermore, contemporary media audiences found in the current interactive media landscape have been termed 'producers', as they are now both producers and consumers/users of their preferred media content at the same time (Bird, 2011:506), further complicating the present-day media audience. While new media technologies have promoted highly varied forms of media usage, engagement and interaction, the concept of audiences as users has been criticised for undermining the critical role played by the social structure in determining how individuals use the media, for instance, gender relations and other related socio-cultural factors (Livingstone, 2012; Morley, 2003) as well as the indirect control that media producers still have on media users through privileged representations of certain world views thereby restricting audience perceptions and practices (Bird, 2011:508). Furthermore, the word 'user' is seen as not fully capturing the main features of the communication process or the concept of an audience as an interacting collectivity and hence does not adequately describe the media audience (Livingstone, 2012:9-10).

### **Participatory audiences**

In addition to being active 'users' of different media technologies, contemporary media audiences are increasingly being seen as 'participants', with some critics arguing that the concept of the active audience is fast being overtaken by that of 'participatory audiences' in that more opportunities for audience participation are created in and through new media technologies (Livingstone, 2012:1). This type of audience is arguably not fully accounted for by the traditional active media audience concept but is better encapsulated in the new concept of 'pro-active users', particularly second screen users (Blake, 2016:40). However, not all audience groups will be able to participate in the media in the same way due to lack of, or limited access to media technologies as well as limited or lack of knowledge and literacy (Bird, 2011:509). This is particularly true in most underdeveloped countries, where technological advances are taking place at a slow pace and access to information and communication technologies is still restricted to the financially privileged and literate elite (Bird, 2011:509).

Advances in media technologies have changed how audiences perceive the media and how media institutions perceive their audiences. The interactive media era has arguably ended the traditional top-down media industries' communication approach and brought in a new wave of powerful and influential audiences, who are able to mobilise each other online and influence each other's opinions and as such can also resist messages from media industries and also dictate their own terms of engagement (Costello and Moore, 2007:140). Bird (2011:507-508), observes that while most media institutions are now incorporating audience needs, they still exert power over their audiences through terms and conditions they put in place to control information posted and are also benefiting by targeting online users for marketing purposes. While it is acknowledged that new media technologies have increased diversity in media, which has impacted audience practices and promoted cross-media practices, it should also be noted that society too plays a critical role in shaping these technologies, as technology is part of the social. It is therefore important to be careful not to fall into technological determinism and media centrism, when dealing with the impact of technology on contemporary media audiences. Rather, the focus should be on investigating the holistic relationship between media technologies and society (Carpentier et al, 2013).

Critics argue that advances in media technologies have caused media audiences to be fragmented and abstract, with some going as far as postulating that audiences do not exist anymore but only exist as a discursive construct, an 'abstracted totality' (Allor,1988:219). Furthermore, the diversity and convergence of contemporary media technologies, has been seen as possibly marking the end of the traditional television and its audience (Scannell et al, 2009). Others argue that new media technologies have promoted an unpredictable audience and a more interactive media environment which has undermined traditional ways of analysing and studying media audiences as the traditional ways are incapable of capturing all of the dynamics of audience behaviours produced through the new media-audience interaction (Napoli, 2011:5).

Other views maintain that, as long as there are media, there will be audiences, and that the questions to be asked are "where are audiences to be found, and what are they now part of, and why does this matter?" (Livingstone, 2012:4). Therefore, in order to remain relevant in the current complex media environment, media audience research should find ways to address emerging trends of media consumption and usage by audiences by taking into account contemporary conditions of communication (Livingstone, 2012:10). By

incorporating the contemporary television viewing context, characterised by the proliferation of portable multi-media technological devices into my reception study, I am heeding this call.

### **Second screen theory**

The new information and communication technologies (ICTs) discussed above have arguably invaded the traditional living room where the social and collective practice of watching television took place, impacting not just the television-viewer interaction but the viewer to viewer interaction and the construction of meaning. This transformation of the traditional television viewing context due to multiple screen usage during television viewing is encapsulated in what has come to be known as second screen theory. For the purposes of this study, second screens are defined as “a mobile handheld device such as a phone, laptop or tablet” (Wilson, 2016:178).

Blake (2016) defines second screen concept as the activity and experience of “engaging with related media content on two screens concurrently, usually a television set and mobile devices like smart phones and tablets” (Blake, 2016:9), a definition also echoed by Choi and Jung (2016:1). On the other hand, D’heer and Courtois (2016) use the term more loosely to refer to the use of a second screen device during television viewing to access any material which may not necessarily relate to what is being viewed on television, such as watching different programmes altogether on a laptop or tablet, or visiting different internet pages or social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter or even reading emails while watching a programme on television at the same time. Blake (2016:10) further notes that reference to mobile devices as second screens is problematic as it implies that the conventional television is the primary screen yet research shows that younger viewers particularly use mobile devices like smart phones as their primary screens and television as the secondary screen. This has led to second screen being called different things such as the ‘dual screen’ or ‘companion screen’ (Blake, 2016:9) or even media multi-tasking (Choi and Jung, 2016:3), orchestrated media or media meshing, as Ofcom (2013) calls it. Notwithstanding the above views, I will use second screen concept to refer specifically to the use of a second screen mobile device while watching *EastEnders* on the television screen.

Recent studies discussed below show that the use of multiple screens during television viewing is increasing, raising questions about how this practice impacts on television audiences and meaning making. This is significant for my study which seeks to investigate

how young people negotiate alcohol messages in *EastEnders*, in the modern multi-screen context of television viewing, given recent findings by Ofcom (2015) which indicate that traditional television viewing by 16-24 year olds has been dropping annually since 2010 due to the use of mobile media devices. A Google (2012) world report on the use of multiple screens also showed that portable devices, particularly smart phones, were used 77% of the time when television was viewed, while in America, according to a 2014 market research, eighty percent of mobile device owners reported using their smartphones or tablets daily while also watching television (Nielsen, 2013a; Nielsen, 2013b).

Furthermore, participants in D'heer and Courtois's (2016) study confirmed that while television viewing still played a central part in family evening routines, multiple media gadgets had also been incorporated into the television viewing practice as viewers used them while watching television in the living room, a view echoed by Wilson (2016:183)'s study participants. The tablet was the most commonly used device because of its portability and bigger screen than the smart phone, which made internet browsing or watching parallel programmes online easier. Secondary gadgets were mainly used when watching routine programmes that did not require serious concentration such as daily soap operas or programmes that other family members wanted to watch but participants were not interested in (D'heer and Courtois, 2016:10). The study concluded that television viewing in a multiple screen context can be said to take place collectively, in that family members still view some television programmes together in the social context of the living room, but is experienced individually due to parallel viewing (on secondary screens) encouraged by competing family agendas and individual needs and interests (D'heer and Courtois, 2016:10).

This is contrary to traditional television viewing where family members interacted with each other while viewing the same television programmes and thus contributed to the collective production of meaning (Morley, 1980). The contemporary viewing environment has altered this social context of television viewing, as technological devices are now used to access more and diverse information online and to even communicate with external programme viewers elsewhere, a notion that is also evident in studies conducted by Madill and Goldmeier (2003:485) and Simons (2015:219). D'heer and Courtois (2016:3) call this practice 'an outbound affiliation', where television content is shared and discussed online, in real time, via social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, sometimes without sharing or discussing with other viewers in the living room. Deller (2011:222) and Wilson (2016:183)

also confirm the growing use of Twitter by television viewers to discuss television programmes live with other Twitter users. While this practice has been lamented by some as fragmenting audiences and changing the social and communal aspects of television viewing and making it a lonely experience (Katz and Scannell, 2009; Murray, 2012), it has been seen by others as an enhancement of the social television experience (Wilson, 2016:184) in a bigger way as sharing and discussing programmes on second screens in real time brings an even larger community of online viewers together to share and enjoy the experience.

Questions have been asked about whether second screen activity adds value to the television programme being watched or is a mere distraction. This is the view of some study findings revealing that the practice varies, with some viewers focussing on television viewing only while others watch television and also use portable media devices simultaneously and yet others watch television and complement their viewing with other media (D'heer and Courtois, 2016). Participants in the market research carried out by the Nielsen company on the use of second screens in America, in 2014, reported that using a portable device while watching television enabled them to expand their knowledge and deepen their understanding around issues discussed in the programme. They used portable devices to cross check information depicted in television programmes with other viewers in other social networking platforms or internet search engines like Google, or even access differing views, thus empowering them to question and negotiate media messages (Blake, 2016:41). Similarly, Choi and Jung, (2016:1) argue that accessing related supplementary content from second screens while watching certain television programmes augmented viewers' perceptions of the programmes and also gave them programme satisfaction, particularly now that many programme providers are providing additional information on portable devices about programmes being watched on television screens, in order to meet viewers' information needs. Further studies assert that using multiple screens with television does not impact viewing negatively but enhances the whole television viewing experience and makes it enjoyable, as viewers are now able to interact and bond with other viewers elsewhere while discussing their favourite programme (Simons, 2015:224), and as such, might even attract young people back to television viewing (Blake, 2016). It also gives viewers the flexibility they need and the opportunity to multi-task while also maintaining concentration on the television programmes (Blake, 2016:3).

On the other hand, it is argued that, as second screen activity entails ‘look up and look down action’, where viewers have to keep looking up at the main screen and then looking down at the second screen, this practice distracts the viewer as attention is constantly lost through continuously shifting between screens and in some cases, more attention is given to the second screens than the television (Blake, 2016:3). The loss of attention, however, arguably still occurs even when the second screen is used to access information relating to the television programme being watched, thereby implying that the second screen is detrimental to the television viewing experience rather than an enhancement of it (Blake, 2016:3).

This study explores empirically how young people use their second screens while watching *EastEnders* and how the use impacts on their reception of alcohol messages and meaning making thereof.

## **Conclusion**

The above discussion has critically analysed the progression of media audience research theories from the behavioural paradigm of the effects tradition, the interpretive tradition of uses and gratifications and the ethnographic turn to qualitative, empirical audience research, encapsulated in the cultural studies and reception analysis traditions. This diversity in audience theories and research has shaped the mass media field and informed the understanding of the relationship between the media and their audiences. Notwithstanding the contributions made by the different traditions discussed, this study is premised within the reception analysis theory due to its attention to the active audience. In reception theory “the audience has become visible, theoretically, empirically and politically, having been previously marginalised and devalued within media theory” (Livingstone, 1998:4). The combination of social science and humanistic methods of enquiry in reception analysis enabled a qualitative empirical investigation of the topic. By using a multi-disciplinary approach to audience research, the study acquires vital knowledge about media audiences in general and television audiences in particular, and thus contributes to ongoing debates in the field.

Moreover, this chapter has unpacked the complexity of the contemporary television viewing context brought about by portable multi-media devices. As most empirical television audience research in general, and soap opera research in particular, was conducted before the advent of these technologies, insights into how contemporary television audiences,

particularly young people, receive and use media messages, in the context of these socio-technological changes, are few. This study therefore fills this gap by investigating television reception practices of young people in England, in the context of a complex media landscape.

This chapter has also established from reception analysis approaches and the concept of second screen that the reception and interpretation of media messages is a complex process that requires an investigation of both the text and the audience moments (Livingstone, 2013:8) of the circuit of culture. The next chapter reviews key research on the reception of soap operas in general and *EastEnders* in particular.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEORISING SOAP OPERA

#### Introduction

This chapter reviews studies on the reception of soap operas by different audience groups, to map the field and to establish gaps that need to be filled by future research. We note, firstly, that most soap opera reception studies to date have predominantly concentrated on the reception of soap operas in general, that is, answering research questions which include: why people watch soap operas and why soap operas are popular with their audiences. Very few studies focus on the reception of a specific message/messages portrayed in soap operas by a specific audience group. Calls have therefore been made for future soap opera research to address the above as this will add depth to the field of reception and offer insights into whether audiences can identify specific messages in soap operas and specific solutions proposed by the soap opera to address the issues raised or not, particularly with regards to the educational characteristic of the soap opera (Livingstone, 1988). This soap opera reception study answers this call.

We also noted that most soap opera reception studies to date were conducted prior to the emergence of information and communication technologies discussed in the previous chapter, particularly portable multi-media devices like the smartphone, tablet and laptop (second screens), which have arguably changed the television viewing landscape and viewing practices of television audiences, specifically young people, whom research shows engage the second screens more than any other age-group in their television viewing (Blake, 2016:2; Ofcom, 2013). Likewise, calls have been made for future television audience research to investigate how second screens have impacted television viewing and the dynamics of meaning construction in a multiple screen contemporary viewing context (Livingstone, 2012).

The first part of this review will outline the origins of the soap opera genre in America followed by a critical review of the origins of British soap operas and how they differ from their American counterparts. I then discuss the soap opera genre, its serial characteristics and how it engages its audience and generates meaning. I move on to the concept of realism, which is central in all soap opera reception studies reviewed. Previous work on soaps generally and specifically about *EastEnders*, as well as some health-commissioned studies on alcohol portrayal on British television will also be reviewed.

### **Origins of soap opera**

Soap operas originated in America, in the late 1920s as daytime radio serials, used by programme producers to sell daytime, predominantly female audiences (housewives) to advertisers of products used by women in the home (Allen, 1995:4; Harrington,2016:109). The ‘soap’ in soap opera refers to the sponsorship of the programmes by soap manufacturers, while the ‘opera’, “acquires its meaning through its ironic, double inappropriateness” (Allen,1995:8). This is because opera is an elite form of art and yet it is used in soap opera to describe what was viewed as a low status genre (Allen, 1995:4). The serials were broadcast daily and meant to fit in with the domestic chores of housewives (Ang, 1985:118). Storylines on human relationships and everyday life characterised the genre, with domestic-related themes being popular (Ang, 1985). The genre thus gained popularity with female audiences as a result (Ang, 1985:118).

Daytime television soap operas emerged around 1956 (Frentz, 1992) replacing radio serials (Allen,1995:6). Like their predecessor, they maintained simplicity, everyday storylines and domestic themes and still targeted the same audience (Ang, 1985:117). These were followed by prime-time television serials like *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *Falcon Crest*, with higher production costs and a wider audience aimed at attracting high advertising revenue (Ang, 1985:117-118). In prime-time serials, male characters occupy key roles in contrast to the daytime ones. Ang (1985:118) thus concludes that unlike traditional soap operas which can be regarded as a “women’s genre”, prime time serials like *Dallas* cannot be said to be primarily aimed at women even though statistics show that more women than men watch *Dallas*.

### **British soap opera**

Britain, Australia and Brazil also have their own local soaps (Ang, 1985). Britain, in particular has popular home-grown soap operas, such as *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*, which attract the highest viewership to the channels on which they are broadcast (Verma et al, 2007:575). Unlike their American counterparts, British soaps are typically prime-time (evening) serials screened more than once a week, every week (Longhurst, 1987:637).

Allen (1985:8) notes that one of Britain’s longest running television soaps, *Coronation Street* emerged at the same time as one of British Cultural Studies’ key figures, Richard Hoggart’s influential study on popular culture titled *The Uses of literacy* (1958). As such, it seemed to respond to his views, particularly, his definition of culture as being about the ordinary everyday life practices and his emphasis on the importance of the home, the community and

the central role played by women in working class family life (Longhurst, 1987:638). Both Hoggart and other figures associated with British Cultural Studies argued that studying and understanding the lives and popular culture of the working class, was important. Working-class characters feature prominently in British soap opera unlike in American ones (Allen, 1985:8). For this reason, British soap operas are viewed as being socio-realistic, problem-oriented, down to earth, responsible and educative (Ang, 1985:62). They are also said to provide a sense of community which is not found in American soaps (Madill and Goldmeier, 2003:482).

### **Soap opera criticism**

Due to their origins and popularity with female audiences, critics labelled early soap operas a woman's genre (Harrington, 2016:113). Their audiences were criticised as being emotionally lacking, uneducated and vulnerable (Allen, 1995:6). Furthermore, as a product of mass/popular culture, the genre was accused of impacting viewers negatively through manipulative, mass produced programming (Hayward, 2015:2).

Feminist scholars also contributed to early critical debates about soap operas, because of their interest in television classed as being for and about women (Brunsdon, 1995:54).

Representations of women in soap operas were perceived as perpetuating stereotypes of women as 'mere' housewives confined to the home, thus "reinforcing the patriarchal status quo and oppression of women" (Brunsdon (1995:58) and contradicting the basis of feminist ideology with regards to femininity and family. They were also viewed as disempowering women and frustrating their hopes of becoming anything other than a housewife (Harrington, 2016:110-111). For this reason, early feminists resented both the genre and the women who watched it, as brainwashed and in need of "consciousness raising" (Brunsdon, 1995:58).

Early feminist critique can be said to have been based on assumptions about how women responded to soap operas while later work focused on empirically investigating the assumptions. It was also premised on the assumption made by media effects theory that audiences are passive recipients of powerful messages, an assertion that has since been challenged by later audience theories, as discussed in chapter two. It is therefore not surprising that soap operas were only accepted as serious texts in America in the 1980s, more than fifty years after their inception (Allen, 1995:6). Further soap opera research and investigation can be said to have resulted in a positive turn towards a more optimistic perception and acceptance of the genre by later feminist scholars, who acknowledged the

importance of the pleasure women derive from it and that it addressed them positively, unlike depictions in, for example, cinema (Modleski, 1979; Brunsdon et al, 2007).

Tania Modleski is one notable feminist scholar whose book *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) critically informed subsequent debates about soap operas, particularly their relationship with women (Allen, 2013). Modleski (1984) argued that soap opera constituted a feminine narrative form radically different to the traditional male-oriented films and novels, whose address was perceived to be to a male spectator or reader through their emphasis on action and narrative resolution. Other feminist critics concur that traditional cinema was patriarchal in its approach and portrayed women as passive objects of the male gaze (Moore, 1990:12). On the other hand, soap opera was viewed as reversing the traditional male-centred subjectivity of the cinema, characterised by objectifying portrayals of women, by instead adopting a feminine narrative form that directly addressed a female audience and appealed to them by constituting them as spectators. They achieved this in stressing dialogue over action and a refusal of narrative closure, (Modleski, 2008). Blumenthal (1997) agrees and adds that as a feminist, she finds soap opera viewing empowering to women and that the emotional aspect of the genre, which is often heavily criticised, mirrors human relationships in real life. As we will see, Ang (1985) also emphasises the genre's emotional realism. Harrington (2016:111) postulates that despite the criticism levelled against them, soap operas are progressive in that they bring women's concerns to the forefront.

Below, I discuss the soap opera genre and how its form creates meaning for its audience. Only specific aspects of genre theory relevant to understanding soap opera as a specific genre will be discussed.

### **Genre and soap opera form**

Television texts are generally structured and organised into different recognisable categories called genres (Creeber, 2015:1). Mittell (2004:58) defines genres as cultural products created due to certain media practices which include scheduling and channel identity. Genre theory is however not just about classifying cultural products but also has implications of how a particular artistic product generates meaning and fulfils the expectation of its audiences (Creeber, 2015:3), hence Mittell (2004) calls for the incorporation of audience analysis for a holistic approach to understanding genre theory.

Soap opera is a genre with a particular structure or form. The structure and familiarity with it, plays a significant role in capturing the interest of its viewers (Ang, 1985:83). To maintain audience fidelity, soap opera uses a serial narrative form whose main characteristic is its continuous, open-ended and multi-centred narrative structure (Hayward, 2015:3). The open narrative structure allows its producers to leave space for public debate about any contentious themes introduced (Allen, 1995). The ongoing nature of the serial also allows the soap opera characters to develop and mature just as their audiences do thus generating intimate viewer engagement (Allen, 1985:19).

Soaps comprise many main characters that make up the on-screen community and also allow for interweaving multiple storylines and subplots that usually run parallel to each other (Hayward, 2015:3). Each episode usually ends in suspense, to encourage audiences to view the next one. The narrative pace and development of events in soap opera is typically slow, to allow viewers who have missed some episodes to easily follow the action and thereby creating loyal followers (Katzman,1972). Critics view the slow pace as a waste of time and argue that nothing ever happens in soap operas due to this (Allen, 1985:20). Regular soap opera viewers are arguably familiar with the conventions of the genre and hence know what to expect and also understand its structure and derive pleasure from it (Allen, 1985:20).

The serial narrative is further characterised by its emphasis on talk over action (Allen,1985:20). This makes the setting and location of characters key. Most soap opera scenes are thus set in public places where characters can meet and talk. Most British soaps have the local pub (public house) as their key location (Allen, 1985), this is significant to this study which is about the reception of alcohol messages in *EastEnders*. While the pub is a traditional national icon, Furnham et al (1997:524) argue that its use as a setting in British soap operas might be the explanation as to why studies have found higher instances of alcohol scenes in British soap operas than in American and Australian ones. The centrality of the pub in *EastEnders* may arguably present a conflict between the generic demands for drama and the programme's ability to adequately incorporate health messages (alcohol messages). This argument is discussed further in chapters five, six and seven.

The soap opera form also engages audiences by portraying the rhythms of everyday life in the serial as if it was running parallel to the everyday life of the audience and depicting the long-term passage of fictional time as reflecting the actual passage of time (Geraghty in Dyer et al, 1981: 10 and 28). Major events happening in real British life all feature in the serials at the

same time the events are happening in real life, thus giving the soap opera, a sense of relevance and realism. Jackson (2006:475) concurs that the British soap opera adopts a “real life genre that references seasons and events as they occur in the real world”. Soap opera achieves this by tying time and space together in its portrayal of the daily or even yearly rhythms of life in a location and can thus be argued to have its own chronotope. Bakhtin (2002:15) posits that real time and space can be integrated into narratives through the concept of chronotope, which literally means ‘time space’ or the connectedness of time and space (Tischleder, 2017:120). It is also of representational importance in that through it, time in a narrative becomes tangible and narrative events become real (Bakhtin, 2002).

Representations therefore gain concreteness in the chronotope as it makes it possible to structure narrative events within everyday or human lifetime markers (Bemong, et al, 2011). This is significant to this study as social drinking is inscribed into the routine flow of time in the soap, for example the lunchtime drinks by the market workers at the Queen Victoria pub seem to be the central chronotopes of the narrative where major storylines and dramatic action takes place.

Varied themes are portrayed in soap operas so they can appeal to a diverse audience. Common themes include, social problems (drunkenness/alcoholism), criminal activity, romantic and marital affairs and medical developments (Katzman, 1972, Hayward, 2015:4). Due to the nature of the problems addressed, critics argue that soap operas thrive on sensational issues, however, this has been refuted by those who view this as the nature of the genre and how it appeals to its audiences. After all, life does include the so-called sensitive issues portrayed by the serials (Ang, 1985:64). Below I discuss realism, a key feature of British soap opera.

### **Realism**

Realism is a notoriously complicated concept to define and one subject to diverse conceptualisations and interpretations (Grodal, 2002). Our discussion here will confine itself to understandings of realism in television representations and the different types of realism found in soap operas, as these are most relevant to the study.

### **Empirical realism**

Grodal (2002:67) defines realism as an experience linked to the viewer’s perception and mental images that trigger familiarity and recognisability of the representation. Realism of media representations is therefore evaluated in terms of the relationship of the representation

and the physical and social reality that exists outside of it. The closer and more positive the relationship, the more realistic it is judged to be (Grodal, 2002). Ang (1985:36) calls this type of realism where the comparison between reality inside and outside the text is vital, empirical realism. She argues that empirical realism has its limitations in that, as a cultural product, a media text can never perfectly mirror social reality, but can be said to produce its own perspective of reality, due to ideological and social contexts of the production process and the specific conventions of television narrative.

Grodal (2002:68) argues further that the evaluation of realism is not only about portrayal of absolutely true or real representations but representations which viewers can experience as true or potentially true and which will vary between individuals, groups of people and cultures. It is therefore crucial to investigate the cultural and historical contexts of the producers and recipients of the representations to fully understand their perception and experience of media representations as real. Furthermore, some viewers can judge media representations in terms of the reality of their storylines or the production quality, while others would evaluate the whole representation for an experience of reality (Grodal, 2002).

### **Classical realism**

Realism in a media text can also be experienced through a pleasurable illusion created by carefully hiding technical and other mediating factors that occur during production, and presenting the film in a way that makes viewers see it as a realistic occurrence, unfolding right in front of them, accurately reflecting the real world, and not being aware that it is a mediated construction (Ang, 1985:38-39). Ang (1985:41) argues that based on her findings, both the transparent narrative style (classical realism) and the storylines (empirical realism) seem to be equally important to viewers, for them to judge a text as realistic and pleasurable.

### **Social realism**

Longhurst (1987:634) asserts that one way of understanding the realism of media texts draws on Raymond Williams's Marxist conceptualisation of the notion, and sees it as going beyond merely depicting everyday life to unpacking the real movements that structure it. This type of realism is evident in representations that have expanded their social depictions to include other social classes previously left out, such as the working classes as well as including storylines that are contemporary and covering a wide range of social issues (Longhurst, 1987:635). Three types of realism are thus identified by Longhurst (1987:639-640): *indicative realism*, where working class experiences and everyday problems are at the core of

the media depictions but the depictions are silent on the possibilities of change or offering alternatives to the current situation; *subjunctive realism*, as seen in portrayals that go beyond merely depicting the status quo to critiquing it and providing possible options and solutions which the audience could draw on to transform their social situation.; and *naturalism*, which grounds a sense of realism by creating a strong link between the character and their environment but in the process arguably avoids taking the soap opera to the subjunctive or questioning/critical stage (Longhurst, 1987:639-640). Common conventions of social realism in soap opera genre include storylines about social problems; working-class characters; ordinary homes and families; recognisable and common settings such as the pub or the street; a time usually set in the present; and use of a style that implies a depiction of an unmediated and accurate view of reality (Jordan in Dyer, 1981:28).

The social realism discussed here is significant to this study, as this is the type of realism found in most British soap operas and distinguishes them from those produced elsewhere (Ang, 1985:62).

### **Emotional realism and melodrama**

Grodal (2002) and Hall (2003) argue that the emotional impact of media representations on viewers is an important criterion for realism, in that it is not only the factual aspects of a representation that matter, but the emotions or emotional concerns that it arouses in viewers too. Emotional realism involves what Ang (1985:45) calls ‘a subjective experience of the world, a structure of feeling’. This type of realism, which can be linked to the concept of melodrama, triggers different emotions in viewers such as sadness, suspense, fear and happiness, which in turn make the experience pleasurable and true to life (Ang, 1985:44-45).

Ang, (1985:61) defines melodrama as “a cultural genre whose main effect is the stirring up of the emotions”. Geraghty (2010:92) concurs that the term is often used to describe the emotional responses and personal dilemmas associated with soap opera. American soap operas employ the melodramatic mode more than British ones, although melodrama is also used in British soap operas (Geraghty, 2010:92). Critics argue that the melodramatic aspect of the genre plays with viewers’ feelings and emotions unnecessarily (Ang, 1985:62). Other views see this as a strength which makes the genre unique and also keeps viewers emotionally engaged through the dramatisation of life’s daily emotional struggles that they also face in their lives (Allen, 1985). However, only those viewers with certain cultural

competences will relate to the drama that way (Ang,1985:61). Below I review previous soap opera studies and their findings on how audiences experienced realism.

### **Reviewing realism in previous soap opera studies**

In her study to find out what pleasures Dutch viewers derived from watching *Dallas*, Ang (1985) placed an advertisement in a Dutch Women's magazine called *Viva* asking readers to tell her why they liked or disliked *Dallas*. She received 42 responses, 3 from men and the rest (39) from women. While the study's main limitation is the small sample used, its key goal was to explore in depth how *Dallas* generated pleasure or displeasure in its viewers. Ang achieved this by analysing the response letter to map out the relationship between ideology and pleasure, or how the letter writers call on socially available ideology and cultural contexts to derive meaning from the programme. Pleasure derived from the realism of *Dallas* was one of the main reasons given for watching the soap. This realism was mostly at an emotional or connotative level and not a literal level upon which *Dallas* was viewed by some respondents as unrealistic, an assertion echoed by participants in Livingstone's (1988) and Hobson's (1989) studies. For Ang's (1985) participants realism also extended to characters. Life-like characters enabled engagement with the programme and generated pleasure. This was echoed in Livingstone's (1988) and Hobson's (1989) studies. Respondents who disliked *Dallas* found it to be exaggerated and unrealistic, while those who liked it found it to be realistic, and as such they saw themselves and their problems portrayed in the programme.

In addition to analysing the responses, investigating the socio-cultural contexts of the letter writers would have benefitted the study and helped to account for the different perceptions of realism, something which this project on *EastEnders* has achieved through empirical research. Furthermore, placing the advertisement in a woman's magazine also in itself eliminates some women and men who do not read women's magazines and who might have provided significant insights. This also further perpetuates the assumptions about the gendered nature of the genre.

Buckingham (1987) conducted a qualitative reception study with young people in London aged between seven and eighteen to investigate how they made sense of *EastEnders*. 60 participants were interviewed and 12 focus group interviews held. The study offers critical in-depth insights into how young people relate to television programmes. It is also one of a few empirical qualitative media audience studies involving this age-group, as studies reviewed here show. The study is strengthened by its inclusion of male and female participants from

multi-cultural backgrounds, thereby offering a diverse range of views. Recruiting participants who were already acquainted with each other enabled rich discussions to take place freely, as they would in their natural setting. Furthermore, the inclusion of siblings offered an interesting dimension as they had predominantly contradictory perspectives about some portrayals despite having the same cultural, gender, racial and religious orientation. The study could however have benefited from views held by young people from a different social class, as all participants were from working-class families (Buckingham, 1987:159). The impact of class was evident in how the participants were critical of middle-class characters as unrealistic and unappealing, while working class characters were liked and deemed realistic and true to life.

Buckingham's findings were similar to those of previous studies regarding realism, critical distance, entertainment and general familiarity with the genre. Contrary to common assumptions about the perceived passivity of young viewers and their inability to analyse and critique television programmes, participants derived pleasure from actively critiquing *EastEnders*. Most young people found depictions of social issues like health realistic, while the representation of issues like teenage pregnancy, gender relations and relationships in general, was seen as unrealistic. Significantly, two sisters held opposing views about the portrayal of teenage pregnancy, with one sibling seeing it as realistic and a deterrent while the other one suggested that key facts were missing from the depiction. This further demonstrates the complexity of the reception process and how media messages can be received differently by media audiences, even those situated in similar contexts.

In their assessment of realism, participants took a critical distance and ridiculed storylines which they thought were unrealistic. However, the 'unreal' constituted part of the pleasure derived from the soap as the participants were well aware of its production process and limitations as a fictional construction.

Further studies on the reception of soap operas have been conducted since Buckingham's (1987) study, Livingstone's (1988) and Hobson's (1989) being among them. In her study, Livingstone (1988) investigated the explanations given by regular British soap opera viewers for watching soaps and why they were popular. Her 52 respondents, comprising 37 females and 15 males aged 13-62 years, were obtained by placing an advert in a national magazine, *SOAPS*. Participants were asked for their views on why soap opera was popular. Quantitative content analysis was used to analyse the results. While this method enabled a clear

presentation of views in tables, some valuable data could be misrepresented or lost during categorisation or coding, as not all explanations will perfectly fit the available categories.

Social realism in soap opera, particularly British ones was cited as the reason for watching soap operas. British soaps were also applauded for their boldness in addressing delicate contemporary public and sensitive issues and thus giving the viewer a broader perspective on issues and also helping them to deal with similar or related life challenges. *EastEnders* was particularly viewed as dealing with ordinary life issues which accurately reflected society.

Similarly, in her study of how soap operas were incorporated into the lives of viewers outside the home, in their workplaces, Dorothy Hobson (1989) interviewed six British women who worked for Birmingham City Council, all of whom were avid soap opera viewers. Like Livingstone's (1988) and Madill and Goldmeier's (2003) participants, the women found British soap operas to be down-to-earth and realistic while American soaps were viewed as fantasy and unrealistic. Worth noting is that the British viewers were using their own experience of reality to judge the American soap operas as unreal. As Hobson correctly notes, it would be interesting to know if the American viewers of the same programmes thought of them as fantasy too (Hobson, 1989). It would be insightful too, to find out if American viewers found British soap operas realistic or not. Ang thus concludes that understanding soap operas requires cultural capital from the viewers (Ang, 1985:21).

Worth noting are the differences in the perception of reality in the American programme, *Dallas*, by British and Dutch viewers, with British viewers saying it is fantasy and some Dutch viewers seeing it as realistic, although they did not possess American cultural capital to decode the programme as real. Similarly, Madill and Goldmeier's (2003) North American participants found British soap operas in general and *EastEnders* in particular, more realistic than American ones. The findings present yet another valuable insight into the complicated relationship between media and their audiences.

Like Buckingham's (1987) participants, the women also criticised representations which were not reflective of their social experiences. This shows how viewers actively draw on their own experiences to judge the programmes. The experience is however not homogenous or static, varies from viewer to viewer and can change over time, in line with societal changes. Furthermore, viewers in most studies reviewed were aware of the conventions of the genre and appreciated the incorporation of unrealistic scenes in soap operas for entertainment purposes (Buckingham, 1987:180; Livingstone, 1988). This shows that familiarity with the

form and genre conventions plays an important part in viewers' involvement and engagement with soap operas (Kuhn, 2007).

### **Soap opera and stereotypes**

Despite claims to realism, the soap opera genre resorts to stereotypes to depict certain social issues. Dyer (1999:246) argues that stereotypes are generally used to represent and categorise people by using generalisations, patterning and typifications which are relatively acceptable to specific societies. While ordering society in this way may be useful, it has its own flaws, which include; the rigidity and partiality involved in creating stereotypes and the inability to accept the limitations and partiality of the belief systems and particular order the process is based on. Secondly, stereotypes are arguably ideological and socially constructed and as such are bound to be impacted by the power relations of a particular society (Dyer, 1999:246).

Dyer defines stereotypes in media representations as, “a particular sub-category of a broader category of fictional characters [...] which is any character constructed through the use of a few immediately recognisable and defining traits, which do not change or develop through the course of the narrative, and which point to the general, recurrent features of the human world” (Dyer, 1999: 247). Dyer argues further that most media fictions that deal with general social issues tend to use stereotypes resulting in the telling of individual stories, as opposed to social or collective stories, and as such, attribute and resolve all social issues at the individual level (i.e. personal and psychological) and not as an aspect of society. This view is echoed by Longhurst (1987:634).

Stereotypes tend to invite a consensus by implying that the represented views about a particular type or groups of people, are views generally held and agreed by everyone in society and not a result of particular definitions of reality (Dyer, 1999). Dyer argues further that society in general and television viewers in particular often obtain ideas and form opinions about certain groups of people from the stereotypes presented to them through media fictions. Chapter seven presents views on how *EastEnders* is perceived to employ stereotypes in its portrayal of harmful drinking.

Below, I review recent studies on *EastEnders*, followed by a review of alcohol and health-related soap opera studies.

### **Previous studies on *EastEnders***

There seems to be limited studies on *EastEnders* per se, apart from David Buckingham's (1987) study, discussed above and a few others discussed here such as Middleham and Wober (1997). The latter study investigated appreciation of *EastEnders* by its viewers and how the appreciation separated lighter from heavier viewers. A questionnaire was placed in *TV Times*, one of the widest selling programme listings magazines with a national circulation and on Talk Radio UK, a commercial radio station. 500 completed questionnaires were returned. 71% of the respondents were female, as if to confirm the assertion that soap opera is a female genre. Findings were quantitatively analysed using a coding system. The main conclusions were similar to previous studies in that most respondents appreciated realism, entertainment, emotional involvement and good acting. Only one finding was unique to this study which is that viewers' appreciation of the programme would decrease if portrayal of violent scenes and swearing increased in the soap. Buckingham's (1987) youngest participants also expressed displeasure in scenes that contained bad language with some children threatening to stop watching *EastEnders* if the bad language continued. Furthermore, findings revealed that older people and women appreciated the soap more than other categories.

The study is insightful in understanding how and why *EastEnders* appeals to its audience. Unlike previous studies reviewed, the sample size was wide, allowing for diverse views and the recruitment of participants was not biased. The data analysis method used is however, somewhat confusing and difficult to follow due to the use of a complex coding system. The study could have benefited from a thematic analysis of results in addition to the codes used, for ease of interpretation. Also, the study lacks elaborate views from viewers about their appreciation of the soap which could have been obtained through in-depth interviews thus giving the researchers an opportunity to ask follow-up questions to clarify the responses given, something which cannot be done by merely analysing questionnaire responses.

Madill and Goldmeier (2003) conducted a more recent study of *EastEnders*. The study raises significant arguments and also re-iterates themes raised by previous studies on *EastEnders* and soap opera in general. One of its aims was to understand why people watch *EastEnders*. An open-ended email questionnaire was issued to potential respondents and 45 responses were received from viewers aged 18-74 years, 10 from British viewers and 35 from North American viewers. 32 replies were from women and 13 from men, further confirming the male-female gender ratio noted in previous studies reviewed.

Data was qualitatively analysed. Again, findings were similar to those of previous soap opera studies. Participants watched *EastEnders* for the following reasons: *reduced troubles* (seeing similar problems being portrayed helped them deal with their own, the programme was thus therapeutic), *gender* (most female viewers learnt from and also related to strong female characters), *relaxation*, *entertainment*, *social activity* (bonding with family and as a point of discussion with friends), *community* (mostly North American viewers felt the programme gave them a sense of community and family in comparison with American soaps), *realism* (teenage pregnancy, rape and AIDS storylines) which North American viewers argued was missing in American soaps. North American respondents also felt that *EastEnders* enabled them to experience a sense of Britishness (learning about a different life, culture and working-class society). It is the concept of Britishness that is arguably a new factor in the appreciation of *EastEnders*, which this study has contributed. The concept resonates with sentiments expressed in previous studies, that soap operas enable some viewers to experience life different to their own and in the process, learn from that experience (Livingstone, 1988). Limitations of the study include the small sample size used and the bias created by the use of an online questionnaire which excludes viewers without internet access. The study nonetheless raises an important question currently being debated in contemporary reception studies regarding the impact of modern-day information technologies on the reception of media messages (Napoli, 2011; Livingstone, 2012; Carpentier et al, 2013). Respondents in the study used various *EastEnders* online chat groups to discuss the soap and share views with other fans in different countries. Therefore, viewers are no longer just consuming television programmes alone or with family or friends but with a much wider fan population across geographical borders. This global and multicultural context of reception created by modern information technologies has implications for the construction of meaning and the decoding of the programme by viewers, an interesting area for future research. This study highlights the role of information and communication technologies in contemporary television viewing.

While the studies reviewed above are predominantly reception studies, Wheatley (1999) took a different approach and conducted a textual analysis of *EastEnders* in order to contribute a unique understanding of soap opera through linguistic or discourse analysis. A sample episode of *EastEnders* screened in June 1998 was analysed for key features. His main conclusions were that soap operas portray people's problems more than successes and that they have mini-closures in their narratives, contrary to the belief that they resist narrative

closure (Hayward, 2015:4). He concludes that perhaps it is fairer to say soap operas have no perfect solutions to problems portrayed which might be why some views conclude that they resist closure.

### **Representation of alcohol on popular television**

The above discussion shows that soap operas can be seen as important conveyers of moral values and social messages. This explains why there have been health-commissioned studies in Britain on television soap operas, their content and potential impact on society and young people in particular. Most of the studies are quantitative and employ content analysis as the data collection method. One such study was Furnham et al.'s (1997) content analysis of alcohol portrayal and drinking in British soap operas. It was prompted by previous findings that showed prime-time soap operas in America, Canada and Britain as having high instances of alcohol consumption and significant portrayals of heavy drinking scenes with very few if any corresponding portrayals of consequences. *EastEnders* was cited as having one of the highest number of instances (Furnham et al, 1997:520). Six British soap operas were sampled and their content analysed for instances of alcohol portrayal and any verbal or visual references to alcohol. The results showed an increase in alcohol consumption scenes and alcohol portrayal in general with no consequences of heavy drinking such as drink-driving, health concerns, family problems or serious accidents and even death being portrayed, in comparison with previous studies and also in comparison with other countries like Australia where mostly non-alcoholic drinks were seen to be consumed. The conclusion was that British television and soap operas in particular were not depicting realistic images of alcohol, hence the need for television producers to be factual, accurate and realistic in their representations. The findings echo sentiments raised by participants in Ang (1985), Livingstone (1988) and Hobson's (1989) studies, that soap operas are expected to depict real-life problems realistically so viewers can learn from them and resolve their own issues in turn.

The researchers correctly conclude that it is impossible to suggest whether heavy drinking representations in soap operas can be said to encourage heavy drinking in viewers as this conclusion cannot be reached by mere content analysis alone. However, what can be concluded is that there is high portrayal of alcohol consumption in soap operas and few, if any consequences, thus making the representations problematic, as alcohol consumption is depicted as the norm, and as such may have a negative impact on young people and those trying to address their drinking (Furnham et al, 1997:526).

The pub setting of most British soap operas may have something to do with the high alcohol instances and drinking in British soap operas (Furnham et al,1997:527). The researchers however acknowledge that recent scenes in *EastEnders* show an effort by producers to address the alcohol representations by showing their under-18 characters only being served non-alcoholic drinks in the pub (Furnham et al, 1997:528). Unlike Furnham et al.'s (1997) study, my study has gone beyond content analysis and interviewed young viewers of *EastEnders* in order to elicit their views and perceptions on the portrayal of alcohol in the soap opera.

Another health-related study was conducted by Verma et al (2007) on the portrayal of health-related behaviours in popular UK soap operas. The four most popular British soap operas were analysed for their portrayal of key health related behaviours drawn from the UK government's white paper on public health, these were: alcohol consumption, smoking, food choice, and physical activity. The premise of the study was that soap operas, as part of popular television, are powerful and effective in increasing viewer knowledge and promoting behavioural change by running storylines on health and social issues and portraying these as the norm and not the exception (Verma et al, 2007:576). Findings showed that out of the selected behaviours, alcohol-related behaviours were the most commonly portrayed by the soap operas. Like Furnham et al (1997), Verma et al (2007:576) argue that the pub setting of most British soaps may be responsible for the portrayal of unhealthy alcohol behaviours. Details of the alcohol behaviours were however not provided by the study. This study was also based on content analysis with no audience views obtained.

A recent study of the representation of alcohol on British television was conducted by the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies (UKCTAS) in 2018 on the five free access national UK channels. Like most studies in this area, the study was quantitative and also employed content analysis. 611 programmes and 1140 commercials were recorded for analysis during the peak viewing hours, between 6 and 10 pm, from Monday to Sunday in three separate weeks (UKCTAS, 2018). Alcohol imagery occurred most frequently in the news, current affairs programmes, and soap operas. Findings also revealed that alcohol imagery is extremely common in UK television, with 50% of all programmes and advertisements monitored containing alcohol imagery. Of concern was that programmes broadcast before 9.00 pm, when young people and children were likely to be watching television had the most alcohol content. The alcohol content was higher than that found in a similar study conducted by the same researchers in 2010, leading them to conclude that UK television continues to be

a major source of alcohol exposure to young people and is arguably likely to continue contributing to young people's alcohol uptake. Recommendations were thus made to have stringent scheduling rules that restrict alcohol advertising and programming to after 9pm, to protect children and young people from this content. This study's conclusions were also premised on the assertion that there is a direct correlation between alcohol advertising and subsequent consumption by young people (UKCTAS, 2018), although no audience reception was carried out.

Atkinson et al (2013) conducted a recent qualitative study on young people's views and interpretations of the depiction of alcohol and drinking on different television programmes they watched, which included soap operas, series, advertisements and sport promotions. 114 young people between the ages of 11-18 were interviewed, through fifteen focus group and semi-structured interviews. Content analysis of some episodes of *EastEnders*, *Shameless*, *Skins*, *Friends* and *Match of the Day*, was conducted and some recorded clips of the programmes were played during the group discussions to stimulate debate.

As in previous studies, content analysis results confirmed that there were frequent depictions of alcohol in most programmes watched by young people with no corresponding consequences shown. Unlike previous studies, this study went beyond content analysis and discussed the portrayal of alcohol with the target audience. The main findings were that young people felt the portrayal of alcohol in general and young people's drinking in particular, was biased and unrealistic, due to negative depictions of alcohol dominating and positive portrayals missing, which was not reflective of real life, as not all alcohol use was negative. The participants' views on whether the portrayals influenced their own attitudes towards alcohol or their alcohol use, were inconclusive and vague although the general feeling was that positive portrayal of alcohol use without consequences would potentially encourage drinking while portrayal of negative consequences might be a deterrent.

What is particularly insightful is the qualitative approach and in-depth responses obtained from the young people as well as the qualitative analysis of the responses, which no doubt adds value to current knowledge. The researchers are aware of the complexity of the reception process and hence are cautious not to draw conclusions from content analysis only without empirical audience research. Furthermore, participants were drawn from different economic backgrounds which enhanced the study, for instance, contrasting views about the portrayal of alcohol dependence were expressed by young people from different socio-

economic backgrounds, with those from deprived areas identifying with the portrayal as realistic and those from privileged areas saying it was unrealistic. These views would otherwise have been missed out had the researchers not varied the demography of the participants, as seen in Buckingham's (1987:192) study where the participants, who were all from one social class (working class) found the middle-class characters portrayed in *EastEnders* unreal and working class ones realistic, because they could identify with them, however, had there been participants from a different social class, perhaps different insights would have emerged. The study would however have benefitted from a more balanced participant sample, which might have presented more diverse views on the subject, particularly given that alcohol use maybe viewed differently by different ethnic and religious groups. Therefore, by interviewing a predominantly White sample of young people (93%), potentially insightful views from young people belonging to ethnic minorities and other religious groups have been missed out. Also, the study is silent on how the focus groups were structured to ensure a conducive discussion environment, given the wide age-range (11-18).

My study is similar in approach to that of Atkinson et al (2013) in that, like their study, I am also investigating how British teenagers interpret alcohol messages portrayed by *EastEnders*. Unlike their study, my study goes further to explore the dynamics of media reception within the current context of fast paced technological advancements which have arguably transformed the traditional television audience (D'heer and Courtois, 2016:4). My study is also an in-depth investigation of the reception of one specific genre to produce rich insights. It also attempts to investigate the three main moments of the circuit of culture which are the production, text and reception processes (Kellner, 2011:10; Hall, 1980), in an attempt to gain a holistic understanding of meaning generation. While the methodology used and data collection methods employed by Atkinson et al (2013) are similar to my study, I have ensured that factors such as gender, race, social class and religion, which play a crucial role in decoding messages are represented in my participants. Most studies reviewed here tended to miss out some of the above aspects and thus missing out potentially significant insights. The section which follows concludes the chapter by drawing on soap opera studies reviewed in this chapter to highlight some key aspects of soap opera which make it popular with its audience.

### **Soap opera as entertainment/pleasure**

Viewers in studies reviewed here cited pleasure and entertainment as reasons for watching soap operas (Ang, 1985:9-10; Livingstone, 1988; Hobson, 1989). The pleasure and entertainment were derived from having something to look forward to or to keep up with (Ang, 1985:21; Livingstone, 1988) and the pleasure of talking about the programmes with other soap opera viewers (Madill & Goldmeier, 2003:485). Hobson (1989) found that soap opera viewing extended beyond the living room into work where both men and women discussed soap opera due to the genre's ability to encourage off screen discussions among viewers (Allen, 1995:20; Harrington, 2016:110-112). Viewers were also entertained by critiquing the programmes (Ang, 1985). British viewers in Hobson's (1989) study particularly enjoyed dismissing American soaps as fantasy and so watched them purely for entertainment.

### **Escapism**

Soap operas also provided an opportunity for viewers to escape from their mundane lives into a different world (Livingstone, 1988). This aspect has often led to criticism that soap viewers lack the ability to separate fiction/fantasy from reality. Other views disagree, arguing that soap opera audiences can separate the two worlds and as a result are able to take a critical distance should there be a mismatch in the portrayal of the world they live in (Ang, 1985:35; Hobson, 1989; Livingstone, 1988).

### **Soap opera and education, information and problem solving**

Notwithstanding the above, viewers also took the genre seriously and expected it to play a responsible, educational and informative role, which also contributed to their enjoyment (Buckingham, 1987; Livingstone, 1988). This is significant to this study which seeks to investigate the educational role of *EastEnders* among British teenagers. Soap opera viewers expected the programmes to portray the everyday life challenges they face or are likely to face, to enable them to learn from them and thus help them in problem solving (Buckingham, 1987; Livingstone, 1988). Learning occurred through following characters facing certain problems and witnessing consequences of decisions made, as this in turn enabled the viewer to reflect on their own situations (Livingstone, 1988). Buckingham's (1987:163) participants confirmed that *EastEnders* exposed issues they had not known about or experienced before, thereby educating them and making them more equipped to guard against such practices. For others, the programmes presented an opportunity to discuss sensitive social issues with their parents, something they would not have achieved otherwise. This further shows the ability of

soap opera to bring sensitive social issues into the public sphere (Katzman,1972:212), thereby stimulating debate among viewers.

While most viewers in studies reviewed acknowledged the educational value of soap operas, proposed solutions to the problems were not identified (Livingstone,1988). This highlights the need for future soap opera studies to focus on how viewers recognise and interpret specific themes and proposed solutions (Livingstone, 1988). One of my study's aims was to investigate what young viewers of *EastEnders* thought were the main themes and messages conveyed by the programme and if alcohol abuse was one of them and what in their view were proposed solutions to the issue of alcohol abuse.

Soap operas are increasingly being used by different sectors as social awareness raising vehicles due to their educational value. *EastEnders* and *Crossroads* producers interviewed by Livingstone (1988) confirmed that most storylines aimed at raising social awareness, discussing thought provoking issues and imparting diverse information to viewers. To this end, programmes had to be realistic and controversial social issues were well researched for accuracy to enable viewers to relate to them. To enhance accuracy of storylines on sensitive issues like rape, teenage pregnancy, alcoholism and drugs, programme producers liaise with the relevant government and police departments for facts to aid them in their dramatisation of the issue. In this way, the narrative remains entertaining but factual, informative and educative. A good example is the *EastEnders* breast cancer storyline where a cancer specialist was asked to provide a script for the soap, in line with real-life experiences of patients and the risks and treatments involved (Barba, 2014). This ensured that only accurate information was conveyed to viewers as opposed to unrealistic information likely to scare and misinform them. This study confirmed that *EastEnders* liaises with relevant health organisations in their construction of alcohol storylines in order to enhance their accuracy, as discussed in chapters five, six and eight.

While it is important for soap operas to raise awareness, it is equally crucial for them to remain neutral and let the viewer decide the appropriate response by encouraging a multiplicity of interpretations (Allen, 1985:21; Buckingham, 1987:84). If soaps took an explicit stand on issues they raised, or became overly moralistic, they might be viewed as propaganda vehicles or agents of health and education departments and thus lose credibility as neutral narratives meant primarily for entertainment. This could also cost them their audiences (Buckingham, 1987:84).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to position the study within broad debates around the soap opera genre, its origins, key elements and its relationship with its audiences. Differences between American and British versions of the genre were highlighted and key soap opera studies and *EastEnders* studies critically reviewed. The review indicates that significant work has gone into understanding the nature of the genre, its reception and significance as a cultural product taken seriously by its producers, viewers and various sectors of society like the government, health sector and interest groups. While previous research has indeed moved understanding of the genre forward, work still remains to be done. This study addresses important gaps by focussing on a specific theme portrayed in *EastEnders* and its reception by a specific audience group, as this adds depth to current research. Furthermore, it investigates young people, a social group which I argue is under-researched as most research in the field is on older participants, even though more young people are now watching soap opera (Modleski, 2008) and using information technologies more than any other group in society (Blake, 2016:2 and 51).

Finally, most studies of the portrayal of alcohol by British soap operas are quantitative in approach. They productively chart instances of portrayals, but lack depth as viewers' responses are completely missed out. This study fills this gap by using a qualitative approach to investigate and compare the discourses of the *EastEnders* text with those of the audience empirically, by employing qualitative methods of enquiry such as focus groups and semi structured interviews as discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

This chapter outlines the qualitative methodological framework informing the study. There are ongoing debates regarding the appropriateness of different research strategies in social research, with some writers like Blaikie (2007) arguing that the choice of a research strategy is more ideological than practical, and widely dependent on the researcher's beliefs and view of the social world. Other views argue that the choice is a practical one based on which strategy best answers the research problem (Denscombe, 2017:25). My choice of the qualitative methodology over the quantitative strategy is based on the understanding that in social research there is no ultimately right or wrong, good or bad method, but that the decision should be guided by what is the most appropriate and suitable strategy for answering the research questions, which entails evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of each strategy in the context of the investigation in question (Mason, 2017:22; Davies and Hughes, 2014:8-9). My study employs a qualitative research methodology because it enables the production of rich and naturalistic data by young people. It allows young people to give their own accounts, perspectives and views, as seen through their own eyes, and in the process fully answer the research questions set out in chapter one, within the context of the reception theory approach.

I start by contextualising qualitative methodology within the broader context of social research. I follow this with a discussion of qualitative methodology and how this study uses it to generate knowledge about the social phenomenon under investigation. The rest of the chapter discusses the ethical issues raised by the project and how they were handled and the qualitative methods and techniques used to collect and analyse the data generated.

Three fundamental philosophical underpinnings guide social research: ontology, epistemology and methodology (Sarantakos, 2012: 28). The three elements are arguably set in a hierarchical and deterministic order, in that, "ontology constructs the logic of epistemology, epistemology structures the nature of methodology and methodology prescribes the appropriate types of research methods, designs and instruments" (Sarantakos, 2012: 28).

## **Ontology and Epistemology**

Ontology is about the researcher's beliefs regarding the nature of social reality, whether it is objective (one discoverable reality out there) and context-free, or subjective and constructed in different multiple contexts (Killam, 2013:7). The main ontological positions are realism and constructivism (Sarantakos, 2012:28). Epistemology questions the nature of knowledge sought after by research, and how that knowledge should be judged as legitimate (Blaikie, 2007:18). One of the key epistemological debates concerns "the relationship between the researcher and the researched", and the possible impact of this on the research process or knowledge (Ritchie, et al, 2013:8). Objectivists argue that objective knowledge and independent reality exist and can be obtained without any subjective interference from the researcher, resulting in untainted knowledge (Blaikie, 2007:18). Constructivists on the other hand posit that it is impossible to capture objective reality as we only know things in the social world through how they appear to us or through their representations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011:5). Ritchie, et al (2013:8) concur, by postulating that social research is interactive and hence researcher subjectivity and influence are inevitable, making objective and neutral accounts impossible to attain as research findings are either mediated by the researcher or negotiated between the researcher and the researched. This is the premise of the qualitative methodology informing this study.

## **Methodology**

Methodology refers to how knowledge can be gained and how research should be designed, constructed and conducted in order to extract it (Sarantakos, 2012:29). Quantitative and qualitative research are the two main social research methodologies informed by different research paradigms namely positivism and constructionism (Henn et al, 2005). Below I briefly discuss the qualitative methodology which informs this study.

## **Defining qualitative research**

Qualitative research encompasses wide and varied approaches, which makes it a broad and diverse approach to the study of social phenomena (Flick, 2018:16). These include constructivist, interpretivist and phenomenological perspectives (Ritchie, et al, 2013:11-12). According to Marshall and Rossman (2014), qualitative research is a pragmatic, humanistic, naturalistic and interpretive approach to the study of the social phenomena, in their natural setting, using the participants' lived experiences, expressions and interpretations of their world as the basis of knowledge. Its emphasis on meaning rather than measurement makes it

a humanistic approach (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014:13). Furthermore, reality and interpretations of the social world are seen as being socially constructed and not independent of human experience (Denscombe, 2017: 160). This assertion leads to the possibility of multiple realities being constructed by different groups of people with different cultural and other sociological orientation (Denscombe, 2017:162). It is the importance attached to accounts and interpretations given by research participants, and meanings they assign to the social world, from their own perspectives (Flick, 2018:14) that make qualitative research appropriate for this study about how young people interpret media messages and construct meanings from the same.

Naturalistic and interpretive data collection methods located within the qualitative research tradition, namely focus group and semi-structured interviews (Hammarberg et al, 2016:499), were employed by the study to collect rich data that offers detailed explanations and accounts of how young people receive and interpret alcohol messages in *EastEnders*. Focus group interviews were used to collect data from young people while semi-structured individual interviews were used to obtain health experts' views.

### **Ethical considerations**

Israel (2014:1 and 9) postulates that research ethics is about doing what is right, good and virtuous, and displaying proper research conduct throughout the research journey (Flick, 2018:36). Therefore, in planning and conducting my research, I considered all ethical issues relevant to my study and treated my research participants in line with the university's ethical guidelines, the code of research ethics in general (Flick, 2018) and the general code of ethics published by the Social Research Association (2020).

To this end, the project had to undergo ethical approval by the relevant university ethics committee, before fieldwork commenced, to ensure compliance with ethical requirements. Furthermore, throughout the research process, I practiced reflexivity, honesty, and sensitivity and also attempted to see things from my participants' perspectives, in order to treat them fairly, empathetically and with respect, while also ensuring that their needs and interests were taken into consideration and that none of them came into any harm as a result of the study (Flick, 2018:36). As the research involved young people, I considered specific ethical issues raised in the literature on conducting research with children and young people, which relate to treating them as equals in research, and important sources of knowledge about their world

and experiences (Clark et al, 2014:2). This way their rights were respected (Clark et al, 2014:8). Furthermore, I employed focus group discussions as they are recommended for research with young people (Mauthner, 1997:22).

### **Informed consent and voluntary participation**

In line with informed consent requirements, participants were adequately informed about the details of the study, that they were being researched and their right and freedom to withdraw from the study at any time (Silverman, 2016:32). Before giving consent, participants were supplied with relevant information, including that all interview proceedings were recorded and how their data was going to be used (Flick, 2018:40). The consent was given voluntarily and by competent individuals (Flick, 2018:41). In the United Kingdom, while people aged 16 and above are able to freely give informed consent, unless they are vulnerable or incapacitated, as stated by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014), the university requires written consent from all participants to be obtained. As such, all participants were sent consent forms and information sheets in advance and they all consented.

### **Confidentiality**

To guarantee confidentiality and anonymity, all participants' real names, locations, colleges and schools and other information which could lead to their identification were removed from this project (Flick, 2018:40), apart from one participant who wanted to use their real name. Information about the project and how the data was going to be used as well as their right to use a pseudonym for confidentiality, were all re-iterated to the participant but they still expressed their desire to use their real name, their wish was consequently granted, in line with research ethics (Silverman, 2016). All data collected were securely stored in a locked-up cabinet (hard copies) and password protected computer for all electronic data (Flick, 2018:40). I also re-iterated the importance of keeping all group discussions confidential, in order to protect their own and their colleagues' confidentiality. None of the participants disclosed any historical or intended crimes, as such, there was no requirement to break any participant confidentiality by the researcher (Wiles et al, 2008:419).

### **Trust**

To encourage research participants to be open and honest in future research, I kept my promises regarding what was agreed, by ensuring that the data analysis and interpretation are

based on the actual interview statements and not constructed using the researcher's personal judgement or bias (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011:149).

### **Purposive sampling**

As researchers cannot interview every member of the population under study, due to time, resource, financial and other constraints, I interviewed a cross section of the population of interest, with the intention that the selected sample will reveal more insights about the wider population; this process is called sampling (Denscombe, 2014).

Purposive sampling, a qualitative research sampling method (Shenton, 2004), was employed by this study to obtain in-depth findings from a carefully chosen sample (McIntosh and Morse, 2015:8), which represented a key criterion, while also addressing crucial elements of the research and allowing for adequate diversity and comparison between the sample members (Ritchie et al, 2013:113). The scale and representativeness of the sample are thus not an integral part of the approach (Ritchie et al, 2013:113). Snowball sampling, an approach to purposive sampling (McIntosh and Morse, 2015:8), was used to recruit participants for this project. In this approach, eligible participants recommend other qualifying participants to the researcher, who then contacts them, and other recommended participants until the required sample size is achieved (McIntosh and Morse, 2015:8). The strategy is commended for enabling prompt recruitment of relevant participants and generating rich knowledge (Denscombe, 2014; Noy, 2008).

As the study's objective was to investigate the reception of alcohol messages in *EastEnders* by young people, it was vital that the sample comprised participants who watched or had watched the programme, and were able to share their views and experiences about it. As it was not practically possible to interview all young people in Nottingham who watched *EastEnders* and met the study criteria, I purposefully sampled schools and colleges in Nottingham that have a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, diverse religion and mixed gender, age and social class, student population, as the research population from which sample participants for focus group interviews were drawn. This ensured that certain socio-demographic characteristics that are important for the study and key variables essential in reception theory, namely ethnicity, age, gender, social class, culture and religion, were all sampled, to enhance the depth of the findings. Although my initial goal was to target schools only as this would allow ease of access to the 16-18-year-old age range, accessing this age group proved

difficult due to tight schedules and timetables. I therefore widened my sample to include colleges and youth centres. Including young people in colleges added value to the study as it enabled a comparison of the reception processes of young people from different institutions. None of the institutions sampled had any connection with the researcher but were sampled because they met the study criteria and granted access to their students for the interviews. The purposive sampling strategy discussed above was employed to select only those participants who met the research criteria and goals, had the desired characteristics and were able to contribute rich data to the research, even though they were not representative of the broader population (McIntosh and Morse, 2015:8). As such, participants included young people aged between 16 and 18 years, who currently watch *EastEnders*, and those who have watched it before and had enough knowledge about the programme to engage in a meaningful discussion about it. The sample included a mixture of young people who watched the soap with family, friends or alone, and those who watched it from the main television screen in the living room, laptop and smartphones. Including these categories enabled a comparison between the reception and interpretation patterns of different groups of young people. The sampling strategy used was thus robust and enabled an in-depth investigation of the research topic by ensuring that all crucial characteristics, experiences and features relevant to the investigation were included in the sample (McIntosh and Morse, 2015:8).

### **Recruitment of participants**

Each institution provided a contact person, in most cases, a senior teacher. The researcher liaised with them and briefed them about the study and the nature of participants required. The teacher in turn explained this to the population of students that met the criteria, and obtained willing participants who in turn recommended more qualifying students who were willing to participate, until the required sample size was met. This was all conducted in line with the requirements of snowball sampling (McIntosh and Morse, 2015:8).

### **Focus group interviews**

Focus group interviews are informal, but structured group discussions on a specific topic, and are used to gather collective views, opinions, beliefs, experiences, perspectives and meanings of a specified issue, under the guidance of a moderator (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014:1). It is the interactive data collection procedure, joint construction and negotiation of meaning and knowledge, facilitated by group discussions that makes them distinctive and the data collected more informative (Wilkinson, 1998:182).

This project employed focus group discussions in order to obtain in-depth data and also enable the researcher to observe how young people receive alcohol messages as a group just like they do in real life where media messages are often received and discussed with family, friends, peers and workmates (Madill and Goldmeier, 2003). They also provide a more natural environment where participants influence each other as they do in real life (Litosseliti, 2018:207).

### **Group composition**

Group composition is key in facilitating interaction among focus group participants. Research shows that groups consisting of participants who are already familiar with each other prior to the discussion, produce more in-depth discussions than stranger groups where group interaction is minimal (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014:11). Mauthner (1997:23) postulates that friendship groups work well for young people and that single sex groups are also usually more successful than mixed groups because boys tend to dominate mixed groups and end up overshadowing girls' views (Mauthner, 1997:23). Similar age or peer groups also arguably work better than groups with a wide age range or sibling groups, as the younger or older participants tend to dominate or even get excluded by other participants (Mauthner, 1997:23). Gill et al (2008:293) and Stewart and Shamsadani (2014:23) nonetheless agree that group composition will always impact focus group data. A skilled moderator can, however, minimise the impact by actively ensuring that participants have enough common ground to generate interaction and facilitate deep conversations and discussions, and sufficient diversity to stimulate debate and different perspectives.

### **Group size**

Group size is also important in facilitating vibrant discussions (Gill et al, 2008:293). There is no universally acceptable number of participants that should comprise an ideal focus group, with views suggesting a range of between 4 (McLafferty, 2004:190) and 12 participants (Millward, 1995:425). Most writers however believe that groups should have enough participants to stimulate a fruitful discussion, as very small or large groups can hinder productive discussions (Krueger and Casey, 2009:6), while the latter can also become difficult for the moderator to manage and frustrating for the participants who will have insufficient opportunity to express their views (Gill et al, 2008:293). Large groups can also be challenging to tape-record effectively, and make it difficult for conversations to be

accurately followed through by the researcher when transcribing the data (Millward, 1995:425).

To facilitate maximum interaction and stimulate fruitful debate and rich data generation, I held 4 focus group interviews each consisting of between 5 and 12 participants. The first group had 12 participants, all girls, the second had 5 participants, all boys, the third had 5 participants, one girl and 4 boys, while the fourth group had 9 participants, 3 girls and 6 boys. All groups comprised participants from different ethnic groups as shown in figure 1. While most participants in each group were familiar with each other, by virtue of attending the same institution, others were not and thus provided the appropriate balance and conducive atmosphere for vibrant discussions. This was because, on the one hand, the familiarity promoted ease and rapport in the group enabling the participants to comfortably challenge each other's views without fear. On the other hand, including unfamiliar participants also allowed honest views to be shared as too much familiarity could have stifled debate. As the moderator, I also ensured that all participants were comfortable and free to express their views without fear or intimidation and that the groups comprised young people from diverse socio-economic, age, gender and religious backgrounds, as these factors are important in the reception of media messages.

Challenges were faced during participant recruitment resulting in some groups being bigger than others and other groups having more of the same gender, race and age- group among other factors. This was due to the limited availability of a balanced number of young people who met the study criteria. Nevertheless, the groups established were still vibrant and diverse enough to generate different views, insights and perspectives on the topic, and adequate and robust data for the project. Small groups appeared to be more vibrant than large groups due to participants having more opportunity to share their views and feeling less intimidated. Some participants in the bigger groups were happy to let the same people contribute all the time and as such needed constant probing by the moderator to contribute, while those in the smaller groups contributed freely, with less probing. Furthermore, discussions appeared to be more open and in-depth in single-sex groups in comparison with mixed ones. While this could partly be attributed to the conducive environment provided by single sex groups, on this occasion, the mixed groups did not have a gender balance and as such boys arguably dominated the discussions as they were the majority. The above observations confirm most of

the focus group literature on group composition and size discussed earlier in this chapter. The breakdown of the groups is below (figure 1);

**Figure 1. Focus groups breakdown**

| <b>Group</b> | <b>Total Participants</b> | <b>Girls</b> | <b>Boys</b> | <b>16 Years</b> | <b>17 Years</b> | <b>18 Years</b> | <b>Black</b> | <b>White</b> | <b>Asian</b> | <b>Mixed Race</b> |
|--------------|---------------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------|
| <b>1</b>     | 12                        | 12           | 0           | 4               | 5               | 3               | 6            | 1            | 2            | 3                 |
| <b>2</b>     | 5                         | 0            | 5           | 1               | 2               | 2               | 2            | 2            | 1            | 0                 |
| <b>3</b>     | 5                         | 1            | 4           | 0               | 5               | 0               | 0            | 5            | 0            | 0                 |
| <b>4</b>     | 9                         | 3            | 6           | 0               | 9               | 0               | 0            | 9            | 0            | 0                 |

4 group interviews in total were held. While the intention was to hold more groups at the beginning of data collection, no new data was being generated after the fourth group, which led to the conclusion that I had reached saturation. My decision was also in line with the fact that there is no consistency or agreement regarding the number of groups considered appropriate for a research study, with some authors suggesting a minimum of three groups and maximum of 12, while others maintain that anything above ten groups will produce redundant data (Millward, 1995:425). The most common view is that it makes sense to stop conducting further interviews when there is no new information being generated, that is, when saturation is reached (Krueger and Casey, 2009:21; McLafferty, 2004:190).

### **Group venue**

A natural, neutral, comfortable, non-threatening, conveniently accessible, familiar and quiet venue, free of distractions is recommended as conducive for facilitating conversation and debate in group discussions (Gill et al, 2008:94). Gill et al (2008:294) argue that the venue can impact upon the behaviour of participants, for example focus groups held at a school venue for school-going participants might be convenient for participants to attend, but can be affected by participants behaving like pupils in the discussions. Other views however posit that a familiar and natural venue enables group participants to be comfortable and relaxed, and hence talk more freely (McLafferty, 2004:191). All focus group discussions for this project were held in participants' institutions, to enable them to safely and conveniently access the group discussions. Using a familiar venue created a conducive, relaxed and comfortable atmosphere which promoted free discussions. While all the participants appeared comfortable with the venues, notable differences were observed between participants interviewed at schools and those interviewed at colleges. The former appeared less open

while discussing certain topics in comparison with their college counterparts, who were happy to share personal drinking experiences, as discussed in detail in chapters six.

### **The interview/moderator's guide**

In order to stimulate conversation, keep group discussions focussed, and ensure that all research questions were adequately discussed, I used a moderator's guide (McLafferty, 2004:189), defined as a loosely structured guide that contains topics to be discussed during the group interview (Gill et al, 2008:293). The guide was structured with broad questions, crucial to the study (Gill et al, 2008:293) being asked first, to encourage participation from everyone, although during the discussions this order was not always possible to follow due to participants' responses sometimes prompting the discussion to address questions in a different order. I therefore had to occasionally allow the interviews to dictate the order, within reason, to enable the discussions to flow naturally as opposed to rigidly following the guide and risk stifling the discussions. Effort was however made to ensure that all questions on the guide were discussed in all groups. To allow adequate time to probe participants and to also increase their response times, I kept the number of questions low and only used them as a guide, which enabled me to ask other questions I deemed necessary in order to stimulate the discussion (McLafferty, 2004:189). Before using the interview guide in the field, I piloted it with a few young people to ensure that all questions met the requirements of the study and were also correctly and comprehensively worded (McIntosh and Morse, 2015:5). Incorrectly worded questions and those difficult for participants to understand were amended before fieldwork.

### **Role of the moderator**

I moderated all discussions due to having in-depth knowledge of the project. This aided the collection of relevant and rich data (Millward, 1995). I sought to ensure a non-threatening, comfortable and conducive atmosphere for all participants to express their views freely, while also keeping the discussion focused on the research topic (Gill et al, 2008:294). To promote a relaxed atmosphere for open discussions, I presented myself as trustworthy, confident, professional, relaxed and comfortable (Gill et al, 2008:294). I served refreshments at all group discussions and played ice-breaker games to relax the participants prior to the discussions (McLafferty, 2004:191).

To set the tone and expectation, I communicated all relevant information about the discussions at the outset, and allowed participants to ask questions (McLafferty, 2004:191). The information included: re-iterating the goals and purpose of the study; my role as a moderator; their right to withdraw at any stage (but that if they chose to withdraw at a later stage, it may be difficult to entirely remove their contributions as they will be intertwined with other participants' contributions); privacy and confidentiality in gathering, storing, use and retention of the data; protection of their identity, reminding them not to use their real names and assuring them that if real names are accidentally used during the discussion, these will be changed during transcription in order to maintain their anonymity (McLafferty, 2004:191). Participants were also reminded of the importance of expressing their views freely and allowing others to do so, even if their views were contrary to theirs (Gill et al, 2008:294). Providing this information at this stage, gave them reassurance, built trust and confidence and encouraged openness. Short video clips of alcohol storylines in *EastEnders* were played to each group prior to the discussions, to jog the participants' memory of the programme and in line with the reception theory requirement, although it was made clear that the discussions were to be based on *EastEnders* as a whole and not just the clips. The same video clips were played to each group to enable appropriate comparisons.

During discussions, I facilitated maximum interaction among participants, and afforded everybody an equal opportunity to make their contributions (McLafferty, 2004:191). Furthermore, I encouraged different views by probing quiet and shy participants, while reining in the talkative ones who dominated the discussion (Krueger and Casey, 2009:101). Participants were encouraged to avoid talking over each other to enable effective recording of conversations (McLafferty, 2004:191).

Effective moderation also entailed actively guiding the discussions by moving them forward (Litosseliti, 2018) when adequate insights had been expressed on a particular issue (Carey, 1994). Furthermore, I was attentive, exercised good listening skills (Krueger and Casey, 2009:101), and followed up interesting contributions and probed for more information and further insights (McLafferty, 2004:191). Care was taken when interjecting for elaboration, to avoid a situation where the conversation ended up being between myself and the participants, instead of occurring among participants. I was careful not to end up leading or joining in, as this was going to create bias and sway the participants towards saying what they thought I wanted to hear, and as such take away their confidence to openly express their own views

(Gill et al. 2008:294). I was neutral in my questioning and reactions to the respondents' contributions (Litosseliti, 2018) while also aiming for balanced and sensible moderation, as too much intervention would have stifled open discussions, whereas minimal guidance ran the risk of inadequately covering the topic.

### **Recording the interviews**

All the group and individual interviews were recorded in order to adequately capture the discussions and to allow me to observe non-verbal behavior and group interaction (Gill et al, 2008:294), which I noted in my field notes for inclusion in the analysis (Carey, 1994). I avoided taking elaborate notes as this could have been detrimental to my moderation role and impacted on the quality of data generated (McLafferty, 2004:191). Before recording the interviews, I alerted all participants to this and re-assured them of the privacy regarding the collection, handling and storage of their data, and their rights to withdraw (Gill et al's, 2008:294). All participants were willing to be recorded. While I predominantly relied on the recorder to capture the discussions, I also wrote down key points raised in addition to the notes on body language and other group interaction observed. This practice proved to be a good and effective back-up during data collection, as I had to refer to the notes after the first group interview when I discovered that the first part (introductory part) of the recording was not clear due to incorrect positioning of the recorder by the participants. Lessons were learnt from this experience resulting in excellent recordings of subsequent group interviews. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to enable a thorough and accurate analysis. Framework analysis, a qualitative data analysis approach discussed in this chapter was used to analyse all interview data, due to its appropriateness and suitability for the analysis.

### **Disadvantages of focus group interviews**

Although focus group interviews are viewed as one of the most effective humanistic methods of eliciting rich views about a specific topic, they are not without disadvantages, even though the richness of the data collected by the method arguably outweighs its shortcomings (McLafferty, 2004:193). Carey (1994:236) postulates that conformity and censoring are a major pitfall of the method, as these can potentially impact on the data generated. This is because some participants may alter their own contributions so they are in line with those of other participants and the moderator. Furthermore, others may censor or withhold their contributions because they do not trust the moderator or other group members or even how their information will be used (Carey, 1994:236).

As a skilled moderator I was able to mitigate most of the issues by consistently reassuring participants of the confidentiality of the discussions and the importance of gathering diverse and even contradictory views from everybody, and above all, ensuring that the environment was conducive for everybody to contribute their views without intimidation (Litosseliti, 2018). Furthermore, no data gathering method is pure and uncompromised (Litosseliti, 2018:206).

### **Semi-structured interviews**

In addition to focus group interviews, semi-structured individual interviews, administered face to face, were conducted with health experts. Using mixed methods ensured rich data collection as the study benefited from the strengths of the different methods (Shenton, 2004; Morgan, 1996).

Semi-structured interviews, also known as “informal, conversational or soft interviews”, are a qualitative research data collection method which involves an informal verbal exchange between the researcher and the participant, using open-ended questions (Longhurst, 2003:103). The participant has the flexibility to respond to the questions elaborately and from any angle, while the interviewer can probe for further insights, resulting in the production of in-depth and elaborate information (Gill et al, 2008:291). This method enables a deeper understanding of the research topic by enabling an exploration of diverse perspectives. (McIntosh and Morse, 2015).

### **The interview guide**

As in focus group interviews, I ensured that all questions on the guide were pertinent, open-ended, neutral, sensitive and understandable (Gill et al, 2008:292). I started with easy questions and ended with challenging ones, as this puts the interviewees at ease and builds their confidence and rapport with the interviewer (Gill et al, 2008:292). I pre-tested the guide, and relevant amendments were made to the questions after the pilot and before field work (McIntosh and Morse, 2015:5).

### **Conducting the interview**

Before commencing, I explained the purpose of the study to each interviewee, reminded them that the interview was being recorded and re-iterated the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity (Flick, 2018:40). This set the interviewee’s expectations about the interview and also encouraged confidence, honesty and openness during the interview (Gill et al,

2008:292). Selected alcohol-related *EastEnders*' clips were viewed with the respondents prior to the interviews, to aid the discussions, although the interviews were based on the whole programme. The same clips were played to all interview respondents in order to enable appropriate comparisons. Prior to the interview, I familiarised myself with the contents of the interview schedule so that the interview process came across as natural (Gill et al, 2008:292). During the interviews, I referred to the schedule loosely to ensure all pertinent questions were covered, but also strayed from it, when necessary, to follow up interesting insights and to allow interviewees freedom to express themselves, in their own terms (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006:1). While conducting the interviews, I exhibited neutral, encouraging and friendly body language, and showed interest by using non-verbal gestures like nodding, so as to motivate the interviewees (Gill et al, 2008:292). Furthermore, I exercised sound questioning and probing skills (Gill et al, 2008:292) and listened carefully to allow interviewees to give elaborate accounts of their experiences without interruption (Gill et al, 2008:292). To promote rapport with the interviewee, all interviews were recorded, to allow me to focus on the interview (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006:1). After each interview, I noted all key information which could not be captured by the audio recording (Longhurst, 2003:110).

Participants were thanked for their participation at the end of each interview, and were also encouraged to ask questions and add to the interviews anything they felt relevant. This added new insights to the study, while also enabling participants to add information about the subject that was important to them (Gill et al, 2008:293). The duration of the interviews ranged between an hour and ten minutes and one hour and forty-five minutes. All the interviewees were open, competent and keen to discuss the topic in detail and with significant passion, enabling rich data generation. To provide a neutral, informal, accessible and comfortable venue for both interviewer and interviewee (Gill et al, 2008:292), all semi-structured interviews were held at the interviewees' offices. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim soon after the interviews, to enable an accurate record of the conversations, and all references to participants and other information that could lead to their identification were removed to protect their anonymity (McIntosh and Morse, 2015:8). The Framework analysis approach discussed below, was used to analyse the data, as it allows for a close analysis of transcripts for common themes.

## **Data analysis**

There is no prescribed way of conducting qualitative data analysis due to the diversity of approaches (Rabiee, 2004:657). The nature and magnitude of the study, the research objectives and nature of data to be analysed (Dey, 2003:1-2) determine the appropriate approach to use. Researchers are encouraged to be systematic in their chosen approach and document the methods they use to analyse their data, for credibility, dependability, reliability and verification purposes (Miles et al, 2013). Effective analyses should also explore and explain any links between the data and the theory used by the researcher (Pope et al, 2000), and use the conceptual framework to understand and interpret the social action and the interrelationships that may exist (Dey, 2003:22). Morgan and Kruger (1998:4) posit that for credibility purposes and to enhance confidence in study findings, the name of the analysis strategy being used should be mentioned.

## **Framework analysis**

This study employed Framework analysis, a qualitative data analysis approach, to analyse both focus group and semi-structured interviews because it is systematic, flexible, rigorous, transparent and also allows for a thematic analysis of the data (Ward et al, 2013:2425), which suits the nature of data for this study and the research questions and study goals. It also offers a simple but structured and rigorous step-by-step approach for the researcher to effectively manage large amounts of data from both focus groups and individual interviews, while also enabling those reviewing the study to easily follow the analytical procedure used (Rabiee, 2004:657). It is dynamic and comprehensive and is grounded on the original accounts and observations of the research subjects (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002:176). Its main strength is that it incorporates all important features of qualitative data analysis in general, which include flexibility, a systematic and transparent approach, verifiable findings, among others, and also includes key analytical elements found in other qualitative analysis approaches such as data immersion, reduction and comparison of themes (Ward et al, 2013:2425). The flexibility in the Framework approach allows data collection and analysis to occur simultaneously while also providing a clear structure for the analysis of interview transcripts and thematic comparisons across data from different interviews (Ward et al, 2013:2425; Rabiee, 2004:657). This makes the approach easy to follow and easy to scrutinise (Johnston et al, 2012).

Framework analysis comprises a number of distinct but highly connected analytical stages, which include: familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002: 177). The “*familiarisation*” stage involves data immersion through listening to the interview recordings, reading interview transcripts, observational notes and notes made soon after the interview, multiple times, in order to recall as much of the interview as possible and to also get a feel of the data in terms of its range and diversity (Ritchie et al, 2003:221). Key ideas emerging from the data and recurring themes are noted at this stage (Rabiee, 2004:657).

“*Identifying a thematic framework*” is the second stage (Ritchie et al, 2003:221). Key ideas, concepts and themes which can be used to examine the data are identified (Rabiee, 2004:657). This can be done by drawing on questions and issues emerging from the aims and objectives of the research, as well as themes arising from the research participants themselves and other recurring views in the data (Pope et al, 2000). This is one of the key strengths of Framework analysis, in that it allows themes to emerge from both research questions and the narratives of the respondents (Rabiee, 2004:657).

The third stage, which is “*indexing*” (Rabiee, 2004:657), involves systematically applying the thematic framework to the rest of the data by scrutinising the data, highlighting quotations and making comparisons within and across different data. This is followed by the “*charting*” stage, which involves re-arranging quotations under relevant themes (Rabiee, 2004: 657-658) and providing refined summaries of the views and experiences of participants.

The final stage, which is “*mapping and interpreting*” (Rabiee, 2004:658), calls upon the researcher’s analytical skills in analysing the quotations and investigating how they connect to each other and to the rest of the data. This stage is guided by the research objectives as well as the themes emerging from the data. According to Morgan and Krueger (1998:6), taking into account words, context, internal consistency, frequency and extensiveness of comments, specificity of comments, intensity of comments and big ideas, in the analysis of quotations leads to a systematic and rigorous interpretation.

Considering the correct “*context*” of the utterance within the group discussion is important as taking quotations out of context can change their meaning (Rabiee, 2004:659). Understanding contexts also prevents the researcher from taking people’s actions at face value, which may negatively impact on the analysis (Brennen, 2017). Considering “*internal consistency of*

*comments*” (Rabiee, 2004:659) enhances the analysis. This entails examining changes of views, opinions and positions by participants and seeking an explanation for it in the analysis (Rabiee, 2004:659). Furthermore, analysing “*frequency and extensiveness of comments*” can also aid the analysis, and this entails scrutinising the number of times a comment is made as well as the number of participants who express a specific view or comment (Rabiee, 2004:659). Moreover, researchers are also encouraged to take into consideration the “*specificity of comments*” made by participants in their analyses by focusing on views and comments relating to participants’ personal experiences as opposed to hypothetical situations (Rabiee, 2004:659).

While Framework analysis has all the discussed strengths and qualities, like all qualitative data analysis methods, it has its own shortcomings. Its flexibility can be a disadvantage in that it tends to allow some researchers to use short cuts by not entirely following all the stages (Pope et al, 2000). In analysing data for this study, I have followed the steps and recommendations outlined in the Framework analysis approach, with thematic analysis being the main strategy used because of its suitability to analyse the nature of data collected.

Before attempting the analysis, I familiarised myself with the data by listening to the interview recordings multiple times and thoroughly going through the transcripts and field notes, noting key ideas, themes and concepts emerging from the data. Themes used in the analysis were drawn from the study objectives and questions while others emerged from the data themselves, in line with the Framework analysis approach. The next stage entailed identifying quotations from all the transcripts that were relevant to each theme followed by an exercise that involved lifting the quotations from their original positions and placing them under specific themes and focus group questions they related to. While this can be a challenging task particularly in instances where large volumes of data are being analysed at the same time, for this project, the challenge was eased by the fact that data was collected and analysed in two stages, which made the volumes manageable. The quotations were then interpreted in line with the study objective which is to investigate how young British teenagers receive and interpret alcohol messages in *EastEnders*. In interpreting and analysing the data, a conscious effort was made to cross-reference all group discussions noting and explaining any similarities and differences in views and perceptions while ensuring that the explanations were grounded in the participants’ comments. As recommended in the above literature on qualitative data analysis, the analysis was informed by the main conceptual

framework employed by the study which is reception analysis theory as well as the secondary theoretical framework, which is second screen theory, while significant reference was also made to the soap opera form particularly with regards to how the participants engaged with *EastEnders*. Views obtained from an interview with one of the *EastEnders* producers were also incorporated into the analysis. All interview transcripts are available should they be required.

Group interaction is considered the trademark and advantage of focus group interviews over other data collection methods, as it enables the researcher to observe different attitudes and to see how perceptions and opinions are formed (Grønkjær et al, 2011:16). It is therefore important to include it in the analysis, although most writers agree that it makes focus group analysis more complicated than other qualitative analyses (Morgan and Kruger, 1998:20). In analysing focus group data, I ensured that all observations noted in the field notes on group interaction were taken into account and that all changes of opinion and views by participants due to group dynamics were accounted for.

## **Reflection**

### *My role as a researcher*

Given the common adage in qualitative research that "the researcher is the research instrument" (Hammarberg et al, 2016:500), certain researcher characteristics can potentially influence empirical data collection. I reflect here on the extent to which my own experiences and insights may have fed into the design and execution of my research and data interpretation. This is however in the context of the overall understanding within qualitative research that social research is interactive and hence researcher subjectivity and influence are inevitable (Ritchie et al, 2013:8). Furthermore, reflecting on the possible influence of the researcher on the research is considered a significant way of defending the study's credibility and validity (Hammarberg et al, 2016:500).

While I acknowledge that it is not possible to eliminate all subjectivity from research, I concur with some views (Silverman, 2016:3) that it is important for qualitative researchers to take necessary steps to consciously eliminate possible bias and subjectivity during data collection and analysis. To this end, I phrased all my interview questions in a neutral and not leading manner. This entailed obtaining constructive feedback and views from supervisors and colleagues on how the questions came across. A pilot study was also conducted to test

the questions and any questions that did not achieve the desired outcome were amended before commencing fieldwork. Moreover, questions that were ambiguous were amended and perfected with each group discussion held. It is important to note that the questions did not change substantially and as such, the same questions were asked in all focus group interviews, to enable accurate comparisons between groups. Participants were also allowed to add their own views which they felt added value to the study. When conducting the interviews, effort was made to maintain neutral body language and comments. As the topic of discussion was a sensitive one involving personal views and alcohol consumption practices, I ensured that my personal views on the subject remained unknown to the participants to enable them to give their own views openly without feeling judged.

While most participants were vibrant and participated freely, others needed constant probing, particularly in big and mixed groups. Single-sex group discussions were more vibrant than mixed ones where boys dominated the discussions and girls mainly spoke when probed. Although my initial intention was to hold only single sex discussions for maximum benefit, it was difficult to balance the gender when recruiting the participants as more boys volunteered to take part than girls, particularly in colleges, resulting in the unbalanced groups. Similarly, effort was made to recruit participants who represented all relevant variables that are significant to the study, however, due to unavailability, desired numbers representing each variable were sometimes not adequately met although there was at least some representation of each key factor.

As indicated earlier, my goal was to hold more focus group discussions, however, due to reaching data saturation early, only four group interviews were held in the end. My initial research design also included holding semi-structured interviews with individual young people. However, a pilot study did not yield data different to that already gathered from focus group interviews. Because of this, the interviews were instead pursued with health experts. While these changes modified my research design, they did not negatively impact on the data collected for the study or the analysis thereof, as rich and adequate data was still collected and varied opinions and perceptions still obtained from the participants. Using the qualitative research strategy allowed me the flexibility to amend my research design in line with the realities of fieldwork when the need arose. This is because flexible research designs are one of the main strengths of the qualitative research methodology (Ritchie et al, 2013: 16). My willingness to amend the research design when the need arose demonstrates the importance

of flexibility on the researcher's part, particularly with regards to fieldwork. While care should be taken not to change the nature of the study completely, it is also crucial to explore alternative routes and options to reach the intended goal should the initial ones not work for whatever reasons.

The fieldwork proceeded otherwise as planned, with all interviews occurring successfully. Worth noting however, are two minor occurrences during field work. The first one relates to pseudonyms used during the focus group discussions to promote anonymity. To empower participants and make them feel they were a part of the study, I asked them to pick their own pseudonyms to use during the discussions. One participant chose a pseudonym which the supervisory team felt was potentially controversial and distracting. The participant was given another pseudonym while the rest of the participants maintained their chosen ones apart from one participant who insisted on using their real name, as discussed earlier.

The other incident related to interference by one of the youth supervisors during a focus group discussion. While the supervisor had granted prior permission for the discussion to be held, they also requested to sit in briefly during the discussions as part of the institution's security measures to safeguard the participants under their care. Their presence did not seem to have any recognisable negative effects but helped to keep the participants focussed on the discussion. However, during a discussion of a sensitive question about alcoholism, the supervisor requested that the discussion be cut short and moved on, although the participants were fully engaged and willing to share their personal experiences on the topic. I followed their recommendation and wrapped up the discussion of the topic in question. Fortunately, significant data had already been collected at that stage. After the group discussion, the supervisor explained that the reason he was uncomfortable with that particular discussion was because some of the participants were currently experiencing a similar situation to the one being discussed, in their lived experiences, and as such, he did not want them to get upset or reminded of it. While the abrupt end to the debate created an awkward moment for me and the participants, I managed to wrap up the discussion professionally and proceeded to the next questions. This was a typical example of unexpected occurrences which researchers can encounter in the field without prior warning and preparation. As I was able to think on my feet and exercise flexibility, I was able to handle the unexpected situation without it negatively impacting on the participants and the rest of the data collection.

Overall, the qualitative methodology and data gathering methods used for this study were appropriate and suitable for answering the research questions. The focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews employed enabled me to obtain in-depth data and varied views and perspectives from the participants, in line with what I had envisaged when the project was designed. I am aware that focus group interviews may not capture the complexity of real-life television viewing and reception environment but instead provide an artificial viewing environment where the soap opera is discussed in isolation from the other programming that it is part of in real life. I argue that the method was arguably the most appropriate for collecting the relevant data.

It is also worth pointing out that the textual analysis discussed in the next chapter (chapter five) was used to prepare and lay the ground for focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The objective of the analysis was thus to elicit key storylines and messages for the reception analysis. To this end, key alcohol messages foregrounded by the text were identified and used to facilitate discussions in both focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Similarly, the harmful drinking clips that were used in the interviews in line with the requirements of reception analysis, were identified through textual analysis.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that while an attempt was made by this study to look at the main moments of the circuit of culture, originally proposed by Hall (1980), which are, the production, text and reception (Kellner, 2011:10; Philo, 2007:195; Hall, 1980), for a holistic approach, the emphasis was on the last two moments. This was due to the study being predominantly a reception study, as well as the difficulty in accessing producers in media research. Because of this, only one *EastEnders* producer was interviewed for the study, and as such, all references to *EastEnders* production research in the study are limited to this interview.

### **Validity of data**

Here I present my response to the common concerns normally raised in social research regarding the validity of data collected in the field (Hammarberg, et al, 2016:500) and whether I have accessed the truth I was looking for. While acknowledging the existence of possible threats to the validity of data collected for the study, which include: participants making things up to please the researcher or for other reasons; the interplay of gender and religious factors, where girls may have been less open about their alcohol practices in

comparison with boys due to socialisation and other factors and Muslim participants being constrained by their religion to open up about their alcohol experience, robust measures were put in place to enhance and safeguard the validity, accuracy, trustworthiness, credibility and reliability of data. These include, among others, employing appropriate sampling and multiple data collection methods to obtain multiple perspectives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011:5). To this end, a broad cross-section of young people with diverse social and demographic characteristics (race, gender, religion, age and social class) was sampled and both focus group and semi-structured interviews were used as data collection methods while open-ended and unbiased questions were asked in the interviews. As discussed earlier, I also ensured that the environment was conducive for a free and open discussion for all participants. I therefore believe that these measures, among others, facilitated the collection of valid data and its analysis, which was deeply grounded on the views and perspectives of the participants. This, I argue, enhanced the study's quest for the truth within the qualitative research approach, which argues that reality and truth do not exist independently but are socially constructed resulting in the possibility of only accessing relative truth as opposed to absolute truth (Sukamolson, 2007:5).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the main philosophical underpinnings underlying social research. I have argued that this research project is located within the qualitative research tradition because it is the most appropriate approach for the nature of the study and the type of data required to answer the research questions. As such, qualitative data gathering techniques, namely focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews have been used to gather data for the study, as they enable a thorough but humanistic way of eliciting perceptions and experiences from people, resulting in the production of rich accounts. Throughout the research process, I ensured that ethical considerations were taken into account, and that all study participants were treated fairly and with respect.

In addition to the methodological approach discussed here, in the next chapter (chapter five), I discuss qualitative textual analysis, a further qualitative method employed by the study to unpack the harmful drinking discourses foregrounded by the *EastEnders* text. The discourses prioritised by the text were then compared with those of audiences (young people and health experts) obtained during empirical data collection, in line with the demands of reception theory (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:218).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

This chapter analyses *EastEnders* as a television text, with the aim of unpacking different readings or potential omissions and inconsistencies within it, which may be relevant to its reception by audiences. This is in line with the requirements of the reception theory, discussed in chapter two, which informs this study. Reception theory argues that meaning is created at the interface between the media text and the audience situated in different socio-cultural and historical contexts (Livingstone, 2013:7). As such, media audience researchers are called upon to conduct textual analysis in order to compare the discourses of the text with those of the audience, for a holistic understanding of meaning generation (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990:218). Moreover, combining textual analysis with audience analysis allows researchers to assess how messages may change in interpretation and which readings are given priority by the audience (Fürsich, 2009: 243).

To this end, selected episodes of *EastEnders* which directly relate to the study objectives and research questions, have been qualitatively analysed in terms of how young people's use and relationship with alcohol is represented and how the soap generates meaning. Purposive sampling strategy, discussed in chapter four, was used to select the *EastEnders* episodes that were analysed, as it enables the researcher to only include episodes relevant to the study (Ritchie et al, 2013:113). Episodes where alcohol-related storylines and young people were the main focus, were picked for analysis. Some of these episodes were used in focus group discussions as prompts.

The textual analysis conducted here is of a limited scope, and not a stand-alone methodology, as the study is predominantly a reception study. By conducting textual analysis, this study is heeding calls for media researchers to take a multi perspectival approach by attempting to study the main moments of the circuit of culture, which are, the production, text and reception (Kellner, 2011:10; Philo, 2007:195; Hall, 1980) for a holistic understanding of the generation of social meanings by media texts (Philo, 2007:195). Chapter one discussed the latest model of the circuit of culture proposed by Du Gay et al (2013). While a comprehensive investigation of the production moment of *EastEnders* was not possible due to the scope of the study, an interview was held with one of the research producers of

*EastEnders*, to obtain an insight into the production and construction of storylines. This was useful in unpacking key production processes that have a direct bearing on the text and reception moments of the circuit of culture.

The chapter starts by discussing key elements of qualitative textual analysis, the approach employed by this study. It then discusses how *EastEnders* conforms to the soap opera genre and how it generates meaning. The rest of the chapter analyses how *EastEnders* portrays alcohol in general and the depiction of alcohol and young people specifically. The chapter also highlights the tension between the nostalgic vision of community promoted by the soap opera genre, discussed in chapter three and the individualisation of social problems such as alcoholism, in line with generic conventions. I argue that the generic tension between the nostalgic vision of community and individualism complicates how the genre responds to alcohol as we will see.

Fursich (2009:240) defines textual analysis as a “type of qualitative analysis of media content” whose aim is to unpack the fundamental ideological and cultural assumptions of the text. Media texts are arguably a site for the struggle over meaning (ideological negotiation), and also represent mediated reality (Fursich, 2009: 238), and as such require multidimensional scrutiny and analysis of the various discourses presented, narrative strategies, image construction and effect (Kellner, 2011:12). While media producers can play the role of cultural mediators by highlighting and bringing to the fore certain cultural aspects for debate, textual analysis should move beyond merely focussing on their role or preferred readings of the text to analysing the text as a polysemic signifier with many different possibilities and insights (Kellner, 2011:13). Researchers should acknowledge alternative readings and that their interpretation is one of many possible readings, and not the only certain reading (Dow, 1996:4). Effective textual analysis unpacks strategies used by the text to restrict openness and possible readings (Kellner, 2011:13) and the different versions of reality provided, allowed for and normalised by the text (Fursich, 2009:246). This can be achieved by explicating hidden meanings, implicit meanings, assumptions and omissions of the text (Fursich, 2009:240). Textual analysis can also unpack the range of readings a media text allows by investigating how the content creates different subject positions and which ethnic, gender and class identities for instance, are included or excluded (Fursich, 2009:247).

Qualitative textual analysis draws on different methodological and intellectual traditions and is informed by various disciplines such as, linguistics, semiotics, literary criticism, genre, ideology, narrative theory and psychoanalysis (Fursich, 2009:241; Creeber, 2006:81). In light of this, there are different approaches to textual analysis which include; critical discourse analysis, thematic analysis, genre analysis, cultural analysis or ideological analysis (Fursich, 2009:241). Textual analysis involves the application of one or more of these methods to the analysis of relevant media texts (Fursich, 2009:240). Combining textual analysis with audience studies provides crucial empirical evidence required to validate the assumptions made by the researcher (Creeber, 2006:82). Without the empirical evidence from audiences, Creeber (2006:82) argues that the claims and interpretations made by textual analysis will be unfounded and possibly misleading. David Morley's (1980) *Nationwide* project, which played a central role in establishing the field of audience research, is one example of work that combines textual analysis and audience research.

Notwithstanding its crucial role in media research, textual analysis is perceived by some as a subjective method that reflects the researcher's own assumptions and values instead of those of the audience (Phillipov, 2013:212; Creeber, 2006:82). To mitigate this, researchers are encouraged to clearly state in their analyses that their reading of the text is not the only reading but one of the many possible readings (Kellner, 2011:13). Textual analysis is also accused of drawing interpretations and meanings of media products outside of the contexts and experiences of audiences consuming the media text (Phillipov, 2013:213). It is the strength of this study to be able to compare the discourses of the text with those of the audience.

### ***EastEnders* and the soap opera genre**

In many ways, *EastEnders* follows the conventional soap opera generic form, particularly the British version which is working-class oriented, socio-realistic, down-to-earth, responsible and educative (Ang, 1985:62; Livingstone, 1988). This mostly applies to soaps screened by the BBC which are mandated to inform, educate and entertain viewers (Swann and Forster, 2011:79), as inscribed in their Charter. The following extract from an interview held with an *EastEnders* producer in April, 2017 summarises the role of *EastEnders* and the nature of social issues portrayed:

*“It is arguable that we [EastEnders producers] hold ourselves more closely to social responsibility than many of the other continuing dramas. This manifests in devising stories that (whilst gripping, moving, and surprising) are also calibrated to consider stigma busting (e.g. mental health), raising and discussing relevant social issues (e.g. AIDs, poverty, NHS funding cuts), portraying human experiences that are representative and relatable, and mapping our stories onto procedurally accurate real-life scenarios (re. police, legal and medical consequences). By telling exciting stories that are relatable and informative of what our friends and neighbours are going through (if not directly relevant to every viewer) this helps promote empathy and social cohesion.”*

*EastEnders* is a serial screened four times a week by BBC1, in half-hour episodes, during prime time (7.30 - 8.00 pm). There is also a weekly omnibus edition of the soap opera every Saturday afternoon at 2.00 pm. Like most British soaps, *EastEnders* is set in a fictitious working-class community, in its case Walford in East London, and addresses everyday and contemporary issues that affect ordinary people, such as, unemployment, racism, teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, gangs, illnesses, death, relationship problems, among other issues.

Due to its working-class setting, working-class characters feature prominently, with all age groups fully represented to mirror society and to appeal to a range of viewers. Young people however make up a significant proportion of the cast, a view confirmed by one of the programme producers (see chapter one). Due to the sensitivity of the viewer demographics information, the producer was unable to disclose specific viewership figures. Brunson (2005:27) further confirms that *EastEnders* is one British soap opera that arguably appeals to a younger audience. Themes that relate to young people in *EastEnders* include: bullying, gangs, drugs, teenage sex, harmful drinking among other challenges faced by young people. These themes are portrayed through the characters of Bex, Louise, Lauren, Lee, Abie, Lola, Lucy, Jay, Peter among others. The use of multiple characters to portray different themes conforms with one of the key characteristics of soap operas which is multiple points of identification. Soap operas are intrinsically multi-centred narratives (Hayward, 2015:4) with multiple points of partial identification. This means that viewers are able to identify with different characters whose experiences resonate with their own. This is in contrast to the identification with a single protagonist typical of other mainstream narrative forms.

The ongoing nature of the genre also allows soap opera characters to develop and mature just like their audiences and as such create an intimate relationship between the two. *EastEnders*

has been ongoing for thirty-four years since its inception in 1985, and most of the characters have developed and matured over the years just as its viewers would have. This makes the drama appear to be a real part of the viewers' lives.

### **The significance of the pub setting in *EastEnders***

The open narrative structure allows soap opera to emphasise talk over action, and as such, venues in the serials are carefully chosen to enable characters to meet and talk (Allen, 1985:20). *EastEnders*, like most British soap operas, has the local pub, the Queen Victoria, as one of the key settings where characters meet and talk, and where new storylines are also introduced. The pub setting of *EastEnders* is of significant relevance to this study which is about the reception and interpretation of alcohol related messages by young people. As seen in the selected episodes, the pub plays a central role in the programme, which is to foster community integration and spirit. All members of the community have contact with it, be it for individual drinks, family meetings, meals, community parties, weddings, fundraising events, funeral wakes, and other meetings. The portrayal resonates with real-life uses of the pub in most parts of British society. It can thus be seen as an attempt to mirror everyday life while also meeting the expectations of the genre. *EastEnders* producer also argued that the pub is useful in providing characters a communal space in which to meet, interact and get to know each other and where important story information can be communicated to different households directly and indirectly. Furthermore, they argued that pubs and drinking “generally are historically a defining characteristic of British culture, hence why they appear so frequently across all continuing dramas in the UK, i.e. *The Rovers Return* and *The Woolpack*”. Similarly, it can be argued that the name of the pub, ‘The Queen Vic’, also helps to secure its national-historical connotations.

In most British soap operas, the pub is more than a mere location but is also tied to key characters. In *EastEnders*, both the current and former owners of the pub are central characters, the patriarchs and matriarchs of Albert Square around whom most of the drama revolves. As subsequent sections of this chapter and thesis show, the centrality of the pub in *EastEnders* in particular may arguably generate conflict between the generic demands for drama and the programme's ability to adequately portray health messages (alcohol messages).

In an endeavour to depict societal changes associated with the re-engineering of the urban environment in the UK in recent years, a second pub has opened in *EastEnders* and a night club too. Although drinking places have increased in number, the Queen Vic remains the traditional local pub with a historical and sentimental attachment to most locals. The portrayal exposes the tension between realism and nostalgia, which is a common trait in most British community soap operas. While efforts are made to mirror societal transformations, consistently with the genre's realist requirements, the weight and centrality attached to the local pub as a communal meeting space testify to a nostalgic desire to maintain traditional community life.

Despite these generic and cultural explanations for the centrality of the pub in *EastEnders*, it can be argued that it has a symbolic and narrative centrality in the fiction that it may not deserve. Evidence drawn from the analysis of sixteen randomly selected episodes of *EastEnders* in May and June 2018, concluded that the pub might indeed be given a heavier weighting by *EastEnders*, in comparison with rival communal spaces of interaction such as; the market, the local park, the café, fish and chip shop, local supermarket, allotment and community centre, police station and hospital, among other communal spaces. The sixteen episodes were drawn from weeks where alcohol storylines were not the main focus of the programme so as to eliminate the possibility of the frequency of the pub setting being attributed to the alcohol focus of the episodes. In all the sixteen episodes, the highest number of scenes were set in the pub. Other scenes were set in the rival communal spaces mentioned above. The below table (figure 2), shows the frequency of the occurrence of each communal venue in the episodes monitored.

**Figure 2. Public venues used as settings in sixteen *EastEnders* episodes monitored**

| EPISODE      | PUB/<br>CLUB | CAFÉ/<br>CHIP<br>SHOP | SUPERMARKET | PARK     | ALLOTTMENT | MARKET/<br>STREET | POLICE<br>STATION | HOSPITAL | COMMUNITY<br>CENTRE |
|--------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------|----------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------|---------------------|
| 1            | 1            | 1                     | 1           | 1        |            |                   |                   |          |                     |
| 2            | 2            |                       |             | 1        |            | 3                 |                   |          |                     |
| 3            | 1            | 3                     |             |          | 2          | 2                 |                   |          |                     |
| 4            | 1            |                       |             |          | 1          | 2                 | 2                 |          | 2                   |
| 5            | 6            |                       | 1           |          |            | 1                 |                   |          |                     |
| 6            | 2            | 1                     |             |          |            | 3                 |                   | 1        |                     |
| 7            | 3            |                       |             |          |            | 2                 |                   |          |                     |
| 8            | 2            |                       |             | 1        |            | 1                 | 1                 |          |                     |
| 9            | 4            | 3                     | 1           |          |            | 6                 |                   |          |                     |
| 10           | 6            | 1                     |             |          |            | 1                 |                   |          |                     |
| 11           | 2            | 3                     |             |          |            | 1                 |                   |          |                     |
| 12           | 3            | 2                     |             |          |            | 2                 |                   |          | 1                   |
| 13           | 6            | 3                     |             | 1        |            |                   | 1                 |          |                     |
| 14           | 2            | 3                     |             |          |            |                   | 1                 | 1        |                     |
| 15           | 8            | 3                     | 1           | 1        |            | 1                 |                   |          |                     |
| 16           | 3            | 10                    | 1           |          |            | 1                 |                   |          |                     |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>52</b>    | <b>33</b>             | <b>5</b>    | <b>5</b> | <b>3</b>   | <b>26</b>         | <b>5</b>          | <b>2</b> | <b>3</b>            |

The prominence of the pub in *EastEnders* and most British soap operas in general, has led critics to argue that it may be responsible for the high alcohol instances and drinking in British soap operas in comparison with soap operas set in other countries (Furnham et al,1997:527).

The dominant role of the pub can also be interpreted as a normalisation of drinking by *EastEnders*. Locating everyday discussions in the pub, might encourage viewers to see the pub as ‘naturally’ interwoven with everyday life. While some may interpret it as a realistic portrayal of British life, others may see it as an encouragement to drink. Moreover, although the soap opera is morally expected to promote responsible drinking, the prominence of the pub can be construed as a promotion of excessive drinking. Similarly, the routinised portrayal of drinking seen in most episodes of *EastEnders* might raise similar concerns. Most scenes set in the pub in *EastEnders* depict characters talking or having discussions and meetings about different things, while in the background other people are seen consuming alcohol. This suggests a possible contradiction between the harmful drinking message that *EastEnders* is trying to foreground and the normalised drinking in the background. Figure 3 (below) shows *EastEnders* characters in the local pub having discussions over alcoholic drinks while

figure 4 foregrounds characters not drinking involved in discussion but with other people consuming alcohol in the background.

**Figure 3. Meeting in the pub over alcoholic drinks**



*EastEnders characters having a discussion in the Queen Vic pub over alcoholic drinks*

**Figure 4. Background drinking**



*The Carter family discusses family matters in the Queen Vic pub while other people consume alcohol in the background*

The pub in the serial is therefore a chronotopic space of the sort described in chapter three, which has been constituted to interconnect the serial world and that of the audiences. By using a familiar, historical and cultural British social space, which resonates with the world of the audiences, as its main location, the soap opera space becomes familiar and an extension of the viewer's own world. While this may promote the realism and favourable reception of the programme, it could also detract from the harmful drinking messages the drama seeks to foreground. It could also result in the exclusion of some characters who do not use this space for religious reasons, such as some Muslim characters, from some scenes and plots.

### **Alcohol representation in *EastEnders***

In the selected episodes, as well as in *EastEnders* in general, alcohol consumption can be said to be portrayed in diverse ways through different characters and storylines, in keeping with the soap opera form where social issues are brought into the storylines through different characters in order to shine a light on them and prompt debate among viewers, while also enabling multiple identifications by viewers. While *EastEnders* largely employs a multi-perspectival approach in its representation of alcohol, I will argue that some of the portrayals, particularly the excessive drinking depictions, are more on the didactic side while others, where 'normal' drinking is shown, are arguably more neutral.

### **Intoxication, excessive, harmful, binge, unacceptable and irresponsible drinking**

As a text, *EastEnders* appears to portray the notion of excessive drinking in ways similar to those discussed in chapter one, that is, in terms of the amount of alcohol consumed resulting in drunkenness or intoxication and the subsequent consequences and anti-social behaviour. Different characters and storylines are used to highlight excessive drinking and the consequences of such actions. Characters who drink excessively are seen to suffer diverse social, health, legal and other consequences, such as unplanned pregnancies, liver cirrhosis, relationship breakdown, negative impact on family, drink-driving resulting in a car crash, STDs and STIs. Characters of all ages, gender and race are affected by harmful drinking. The text can arguably be said to portray excessive drinking as drinking to the extent of losing control over one's actions, with fatal consequences. Physical symptoms of excessive drinking depicted in *EastEnders* include acting irresponsibly, loss of speech and physical instability. The message being foregrounded is one that highlights what harmful drinking entails, the consequences associated with it and an implied warning against this drinking practice. The representations further highlight that excessive drinking affects people of all ages, races,

gender and social class as seen in the range of affected characters. Using different characters provides multiple points of entry for viewers from different social, gender, ethnic and age backgrounds to be able to identify with the storylines and representations. This depiction of the alcohol theme is also in keeping with the moral and educative characteristic of most British soap operas (Livingstone, 1988).

Significantly, the analysis showed that most instances of excessive drinking in *EastEnders* occur privately and not in public drinking places. Excessive drinkers are depicted consuming alcohol excessively in the privacy of their homes and usually in isolation. Excessively drunk characters are denied access to more alcohol from local shops and pubs, and are sometimes sent home or literally thrown out of the pub when they start causing trouble. It can thus be argued that the text is highlighting that issues of excessive drinking and alcoholism are often more of an individual problem, implicitly relating to personal issues, rather than something that can be attributed to external influences such as alcohol being readily available in pubs or alcohol outlets.

### **Portrayal of alcoholism**

Similar to notions of excessive drinking and moderate drinking, there is no single definition of alcoholism, as chapter one demonstrates. *EastEnders* arguably predominantly portrays alcoholism in line with the definitions outlined in chapter one, that is, as a disease or condition transmitted through an individual's upbringing and exacerbated by chronic drinking leading to alcohol dependency. This is portrayed through the characters of Phil Mitchell and Lauren Branning, who are constructed as recovering alcoholics who occasionally relapse and return to chronic drinking regardless of the negative impact of this on their lives and those of people around them. As we will see, both characters had a troubled childhood characterised by alcohol abuse in the home and an unstable home environment which arguably played a key part in their subsequent abuse of alcohol leading to chronic drinking, alcohol dependency and alcoholism respectively. Both characters have undergone rehabilitation and related alcoholism treatment.

The above portrayal of alcoholism as an individual problem by *EastEnders* can arguably be seen to echo neo-liberal debates which tend to responsabilise the individual for harmful drinking and not the substance (alcohol) or the alcohol industry (Haydock, 2014:12). Under

neo-liberal reasoning, the individual drinker has the responsibility to avoid developing a habit of heavy drinking which could potentially lead to alcoholism (Room, 2011:144). Examples of how responsibility is placed on the individual can be drawn from the expectation from many societies for pregnant women to abstain from alcohol for the duration of the pregnancy or risk impacting the health of the unborn baby and for drivers to avoid drinking and driving, among others. Chapter one discussed these neo-liberal ideas in relation to the construction of health promotion messages.

*EastEnders* can arguably be said to reproduce neo-liberal discourse in its representation of alcoholism and excessive drinking. Pregnant women in the drama are portrayed as staying away from alcoholic beverages for the duration of their pregnancy, while characters who drink and drive face the wrath of the law by receiving driving bans. Furthermore, the alcoholism of its main characters seems to be attributed to their genes and upbringing and not other possible influences. Figure 5 (below) provides a good example of an individual being blamed for excessive drinking, showing how the depictions align positively with a neo-liberal account of individual responsibility. The image is of a young teenage character, Lauren Branning, who is portrayed as an alcoholic, getting drunk and disorderly in the Queen Vic and being told to sober up and go home by her grandmother, Dot. As seen in the image, other people are drinking peacefully and supposedly ‘responsibly’ in the background, as if to re-iterate the neo-liberal discourses that blame the individual drinker for intoxication and alcohol dependency and not the pub that sells the alcohol or the alcohol itself. Furthermore, by portraying the rest of the people in the background, including Lauren’s friends drinking responsibly, and Lauren being kicked out of the pub and sent home, it can be argued that the text is saying moderate drinkers should be allowed to enjoy alcohol and not be punished due to individuals who cannot control their alcohol intake, a view championed by neo-liberal discourses. Individual drinkers who cannot control their drinking are thus asked to leave the drinking premises to avoid spoiling it for the rest of the moderate drinkers.

**Figure 5. Lauren excessively drunk and disorderly in the pub**



*In the Queen Vic pub. Lauren is drunk and disorderly and is being told to sober up and go home by her grandmother Dot. Around her, other people are seen enjoying their alcoholic drinks.*

It could alternatively be argued that the depiction of alcoholism in *EastEnders* is in line with the codes of soap opera realism, in that, although soap operas purport to represent social reality, their representational codes are so closely organised around the activities of individual characters, that they are ultimately unable to address the social nature of the issues they seek to explore and can thus only ever resolve them as individual problems (Dyer, 1999 and Jordan in Dyer, 1981:33).

It can be argued that there are omissions in the text's portrayal of excessive drinking and as such only one reality is portrayed about this theme. The text does not often include representations of young characters consuming alcohol excessively outside of their homes and in groups, as young people often do in real life. Furthermore, it is also often silent about depicting alcohol-fuelled violence and disturbances, which usually characterise excessive night out drinking particularly by young people, such as anti-social behaviour, criminal offences (Engineer et al, 2003:31), public fights, vandalism of public property and related incidents (Jernigan, 2001:5). Additionally, the soap opera does not seem to include significant portrayals of the vibrant night-time economy brought about by the recent re-engineering of the urban environment in the UK, which in turn has arguably seen an increase in alcohol consumption by young people and subsequently, an increase in anti-social behaviour and public disorder (Supski, Lindsay and Tanner, 2017).

It can therefore be argued that the genre is torn between nostalgia and realism, with the generic drive to nostalgia resulting in its failure to engage with the consequences of social change driven by neo-liberalism. As such, the re-engineering of the urban environment which has seen mostly young people drinking in venues other than the local pub, is omitted in *EastEnders*' portrayals as it would conflict with the nostalgic image of community life where the local pub is the hub for the community.

Furthermore, the structural demands of soap opera sometimes tend to restrict characters' social and geographical mobility. As part of the generic demands to advance storylines and enhance drama, soap opera practices what can be termed the existential imprisonment of characters. To this end, soap opera characters are denied any mobility and growth by being confined to the same community and sometimes even the same house for the duration of the programme (*EastEnders*' Ian Beale is a good example. Despite being a successful businessman, he is still living in his parents' house and has not left Albert Square to grow his business elsewhere, as this would impact the storylines). This generic convention is contrary to the neo-liberal principle which promotes development, progress and mobility of people. Such tensions within the genre unveiled by this study may impact on the genre's ability to reflect reality and communicate health messages effectively, as chapter eight clearly demonstrates.

The main harmful drinking storylines in *EastEnders* are depicted through two of its main characters, Phil Mitchell and Lauren Branning. One is a middle-aged local businessman with a troubled family background and the other one a wayward teenage girl also from a dysfunctional family. Both are recovering alcoholics and both have ripped their families apart due to their excessive drinking. Their health has also not been spared by the excessive alcohol intake. Phil Mitchell is a well-known recovering alcoholic in the community who has previously wreaked havoc on his family and community while intoxicated, including burning down the family home and business. In most episodes where he is in the local pub, he is served orange juice. At the local supermarket, the shopkeepers do not serve him any alcoholic drinks. At his home, no alcohol is stored to avoid triggering a relapse. His alcoholism almost cost him his life through liver cirrhosis, an alcohol-triggered illness. These representations of alcohol can be interpreted in several ways. Firstly, as an attempt to educate viewers about the dangers of excessive drinking and the negative impact on the individual's health, family and community, while also highlighting key issues about alcoholism and offering implicit tips

and support to alcoholics, recovering alcoholics and those living with them. Secondly, the depictions can be viewed as exposing generic tensions which complicate how the genre responds to alcohol. As we have seen, the soap opera genre promotes the nostalgic vision of community. On the other hand, its generic conventions which also tend to align it with the neo-liberal principle of responsabilising the individual, call for the resolution of social problems at an individual level. This is evident in how *EastEnders* presents alcoholism as mainly an individual problem linked to the individual's genes and biography rather than one influenced by social factors. The textual analysis here highlights this generic tension between individualism and the nostalgic vision of the community in *EastEnders*. This is because the text appears to be suggesting that while alcoholism is an individual problem, fighting it is however not an individual or family effort, but a joint effort between the individual, the family and the community, everybody has to play their part. We see here the generic drive to nostalgia resulting in the depiction of communal solutions to alcohol problems.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Phil Mitchell's struggle to get a new liver, and his alcoholic colleague dying before getting one, can be viewed as a warning to viewers about the difficulties of obtaining liver transplants and the potential risks of losing one's life. The family of the dead alcoholic subsequently struggle financially and his child takes the wrong path as a result. The text here is highlighting the impact of alcoholism on the whole family, particularly children, and how lifestyles can be negatively changed and affected by such practices. The text is further highlighting the enormous financial pressure exerted on the NHS by alcohol-related illnesses and the long waiting lists for organ donations that now exist as a result. Here, alcohol is represented as affecting all sectors of society, directly and indirectly. This representation can arguably be viewed as part of the pedagogic nature of the programme.

Of significance is the choice of characters used for the alcoholic roles. By using an old and young person, male and female, businessman and ordinary teenager, father and single girl, the text is arguably attempting to appeal to different viewers represented by the characters and to highlight that alcoholism cuts across age, class, gender and other factors. The character of Lauren Branning's relationship and struggles with alcohol is discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter under the young people and alcohol section.

### **Normal, acceptable, moderate, reasonable and responsible drinking**

In addition to excessive drinking, *EastEnders* also portrays what might be considered normal and acceptable drinking. Like the rest of the concepts discussed, there are varying definitions of moderate drinking, as discussed in chapter one. In this thesis, moderate or controlled drinking are used interchangeably with ‘normal’, ‘acceptable’, ‘sensible’ and ‘responsible’ drinking. I am however aware of the slight variations in meaning and usage associated with the above notions but I argue that the key element in all of them is similar, and this is the opposite of what is perceived as excessive or harmful drinking.

It can be argued that *EastEnders*’s portrayal of moderate drinking is based on the concept of consuming alcohol for pleasure with minimum consequences to the drinker (Room, 2011:145). This portrayal is evident through people seen engaging in social drinking in the local pub, individually or with friends and family, while the soap opera characters talk and advance the plot. The characters also frequently meet up in the pub for social drinks after work and sometimes during the day (at lunch). Business deals are also clinched over a drink or two at the pub while family events happen frequently over a few drinks too. On such occasions, characters are portrayed drinking responsibly and peacefully with no negative consequences or anti-social behaviour resulting from their drinking practices. Similarly, characters are sometimes portrayed drinking alcohol responsibly in their homes without ending up excessively drunk. The programme seems to portray social drinking as predominantly moderate and isolated drinking as usually associated with problem drinking although there are sometimes exceptions to these portrayals. It can thus be argued that the above depictions are an attempt by the soap opera to show that alcohol consumption can be enjoyable if done responsibly.

Based on episodes watched for the past 13 years and the recent ones, there is no evidence which suggests that *EastEnders* has included recent evidence about the harms of moderate drinking (see chapter one) in their storylines. The portrayals are arguably leaning towards portraying all social drinking as moderate, acceptable and risk-free drinking. This is evident in that all social events in the soap opera are accompanied by alcoholic drinks and this appears to be the norm and not the exception.

It can be argued that the text’s depiction of alcohol use is complex and ambiguous in that on the one hand it attempts to portray multiple realities of alcohol use as opposed to a single

reality and thus invites readers to make their own judgements and draw their own conclusions from the representations. On the other hand, it can be seen as highlighting problem drinking in a pedagogic spirit while normalising social drinking.

In addition to stimulating debate about controversial social issues, soap operas also create on-screen audiences who witness and comment on other characters' behaviours. In *EastEnders* such audiences include spouses, partners, parents, children, relatives and friends. The analysis revealed that *EastEnders* arguably has two types of on-screen audiences regarding alcohol consumption behaviours. The first group embraces normal or social alcohol drinking. Characters who conform to what is arguably the norm or acceptable drinking are never condemned for their alcohol intake. Instead the practice is woven into everyday life and is encouraged by most characters practicing or witnessing it. However, those under the legal drinking age are particularly condemned and ridiculed by older characters in the soap opera, when caught trying to illegally buy or consume alcohol. On-screen audiences seen to be taking action on this behaviour often included parents, older brothers and sisters of the young people, relatives, neighbours, as well as bar and supermarket staff.

The second on-screen audience group includes individuals and groups of people who witness and comment on the excessive drinking of fellow characters, and in most cases act upon it. Pub patrons and bar staff comprise this group. In the analysed episodes, and in *EastEnders* as a whole, it is common for the pub staff and patrons to comment on and condemn the drunken behaviour of fellow characters. In most cases, the bar staff go to the extent of refusing to serve the excessively drunk individuals more alcohol and advise them to go home instead or throw them out. Such characters include Phil Mitchell, Roxy, Masood and Lauren. Families and friends of individuals who are usually involved in excessive drinking also constitute a big part of the on-screen audience. Phil Mitchell's wife Sharon, his daughter Louise, his son Ben, cousins Billy and Ronnie and other members of the Mitchell family regularly witness his excessive drinking and are often heard condemning it and the relapses he experiences. Similarly, Lauren Branning's family, her mother Tania and sister Abie are depicted as being the victims of her drinking and as such are always concerned about the negative consequences on her health and the impact her drunken and disorderly life is having on the family. Her grandmother Dot, has also witnessed her excessive drinking many times and each time it happens, she gives her a lecture about 'sobering up' and how she should stop drinking excessively and behave like a lady. She always sends her home to her parents whenever she

finds her drunk in public. Her boyfriend and other close friends are equally concerned and are always talking about it and trying to get her help. Most characters in the soap opera have witnessed Phil and Lauren's disorderly drunken behaviour and have uttered disapproving comments about it usually among each other and sometimes directly to the individuals. It can thus be argued that alcohol consumption in *EastEnders* is received in two main ways on-screen. On the one hand, most characters take social and moderate drinking as a norm and hence view it as acceptable behaviour, as stated above. On the other hand, under-age and excessive drinking are condemned by fellow characters.

The analysis further revealed that *EastEnders* sometimes portrays drinking as a coping strategy. When most characters are stressed, they run for alcohol and not alternative options such as talking to family, friends or professionals (counselling). Some of the characters who consistently run for the bottle when in distress can arguably be termed border-line alcoholics, however the text does not address this type of excessive drinking which could escalate into alcoholism. Instead, professional help is only available when characters become alcoholics. This portrayal can be misleading to viewers and can also be said to relate to polarised depiction of drinking by the programme, where two main drinking patterns are predominantly portrayed and contrasted, namely social or moderate drinking on the one hand and isolated and excessive drinking on the other hand. Portraying multiple drinking realities and highlighting the importance of getting professional and other alcohol help early before the problem escalates into alcoholism could benefit viewers.

Similarly, as recovering alcoholics, Lauren and Phil regularly relapse when the going gets tough. While this portrayal is realistic, other realities are omitted as there is no depiction of recovering alcoholics who resist the temptation to drink again when faced with problems. Notwithstanding the above, it is worth mentioning that the portrayals may be a result of the soap opera genre's need for drama and emotional excess which sometimes operates in tension with the drive to realism.

### **Representation of the relationship between alcohol and different religious groups in *EastEnders***

*EastEnders* has a multi-ethnic and multi-racial mix of characters to mirror the world of its viewers. It also endeavours to portray different cultures and religions through its characters. Of significance to this study is the representation of the relationship between different ethnic

groups and alcohol. Black and White families are predominantly depicted as having a very close relationship with alcohol, with characters from both ethnic groups often depicted as engaging in both responsible and excessive drinking. Furthermore, the two local pubs in Albert Square are run by both black and white couples. The text does not appear to highlight any significant differences in the way the two ethnic groups relate to alcohol. On the other hand, the text draws attention to the relationship between characters belonging to different religious groups and alcohol. Dot, who is represented as a Christian, is depicted as having a casual relationship with alcohol. She is portrayed as a social drinker and is never portrayed drinking excessively or getting drunk.

The Ahmeds on the other hand are represented as strict Muslims with no relationship with alcohol due to their religion. Their distaste for alcohol is seen when they object to even entering the local pub voluntarily. So serious is their negative perception of alcohol that their nephew Masood had to lie about his job at the pub. There are no representations of this family with alcohol in or outside their home. Unlike his uncle and aunt who are strict Muslims, Masood is represented as a more liberal Muslim, who has had brushes with alcohol and gambling in the past. The consequences of his excessive drinking were however always severe. For instance, when he got drunk and disorderly in the pub, on screen audiences shouted, “why don’t you be a good Muslim and go home”. The reference to his religion can be interpreted as an attempt by the text to highlight that according to the principles of his Muslim religion, Masood was not behaving as a good Muslim.

The contrasting representations of alcohol within the same religious family can be interpreted as depicting reality and highlighting potential challenges faced by people belonging to different religious groups in a multicultural society like London where the soap opera is set and England in general. This is further evident in the depiction of Shabnam, a young Muslim girl, who succumbs to peer pressure and gets involved with alcohol, with serious consequences. It can be argued that the text is portraying one reality about the relationship between Muslims and alcohol. The assumption is arguably that Islam and alcohol are incompatible and if this norm is disobeyed, severe consequences follow. What is missing from the text is a balanced and realistic representation which shows the portrayal of a practicing Muslim who consumes alcohol without suffering negative consequences, to reflect that there may be some Muslims in society who drink moderately and with no adverse consequences. The text therefore can be seen as portraying the Christian religion as less strict

and more accommodating in terms of its relationship with alcohol, and the Muslim religion as very strict and rigid, which is arguably a stereo-typical portrayal.

### **Representation of young people and alcohol in *EastEnders***

The above section has focussed largely on the representation of alcohol in general by *EastEnders*. As the study is specifically about the reception of alcohol messages by young people, it is important to look at how *EastEnders* represents young people and alcohol. Young people under the legal drinking age in *EastEnders* are rarely portrayed with alcohol or in places where alcohol is found, such as the local pub. Unlike most adult characters who use the local pub as a central meeting place, most young people meet up at their homes, park or in the local café or chip shop. They are predominantly seen in the local pub during family-friendly gatherings. On these occasions, they are not served alcoholic drinks. Through such portrayals, the text is arguably re-iterating the legal drinking age message.

What is noteworthy is that when young people under the legal drinking age are portrayed consuming alcohol in *EastEnders*, the results are usually undesirable. On these occasions, the alcohol is accessed illegally and consumed privately, usually at house parties not sanctioned by parents. Examples include Louise's house party, organised secretly when her parents were away. Alcohol was brought in against her will by friends. Her drink was spiked with alcohol resulting in her getting excessively drunk and acting irresponsibly. She ended up very unwell and in hospital. This incident affected her mental health as she was constantly paranoid that she may have been raped since she could barely remember anything. The text is arguably showing that even though those under 18 are not allowed to buy alcohol, this does not necessarily mean that they will not access it. Furthermore, the representations can be seen as a warning to parents and carers to be vigilant and not assume that their under-age teenagers do not drink, as they may well do in secret. As such, the text may be encouraging parents to talk to their children about the consequences of under-age drinking and excessive drinking. In all instances where young people's house parties ended up attracting alcohol-fuelled chaos, the teenagers were left unsupervised sometimes for extended periods, which may be another warning message to parents living with young people.

From the subject position of a young person, various messages can be read from the above incident. The first being one that warns against under-age drinking and excessive drinking, and the consequences of such actions seen through Louise's ordeal. The other message

highlights the dangers of peer pressure, as Louise was pressured into hosting the party by her friends, even though she was reluctant to do so, she gave in to peer pressure, with undesirable consequences. While the text is cautious in its representation of under-age drinking by foregrounding young people under the legal drinking age not being served alcohol, it also highlights reality by showing that despite the legal processes in place to stop them drinking, they still drink it, a view also confirmed by some studies (Jernigan, 2001:2; Measham, 2006:261).

On the other hand, young people over the legal drinking age are often seen in the local pub having alcoholic drinks or consuming alcohol in their homes. While this age-group is predominantly represented as drinking responsibly, there is one depiction of a teenage alcoholic, Lauren Branning, which dominates most harmful drinking storylines in the soap opera. She is depicted as a troubled young person from a broken and dysfunctional family. Her excessive drinking is portrayed as destroying her health and tearing her family apart. Her mother is concerned about the impact of the excessive drinking on Lauren's health as she has been advised by medical practitioners that one more drink could kill her. Her efforts to get her admitted into a rehabilitation centre are challenged by Lauren's resistance. In the end she is able to get her the help she requires, and her life changes for the better gradually. Her struggle with alcohol is portrayed as a very long and painful one, which not only affected her but her family and the community. Family members are constantly depicted as playing their roles in discouraging her from drinking, for instance, her grandmother Dot and her father both refuse to give her money, in an effort to avoid funding her drinking habit. While the life-threatening phase has passed, she occasionally experiences relapses when faced with challenges. Based on the above, it can be argued that the text is foregrounding a message showing the dangers and consequences of excessive drinking to the individual's health and well-being and that of others around them. Another message can potentially be one that attributes the young person's alcoholism to her dysfunctional family. Therefore, while Lauren may be represented as a wayward alcoholic, the underlying message might arguably be one that is prompting viewers to debate the issue and the possible root causes of her drinking rather than merely judging her as an excessive drinker.

### **Health organisations and *EastEnders* alcohol storylines**

To ensure that its alcohol storylines are portrayed as accurately and realistically as possible, *EastEnders* engages the services and expertise of real-life health experts and other health

organisations in the crafting of the storylines. This was confirmed to me in a 2017 interview by a senior employee at one of the health organisations approached by *EastEnders* to help with the Phil Mitchell's alcoholism storyline:

*“The British Liver Trust did assist EastEnders in the storyline involving Phil Mitchell drinking heavily and eventually needing a liver transplant. The script writer checked the storyline and script with a previous employee who has since left the Trust. The programme asked for our advice to check that the medical condition is represented as accurately as possible. We also gave advice about how it was likely to affect his family.”*

The above comments confirm the assertion that most British soap operas, particularly those screened by the BBC, indeed aim to be socio-realistic and educational, and that soap opera producers take the necessary steps to ensure that their storylines are life-like, thus enabling viewers to relate to them and also learn from them. The involvement of the health professionals in the production processes also ensures that viewers are not given incorrect or inaccurate information which can lead to unnecessary panic and upset, given the seriousness of the health conditions portrayed.

### **Helpline numbers and alcohol storylines in *EastEnders***

To further the pedagogic value of the alcohol storylines and to underscore the programme's social responsibility, *EastEnders* provides helpline numbers at the end of episodes where excessive drinking was one of the main storylines, for viewers affected by the storyline to call for help and advice. To ascertain if indeed viewers called the numbers provided and the nature of alcohol-related queries received as well the alcohol advice given to callers, I called the helpline numbers and spoke to advisors operating the phone lines at *Drinkline*. Although the advisors were unable to provide specific information relating to the volume of calls received, the age range of callers as well as specific queries dealt with, due to the confidentiality of the service and sensitivity of the information, they however confirmed that they received a substantial number of phone calls triggered by the alcohol storylines in *EastEnders*. The callers included both young and old individuals calling about their own drinking problems while others called for information and advice on other people's drinking. When asked what advice or help callers received from the helpline, the employees advised that callers were usually directed to organisations in their local communities for free alcohol advice and relevant help.

Similarly, the British Liver Trust confirmed receiving phone calls after the Phil Mitchell alcoholism and liver cirrhosis storyline was aired by *EastEnders*. Callers fell under three main groups. The first group were heavy drinkers seeking advice, the second were those concerned about risk factors for liver diseases while the last group comprised those who were unhappy with how *EastEnders* depicted just one type of liver disease, while ignoring other non-alcohol related types. In other words they felt the depiction was biased. This further confirms that media messages are indeed received and interpreted in diverse ways by varied audiences (Livingstone, 2013:7). Callers were given a wide range of alcohol advice, which includes the advice below, also found on their website (British Liver Trust, 2020):

*“Your liver performs over 500 vital functions for your body. Too much alcohol can cause it serious and lasting damage. Love Your Liver by:*

- drinking no more than 14 units of alcohol per week*
- taking 3 days off alcohol every week to give your liver a chance to repair itself*
- avoiding alcohol if you are pregnant or trying to conceive”*

By supplying the helpline numbers for viewers to call and receive health advice, *EastEnders* is demonstrating its social responsibility and the pedagogical vocation inscribed in the BBC Charter. It can also be argued that by communicating such important information to the public through the soap opera, *EastEnders* is not only endeavouring to manage its own public image, but that of the BBC too, in the context of a genre that is often seen as frivolous. Not only are viewers provided with realistic storylines verified by real health experts, which they can identify with, they are also supplied with a contact telephone number where they can speak to real people about their real alcohol-problems and obtain real and tangible advice, off the back of a soap opera.

## **Conclusion**

The above discussion and analysis have revealed that *EastEnders* as a television text conforms to the soap opera genre form in many ways, and also employs different strategies to produce meaning and to keep its viewers engaged. The analysis however unpacked potential contradictions between some of the genre expectations and the harmful drinking message foregrounded by the soap opera. This is particularly in relation to the central role occupied by the pub in line with the genre requirements, which however raises questions of whether the representation cannot be misconstrued as normalising or encouraging drinking.

The analysis also revealed the tension between the depiction of problem drinking in a pedagogical spirit on the one hand and the normalisation of social drinking on the other hand. Tensions between realism and nostalgia were also unearthed, with the generic focus on nostalgia resulting in its failure to engage with the consequences of social change impacting on drinking practices and patterns. On the other hand, the generic drive to nostalgia arguably results in the depiction of communal solutions to alcohol problems, where the whole community plays a role in supporting those suffering from alcoholism.

In terms of the relationship between alcohol and young people, the text endeavours to highlight the dominant messages discouraging underage drinking while also subtly exposing the reality and existence of underage drinking among young people. There are, however, occasions where *EastEnders* arguably fails to depict alternative realities in its portrayal of the alcohol theme, as such I argue that this may be misleading to viewers and also come across as biased. Furthermore, the text can also be said to perpetuate stereo-typical views in its depiction of the relationship between alcohol and different religious groups.

The above textual analysis is one way of unpacking the text and is not exhaustive. To further examine the meaning-making processes, we will now turn to the focus groups with young people and the interviews with professionals to analyse the meanings prioritised by them in their interpretations,

## CHAPTER SIX

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

Chapter five looked at alcohol-related discourses prioritised and foregrounded by the *EastEnders* text, through a qualitative textual analysis of selected alcohol-related episodes. This chapter discusses young people's reception and interpretation of alcohol messages, with the objective of comparing the discourses of the text with those of the real audiences consuming the messages. The chapter employs the thematic qualitative data analysis method encapsulated in the Framework analysis approach (Rabiee, 2004:657) discussed in chapter four, to analyse focus group interview data, due to its suitability. Particular attention was paid to key elements of focus group analysis discussed in chapter four, which include the analysis of group dynamics, the specific context of the contributions made by participants, words used and a comparison of responses across different groups, among others.

#### Why do young people watch *EastEnders*?

The initial analysis was of the discussions around a general question asked about the programme as a whole, namely, '*why young people watch EastEnders?*'. This was done in order to gain an understanding of why and how young people engage with *EastEnders* in general and the implications of their engagement on the reception and decoding of the alcohol messages. Please note that all names used in the interview extracts are pseudonyms apart from the one participant who wanted to use their real name.

#### Family tradition

Most participants reported watching *EastEnders* as a family tradition, as their families have always watched the programme since the participants were children and as such, they also continued to watch it consistently. Furthermore, *EastEnders* was a unifying factor in the family, being one programme they all had in common, they all gathered in the traditional living room to watch it together live. This feeling is encapsulated in the comments below;

*"I watch EastEnders because I have been watching it since primary school. I used to watch it with my family, even now I watch it with my family, we all sit down in the living room together and watch it... it's one show that we all have in common and watch together."*  
(Chino)

*"I watch it because my dad has been watching it for a long time. I was brought up with it..."*  
(Jason)

*"I watch it because of my sister. She likes to watch it so I watch it with her"* (Clarke)

What is striking about the first comment is that it challenges some of the recent audience studies literature which tends to argue that the traditional television living room audience has been fragmented due to technological advancements such as the advent of multiple screens (Livingstone, 2012), and even others arguing that the traditional television audience has come to an end (Scannell et al, 2009). While advances in technology may have indeed altered the way media messages are consumed mainly by young people due to them being a technology-savvy age-group (Blake, 2016:51), findings from the focus groups show that most of the participants still consumed their media in the living room, watching on a television in the company of their families. However, what is more interesting in their pattern of television consumption is the flexibility now available to them in the form of second screens, which some of them use during family viewing, although not as an alternative to the living room screen. As D'heer and Courtois (2016:11) note, it is more accurate to argue that while television viewing is still a family practice, the consumption dynamics of individual family members has become complicated. This will be discussed later in the analysis.

Another particularly noteworthy factor regarding the young people's context of viewing *EastEnders* is the impact viewing with parents appeared to have on their reception of the messages in general and alcohol ones in particular. Markedly, this was only mentioned by girls, probably because the incident being referred to in the discussion involved a teenage girl (Louise) whose drink was spiked with alcohol. Most girls advised that when storylines such as ones involving young people and alcohol abuse were carried by *EastEnders*, their parents (particularly mothers) took the opportunity to lecture them during viewing. This is evident in the below comment which the rest of the group agreed with:

*".... they know people watch this [alcohol storylines and scenes] with their parents and so they put things likely to trigger parents to talk to their children about. I know if I was watching this Louise thing with my mum, she would give me a long lecture, like, yes, when you go out, make sure you do not leave your drink, she would go on for hours to make me aware about it" (Amanda).*

The above discussion resonates with most literature on the gendered nature of alcohol use in most societies and cultures (Holmila and Raitasalo, 2005; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004). In most cultures, women are expected to play the role of wardens or moderators of other people's drinking (Holmila and Raitasalo, 2005:1765), which may explain the reason behind the participants' mothers (and not fathers) cautioning them about excessive drinking. Some societies also expect women to abstain from alcohol intake or to reduce their alcohol consumption, while it is arguably not only acceptable for men to drink alcohol but to

consume large quantities too (Roberts, 2004). This could explain why girl-participants appeared to be given alcohol lectures while boys were not given the same treatment by their mothers.

When asked whether the alcohol messages resonated with their lived experiences, most young people from schools were quick to point out that they do not drink alcohol. This may have been partly because most of them were under the legal drinking age, and as such argued that they could not link this with their own alcohol practices. This inevitably raises questions about the truthfulness of participants in social research (Dey, 2003:52), as studies conducted in the United Kingdom show that the 16-24-year-old age-group were the heaviest drinkers in comparison with other age-groups (Measham, 2006:262). It is worth noting though, that there are significant variations within this age range, with most of the data suggesting that alcohol consumption increases through the teen years and into the early 20s. Furthermore, research shows that worldwide, young people are starting to consume alcohol at an earlier age than before (Jernigan, 2001:2). Recent figures from the NHS (2018) confirm that young people from as young as 11 years are drinking alcohol in England, and that the drinking prevalence seems to increase with age.

The interview venue may also be a factor. As the interviews were conducted on the school premises, this could have impacted some of the responses, as some participants may have felt obliged to say what was legally and morally expected of them there as opposed to stating their actual lived experiences. This aligns with views which posit that while schools may be a convenient venue for school-going participants, focus groups held at schools may be affected by participants behaving like pupils in the discussions (Gill et al, 2008:294). My suspicion here is supported by the comparison made with group interviews held in less formal venues such as Youth Centres. Comments from participants of the same age in these less formal venues suggested they were freer to share their lived alcohol experiences despite being under the legal drinking age:

*“Sometimes I drink but I don’t drink loads. I don’t really drink very often, once every few months maybe. I do go out for drinks, just a few and I don’t really get drunk” (Jack)*  
*“I don’t drink as much as Lauren or anything. I drink every week or two” (Jason)*

This further demonstrates the complexity of the reception process in general and the different dynamics involved in the reception of media messages by audiences, even audiences of the same or similar age groups and gender.

## Entertainment

Entertainment was another reason cited for watching *EastEnders*. Participants enjoyed the dramatisation of everyday experiences, particularly through characters their own age whom they could relate to:

*“I watch EastEnders because I like the dramatisation and the way they incorporate everyday situations within the show” (John).*

*“One thing I like about EastEnders is watching the kids our age there and I can easily relate to them” (Jason).*

Throughout the focus group discussions, what was particularly striking is the young people’s appreciation that *EastEnders* was primarily entertainment. They understood the need for exaggerations in order to achieve this. While they appreciated the importance of ‘keeping it real,’ they acknowledged that a balance was also required in order to keep viewers watching. This is also one of the main goals of the soap opera genre, that is, to entertain their audience and win their loyalty by ensuring, among other things that they adhere to a set formula and structure which viewers are familiar with, and as such manage their expectations accordingly (Ang, 1985:83). Some of the entertainment and pleasure occurred because *EastEnders* provided something that young people could talk about with their friends as ‘a topic of conversation’. Discussions occurred through different platforms which included text messages, Snapchat and face-to-face discussions at school the next day. As one participant commented:

*“I watch it because it is so dramatic and interesting and it is a topic of conversation between friends, we discuss what will happen next in the show and it just makes it more interesting” (Peter)*

This revelation by young people reinforces findings by previous soap opera reception studies (Livingstone, 1988; Hobson, 1989), which confirmed that most viewers of soap opera enjoy discussing the drama with friends, family or workmates. This underscores the collective reception and interpretation of media messages by young people with family in the traditional living room context or with peers through face-to-face conversations at school or via portable electronic devices. Even when young people watched *EastEnders* alone, they found it more satisfying to discuss it with friends on the phone or via text messages.

Worth noting too is the role played by what Ang (1985:45) terms emotional realism. Emotional realism involves what Ang (1985:45) calls ‘a subjective experience of the world, a structure of feeling’. This type of realism triggers different emotions in viewers such as sadness, suspense, fear, happiness, among others, which in turn make the experience

pleasurable and true to life, as confirmed by the Dallas viewers in Ang's (1985) study outlined in chapter three of this thesis. Most young people interviewed appeared to be drawn to the emotions of different characters particularly young characters, as they struggled with different challenges in their lives. However, the most popular characters who seemed to trigger significant emotions in the participants were recovering alcoholics Phil Mitchell and Lauren Branning. The two characters' struggles with alcohol triggered feelings of fear as well as empathy in the participants. Fear in the participants was triggered when the characters in the soap opera suffered negative consequences of excessive drinking such as relationship breakdown and severe health impact (liver cirrhosis). Sadness and empathy were triggered in relation to the participants feeling sorry for the affected characters and the impacted families. Watching the dramatisation of harmful drinking in *EastEnders* particularly by the above characters, and other storylines, even though emotional, was also pleasurable for the young people as the comments below show:

*"Yes. I have seen someone go through what we have just seen in EastEnders [Phil and Lauren getting excessively drunk] and it is not something you want to see. It makes you feel sorry for them and want to know what they feel as they are going through it and how to help them" (Oliver)*

*"There are many different things, like, recently there has been a death, so a lot of people might have someone they lost....different families within the show all go through different things, depending on when you watching it, you may relate to certain things that happened to you" (Chino)*

*"Phil was not only damaging himself but his family too. It gives you an insight into how alcohol can damage people on a large-scale basis and how it affects all the surrounding people" (John)*

The pleasure young people derived from emotional realism echoes what Hall (2003) calls 'involvement'. This is when soap opera viewers identify with and respond to the characters' emotions. Grodal (2002) and Hall (2003) argue that the emotional impact of media representations on viewers is considered an important criterion for realism, in that it is not only the factual aspects of a representation that matter, but the emotions or emotional concerns that it arouses in the viewers as well.

### ***EastEnders'* themes identified by young people**

As the study is about how young people receive and interpret alcohol-related messages from *EastEnders*, it was important to establish whether young people were able to identify alcohol misuse as one of the themes, before focussing on how they interpreted the representations of that theme. Young people argued that *EastEnders* portrayed a variety of issues that affected ordinary people in their everyday lives. The following were identified as some of the themes

in *EastEnders*: poverty, adultery, deception, lies, death, kidnaping, revenge and alcohol. Girls and boys in all groups were able to identify the dangers of excessive drinking as one of the main themes. They were also able to identify that this was portrayed through the characters of Lauren and Phil Mitchell. One of the producers of the programme confirmed that these characters were indeed used by the drama to explore alcohol misuse in order to trigger debate on the issue among viewers of different ages and gender:

*“.... Characters such as Phil Mitchell and Lauren Branning have a long-established complex relationship with alcohol and through them we have been able to explore issues around excessive drinking for both men and women, young and old...in order to highlight the topic and hopefully raise awareness and generate discussion amongst our viewers”*

I analyse below how the young people interpreted the alcohol-related messages in *EastEnders*. To give the analysis a logical and coherent structure, themes from both the interview guide (research questions) and those that emerged from the participants' responses have been used to interpret the responses. Excerpts from the transcripts have also been used to substantiate the analysis in line with the Framework analysis approach, which is deeply rooted in the respondents' original accounts (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002:176).

### **Alcohol representation and realism**

Young people in all groups found most alcohol representations in *EastEnders* realistic. They could relate to and identify with most of the alcohol-related portrayals through the characters of Lauren Branning and Phil Mitchell. The realism referred to by young people here is what Ang (1985:36) calls 'empirical realism'. This is the type of realism where the comparison between reality inside and outside the text is vital. The closer the perceived relationship between the media representation and the world outside the representation, the more realistic it is judged to be (Grodal, 2002). This comparison between the media representations and the real world was evident in most discussions with the young people. What was particularly striking was the young people's apparent awareness of the production processes involved which convinced them that the soap opera did not just make up the storylines but modelled them on real-life situations:

*“I think the alcohol storylines in EastEnders are real. They don't just make it up. It's real life situations that happen to people, they interview people to see what they went through and they put it into characters so it's all based on real life” (Helen)*

*“I think without the alcohol storylines EastEnders would be a bit unrealistic and fake a bit. With the storylines, it's more authentic....” (Peter)*

*“Yes. I have seen someone go through what we have just seen in EastEnders... .” (Oliver)*

Furthermore, in their reception and interpretation of alcohol messages, young people were looking for more than mere alcohol portrayals but portrayals that mirror what they have seen in real life in terms of alcohol addiction and relapses. Expectations of realistic alcohol scenes were common in all focus-group discussions and were expressed in comments such as this:

*“Phil and Lauren were drinking quite a while back and they actually overcame their problem but what I have noticed is that they do bring it up every now and then. I think a couple of weeks ago, Phil started to drink because he was going through some issues with his son and Lauren recently, I think last week, she was drinking because her boyfriend just died. It shows that just because you have stopped drinking, it doesn’t mean it cannot just come back. So they are just being realistic like even if people overcome their problems, for example if you have a friend or family member who maybe stopped drinking now, who was like an ex- alcoholic, maybe you should still keep an eye on them because you never know when they go through problems, they can always start drinking again” (Chino)*

Producers of the programme seem to be aware of the high expectations of their audiences in terms of realistic portrayals and as such try to ensure that their storylines are accurate.

For some young people, the storylines were interpreted as realistic because they resonated with their own experiences or situations that close family members had experienced. However, for others without that experience, they appeared far-fetched. This was apparent in the young people’s interpretation of the clip where a teenage girl (Louise) had her drink spiked with alcohol while at a house party. Those who had never experienced this could not relate to it although they still believed it might happen in real life, although perhaps not in a British environment:

*“I think it depends what environment you are in, my personal experience from the parties I go to, the people at the parties, I don’t think they would do stuff like that but it does definitely happen maybe in life. Places like America, I think that happens a lot when people spike people’s drinks” (Chino)*

*“I have seen it in movies and stuff. It might be like a regular thing” (Alfie)*

For those who had experienced a similar incident in their lives, the portrayal was entirely convincing. One participant whose sister’s drink had been spiked could relate to the storyline in its entirety:

*“I can relate to that incident because my sister’s drink was spiked, maybe half an hour after she finished it, she could barely stand and she was like on the floor” (Jason)*

Another participant could not relate directly to the drink spiking but found another alcohol-related incident in the same clip more convincing because she had witnessed similar real-life occurrences:

*“Like the Louise situation, I can relate to that, not the drink being spiked bit but drinking until she was out of control and how everyone is filming you. That’s true because when you are at a house party, everyone is filming everything, then you wake up in the morning and you see it and it’s all embarrassing. It does happen when you are drunk, you don’t know what you are doing, not me personally, but I know people who have been drunk, Denise for instance when she slept with Phil. People do stuff they would not do when they were sober, like sleeping with someone or just doing stuff with people they wouldn’t do when they were sober, so it is true what they are portraying” (Jennifer)*

This difference in the interpretation of the same incident by the same age-group underscores the complexity of the reception process. It confirms that media messages are indeed polysemic (Morley, 1980), and can attract multiple interpretations from audiences. Meaning-making is indeed impacted by many different contextual factors and lived experience is certainly one of them, as it played a crucial role in the young people’s interpretations and judgements of realism. The closer the alcohol representations were to home, the more realistic they were found to be. On the other hand, the more distant they were from the young people’s life experiences, the more unrealistic they were considered.

To confirm the programme’s appeal to empirical realism, the BBC refers viewers to alcohol-related helplines at the end of relevant episodes. The programme thereby attempts to convince its viewers that the harmful drinking is real and help regarding the behaviour shown can be obtained. The empirical realism demonstrated here complements the more dramatically-structured emotional realism around which alcohol storylines are organised in *EastEnders*. Young people were clearly aware of this endeavour to interweave the represented world with their real world and applauded the programme for it:

*“After every episode of EastEnders, when something serious has happened, there is always a helpline number at the end of the episodes which people can ring for recorded information” (Joyleen)*

*“At the end of some episodes, they have helplines, which you can ring if after watching it you feel emotionally unstable” (Alfie)*

*“...giving a helpline number is smart of the show to do. Alcoholism is a real problem in people and if EastEnders is to do something about it then a helpline number is good because they are giving affected people support” (Jason)*

*“I think it’s a good thing because some people might actually be going through that and they might need help and might be able to use that number” (Greg)*

While most depictions of young people and their relationship with alcohol were considered accurate, others were perceived as inaccurate. Both girls and boys argued that the portrayal by *EastEnders* of young people’s parties as wild and only fun if there was alcohol involved was incorrect. They viewed this as stigmatisation of young people:

*“In all of their parties, that is what they are portraying, that to have alcohol at a party you will have a good time and without it you do not. No, it is not true” (Whitney)*  
*“Just to add on to what Whitney said, at Louise’s party, even though she did not want to drink but they brought a drink along, so it just shows that they are trying to portray young people’s parties as having a lot of drinking when Louise didn’t want it to be actually like that” (Jennifer)*

These sentiments reveal that young people are active consumers of media messages, contrary to assumptions in early audience studies encapsulated in the media effects school, where some audience members such as children and women were assumed to be passive receivers of media messages (Silverstone, 1990:177; Moores, 1993:5). The comments also show that young people are critical in their reception of messages and able to negotiate and even reject messages that they cannot relate to. The young people’s comments highlight the difference between young people as portrayed in media representations and other discourses and the real young people viewing and interpreting the messages.

### **Impact of religion on interpretations**

Religion played a key role in the reception and interpretation of alcohol messages by some young people. It seemed to impact on the way they perceived alcohol and alcohol storylines in the drama and resulted in oppositional readings of the messages. This was evident in two groups which comprised participants with a Muslim background, although it was more prominent in the girls-only group and subtly present in the other groups. In response to most questions about whether the portrayal of young people and alcohol in *EastEnders* matched what they or their family members had experienced in their lives, young people who were brought up in religious families were quick to clarify that, due to their religion or upbringing, they had not experienced the portrayals and were unlikely to. This was expressed multiple times by Whitney, a Muslim girl, who started most of her responses with the statement, “as a Muslim girl...”. The statement arguably set the scene for her responses and managed the expectations of the other participants. The comments below from Muslim (Whitney and Peter) and Christian participants (John) are examples of the religious discourses that featured in the discussions about how young people related to the alcohol scenes in *EastEnders*:

*“As a Muslim girl, I wouldn’t drink alcohol in my life....” (Whitney)*

*“I don’t drink alcohol...” (Peter)*

*“I don’t really drink alcohol. It’s not really a thing that I have been brought up on, so it’s not really affected me but it just gives me an insight into how it affects people and, in the end, it affects families” (John)*

In general, those participants who stated that they were not religious, arguably seemed to have more concrete knowledge about alcohol and its effects and some of them were also able to mention the different types of alcohol and how they can be mixed. This detailed alcohol knowledge given by a participant in the girls' group bemused other participants, particularly the religious ones, who confessed that they had no such knowledge. The below excerpts are from a conversation about how some of the young people interpreted *EastEnders* message on alcohol:

“... *for example Vodka, you can drink it, however be careful, mix it in with something sensible like Sprite. The producers are not trying to say that but I am just saying this just as advice*” (Jess)

“.....(mumbling to herself) *I didn't think you should mix alcohol!!!*” (Whitney)

Young people with religious backgrounds were clearly drawing on religious, cultural and other related contextual factors and competences to interpret alcohol messages in *EastEnders*. It was also evident that their religious and cultural influences sometimes restricted their world views in comparison with the non-religious ones. This insight echoes findings by the US National Alcohol Survey on Religion and Alcohol, which revealed that religion was a strong, important and influential variable for drinking behaviours and patterns particularly in abstention (Michalak et al, 2007:1). Of significance to this study is that the Qur'an which is highly respected and obeyed by Muslims, forbids alcohol consumption (Michalak et al, 2007:1). While other religions and religious denominations (Mormons, Methodists) also prohibit alcohol consumption, the Muslim religion had the highest prevalence of abstention, according to the study (Michalak et al, 2007). This revelation may account for the responses from some of the Muslim participants discussed above.

### ***EastEnders* raises awareness about alcohol misuse**

Young people in all focus group discussions unanimously agreed that *EastEnders* aimed to raise 'awareness' about the dangers of excessive drinking and what happens when alcohol is abused by both the young and old. They argued that this was achieved through the characters of Lauren and Phil Mitchell who are both recovering alcoholics. By dramatising the consequences of excessive drinking through these characters, the young people felt that the soap was inviting viewers to be careful not to become victims of alcohol abuse and to help those that are already affected by it. The discourse used by the young people to discuss how *EastEnders* raises awareness is significant. Words like 'shining light on substance abuse', 'warning', 'heads-up', 'shows the effects of alcohol', 'can affect', 'the message is that

alcohol...' and 'highlights' among others, were used. I have highlighted these words and phrases in the below comments for emphasis only:

*"...the way they construct the storylines helps to **shine light on substance abuse** on things like alcohol" (John)*

*"....even though you haven't been really through drinking or you don't know anyone personally like family members that drink, it still could be a **warning**, like you say I don't want to be drinking at that level because as you can see what happened to Phil...." (Chino)*

*"EastEnders is just giving the kids **a heads up** on what can happen in future and what you need to watch out for" (Jess)*

*"...the Louise clip just really **highlights** how alcohol can be very damaging, she started vomiting blood so it just shows it damages you in a deeper way" (John)*

*"It shows **the effects** of alcohol and how it can also affect people around you like your friends" (Greg)*

*"It **can affect** families like Phil's family were too scared to go to him because he was too drunk" (Robert)*

*"The **message is** that alcohol or excessive drinking is not healthy" (Harry)*

While the young people appreciated that the key message seemed to be to inform and educate them on the dangers of alcohol abuse, as active decoders, they were also able to point out that the message is not meant to be misconstrued as a 'do not drink alcohol' message or even one saying it is bad to drink alcohol, but one that encourages responsible, moderate drinking. This was succinctly captured by the following comments:

*"The producers are trying to portray a message saying, not necessarily do not drink but think about how you are drinking, who you are drinking around and how strong this drink is... just be careful basically and in future if you are trying to make these choices, make them sensibly or potentially talk to a person hence why they put that Action line thing at the end of every episode" (Jess)*

*"The alcohol storylines in EastEnders show that it is alright to drink but not too much" (Chino)*

*".....they (EastEnders) are just showing us what happens if alcohol is abused, really" (Jennifer)*

### **Biased and one-sided alcohol portrayal in *EastEnders***

While the young people agreed about the awareness-raising role played by *EastEnders*, they differed about whether the alcohol portrayals were biased or fair. Some felt that the representations were predominantly one-sided, in that viewers were only shown characters abusing alcohol and using it for escapism, that is, as a 'go to' or a way of escaping from their problems, instead of showing other ways of solving social problems that are not linked to alcohol. They felt such depictions might be misleading and not a fair or balanced portrayal:

*"One of the bad things EastEnders does is that when someone is in a bad situation, one of the first things is to get alcohol, maybe that could influence other people to think, well that might calm what's in my head and numb the pain, so I feel it's bad showing that as like **a go-to** if your life is not going according to plan" (Alfie)*

*"I think it's a good thing to show that this kind of thing exists [alcoholism] but it can also give some people some kind of ideas to turn to alcohol as the last resort when they are upset"* (Greg)

Participants felt the programme neglected other solutions such as therapy:

*"I think in a sense it is sort of unrealistic because alcohol is not the only way people deal with problems. A lot of people have problems but in EastEnders it does not show people going to therapy... but it shows them going straight to alcohol, which I feel is wrong"* (Jason)

Another participant voiced similar sentiments when commenting on a picture showing a group of teenage characters in *EastEnders* drinking alcohol and surrounded by alcohol bottles. He argued that the portrayals sometimes normalised alcohol consumption and failed to highlight the serious consequences alcohol can have in people's lives:

*"...it makes you think that it's just something you drink for social reasons to lighten up the mood, just to make you feel, yeah, I am with my friends and I am just gonna drink. I feel it's not emphasising the actual damage it can cause people internally and physically. Alcohol is damaging but sometimes it is presented as harmless, whereas it is a big catalyst for certain problems within people's lives"* (John)

After listening to other participants' contributions on the issue, Alfie revised his opinion and argued that *EastEnders* might not be portraying alcohol as a solution to problems but merely highlighting problems associated with it. This view was challenged by another participant Jason who still insisted that in real life there are other solutions and as such *EastEnders* was being unrealistic on the issue. Alfie then revised his position:

*"I think because EastEnders is an entertainment show, if someone is having a bad time, they are not gonna go for the unrealistic option, because it is a real show, it's more showcasing the fact that this is a real problem. I don't think it's a solution just showing there is a problem"* (Alfie)

The exchange shows the impact of group dynamics on focus group discussions. There are different views regarding the impact of group dynamics on focus group data, with some critics arguing that less confident participants in focus group discussions can sometimes be bullied into a false consensus by the more confident ones thereby negatively impacting the data (Sim, 1998). The other view is that there is nothing wrong with participants changing their minds and views during group discussions, as people change their minds in real life and what is important is to understand the reasons behind the change of view (Morgan and Krueger, 1998:34-35). In the above discussion, it appears Alfie may have been overwhelmed by the other participants' views which seemed to suggest that *EastEnders* is first and foremost there for entertainment purposes, with one participant going further to suggest that he feels the programme's primary role is to entertain and the rest is secondary. Other

participants who held similar views to Alfie's initial one stuck to their opinions even after a heated debate with others about the issue. As the moderator, I allowed the participants to debate this issue amongst themselves, as they were doing it amicably, and also encouraged them to express their different opinions while I probed their comments further.

### **Balanced and fair alcohol portrayal in *EastEnders***

The majority of the young people seemed to be of the opinion that alcohol portrayals in *EastEnders* were balanced and fair, and gave due weight to the negative consequences of drinking. This comes through in the comments below (I have highlighted some phrases for emphasis purposes only):

*"I think EastEnders is quite diverse when it comes to alcohol. You can see different aspects of what **after-effects** can happen I think they definitely show the **bad side** of it, for example Phil going to hospital and finding out that he has got, I think it was liver cirrhosis, it shows that alcohol can have **extreme effects** on your health and stuff like that"* (Chino)

*"They [EastEnders] do portray alcohol well, like these are the **negative consequences** of alcohol or what could potentially happen if alcohol is at a party and you put your drink down.... It can lead to such **negative things**"* (Whitney)

They argued that through the storylines, they were able to pick out consequences of alcohol abuse, not just on the individual drinker but on the whole family as well:

*"Phil was not only damaging himself but his family too, so it gives you an insight into how alcohol **can damage people on a large-scale basis** and how it **affects** all the surrounding people"* (John)

*"it could be a **warning** like you say, I don't want to be drinking at that level because as you can see what happened to Phil when he started to drink, he got an addiction and started drinking more, it didn't affect just him but it **affected his family** as well so it shows other people that it is alright to drink but basically not too much"* (Chino)

Phil was cited as a middle-aged character representing the older generation and depicting what alcohol abuse can do to families, as stated above, while Lauren was arguably used by the soap opera to portray the consequences of alcohol abuse on young people and their families:

*"There was Lauren's storyline of how she was getting drunk all the time. She **made bad mistakes**, she **had an affair** with a married man, we could see **the impact of getting drunk** and **how that impacts everyone** around you"* (Peter)

### **Consequences of excessive drinking**

Different consequences of excessive drinking in the series which the young people singled out included the following:

*Severe health impact:*

*“I feel the Louise clip really highlights how alcohol can be **very damaging**, she started vomiting blood so it just shows **it damages you in a deeper way**” (John)*

Phil’s liver cirrhosis was unanimously cited by the young people as one big consequence of excessive drinking portrayed by *EastEnders*. Lauren’s close brush with death due to excessive alcohol intake was also cited not only as a consequence of alcohol abuse but a deterrent for one participant, Chino. He advised that watching the episode where Lauren was said to be so close to death to the extent that one more drink could kill her, had consequently changed his perception of alcohol in general:

*“Watching *EastEnders* has definitely impacted my thoughts on drinking alcohol, for example when they said to... Lauren..., that one more drink could kill her, up to today, by seeing that it’s like, I do not want to get to a point where I could never drink alcohol again knowing that even one sip could kill me...” (Chino)*

### **Unwanted pregnancies /bad and irresponsible choices**

Alcohol abuse was also viewed as having the potential to ‘mess things’ up and to cause individuals to behave irresponsibly and in ways they would not ordinarily behave when sober. The young people cited Denise and Phil Mitchell’s drunken one-night stand which resulted in an *unwanted pregnancy*, as an example of what excessive drinking can do to people and the irreversible consequences thereof:

*“..... it does happen when you are drunk, you don’t know what you are doing, not me personally, but I know people, like, they have been drunk, Denise for instance when she slept with Phil. People do stuff they would not do when they were sober, like **sleeping with someone** or just doing stuff with people they wouldn’t do when they were sober, so it is true what they are portraying” (Jennifer)*

*“.... when Phil Mitchell and Denise had a **one-night stand**, they were both drunk and that resulted in Denise getting pregnant. It shows that **alcohol can disorientate** you and make you do things you would not do when you are sober” (John)*

### **Relationship breakdown**

The young people argued that by portraying Lauren being dumped by her boyfriend due to her alcoholism, *EastEnders* was trying to warn young people in particular and viewers in general about how drinking can affect relationships. Their comments echo views expressed in literature about the negative impact of alcohol on young people where relationship problems are cited as one of the most common consequences of alcohol abuse (Jernigan, 2001:5).

Chino, for example, commented:

*“Lauren had made a promise to her boyfriend at the time saying she will be drinking no more because she had previous drinking problems. Because of the drinking and the alcohol, that actually **affected her behaviour**, she was saying things she would not have said if she was*

*sober, like saying things a bit too far and everyone realised she had drunk too much. It shows that alcohol can really mess up things. At the end of the clip, her boyfriend broke up with her. So, within a space of a minute or two minutes it had a really big impact” (Chino)*

It is worth studying the choice of words and phrases used by the participants to describe the negative portrayal of excessive alcohol intake. They felt *EastEnders* portrayed the following about alcohol: ‘bad side of it’, ‘after-effects’, ‘negative consequences’ and ‘impact of getting drunk’. Their own interpretations of the alcohol portrayals are encapsulated in the discourse used to describe the negative effects of alcohol. Alcohol, ‘can disorientate you’, ‘can lead to negative things’, ‘can be very damaging’, ‘can damage people on a large scale’, ‘damages you in a deeper way’, ‘affects all surrounding people’, ‘can lead to bad mistakes’ and ‘can really mess things up’. The word ‘damage’ was used multiple times to describe and emphasise the physical, emotional and mental effects of alcohol on people’s health, relationships and families. The recurring use of the word ‘damage’ and similar words like ‘mess up’, ‘affects’, ‘disorientate’ and ‘bad mistakes’ all paint a chaotic, harmful and destructive image of excessive drinking as perceived by the young people. Tellingly, the young people did not seem to distance themselves from the negative consequences of alcohol but instead appeared to appreciate that the consequences could be faced by anybody who abused alcohol. This is contrary to the findings of some UK studies (Davies et al, 2018; Marks Woolfson and Maguire, 2010), which revealed that some young people aged between 13 and 25 years often distanced themselves from being at risk of most negative consequences of drinking (Davies et al, 2018:3), such as long-term illnesses which include high blood pressure and heart disease, which they felt only affected other people (older people) and not themselves (Marks Woolfson and Maguire, 2010:647).

The young people observed that *EastEnders* also depicted some positive aspects of drinking alcohol, hence suggesting the portrayal was fair and balanced. Examples cited by the young people from the programme included consumption of alcohol for social purposes, such as friends having a drink or two after a hard day’s work or family and friends meeting up to socialise over minimal alcohol consumption. The language young people associated with this type of drinking included, ‘enjoying a drink’ and ‘having fun with it (alcohol)’. The following comments exemplify these views:

*“... there are some people who just work during the day and they go and enjoy a drink with their mates just to finish off the day which is completely normal. It’s not always people just drinking as many bottles as they can” (Whitney)*

*“I don’t always feel like they portray alcohol in a bad way though. In the pub for instance, when they have their karaoke nights and how they just show everyone **having fun with it**.... So, alcohol is not always shown negatively” (Jennifer)*

This underscores the complexity of the reception process. Here again, we see young people displaying different views, not only relating to the same programme but the same message and issue as well. This confirms that media audiences are indeed heterogenous and not homogenous and so are their interpretations. It is however worth noting that not only did the young people recognise that *EastEnders*’ goal was to raise awareness about excessive drinking, but they were also able to identify the consequences of this and the proposed solution which they figured to be responsible drinking or drinking in moderation. This is contrary to other soap opera audience studies where audiences are found to recognise that soap operas raise awareness about social issues but are silent on the proposed solutions depicted by the programme (Livingstone, 1988).

### **Views on the role of the pub in *EastEnders* and impact on alcohol representations**

It can be argued that there is a contradiction between the background portrayal of alcohol in *EastEnders* and the foreground alcohol messages the drama presents to its viewers. This is mainly due to the central role occupied by the pub in the drama which inevitably leads to the depiction of alcohol consumption, mainly in the background as a norm, while in the foreground, messages of the dangers of excessive alcohol intake seem to take centre stage. The contradiction has been discussed in detail in chapter five. On the other hand, the *EastEnders* producer maintained that the prominence of pubs in British soap operas portrays reality. When I asked one of the research producers of the series if the fact that the pub is such a central location for the series raised any particular issues or difficulties for the makers of the series, I received the following reply:

*“No. In fact it is incredibly useful as a communal space for characters (who might not necessarily know each other socially or through work) to interact, to form opinions about each other and a site at which important story information can be passed (directly or indirectly) between households...”*

Participants expressed different views on the role played by the pub in the portrayal of alcohol-related messages by *EastEnders*. To show their concerns about this depiction, young people proactively raised this subject during the discussions before I had a chance to ask their views. Some young people felt that by using the pub all the time and showing people drinking alcohol regularly, *EastEnders* normalised alcohol intake and gave viewers,

particularly young people, the impression that it was the normal thing to do, as these comments illustrate:

*“I think, the Queen Vic normalises alcohol and drinking and makes it look like to drink is ok. Like, if you do it responsibly then it is, but for younger people growing up with it then they might think these people who drink loads it is ok to do, but when they are much older they might regret ..., so that influences you when you are young” (Alfie)*

*“EastEnders uses the pub for everything, it’s like everyone is always drinking in the pub. What do they expect people to do? It’s as if they are encouraging drinking...” (Jennifer)*

Perhaps reflecting a nuanced viewpoint or a shift of opinion during the discussion, Jennifer’s subsequent comments about the pub reflected a different opinion:

*“... In the pub for instance, when they have their karaoke nights, and how they just show everyone having fun with it (alcohol), so alcohol is not always shown negatively” (Jennifer)*

Other young people however echoed the views of *EastEnders*’ producer. They considered the pub a symbol of British culture and a recognised social hub: hence they felt *EastEnders* is realistically portraying the pub by using it as a central meeting venue. Furthermore, they were also aware of its generic role. Those espousing this view drew on their lived experiences in their interpretations and showed a high awareness of their society and the genre, as the following comments show:

*“I feel they use the Queen Vic because it is a generic thing, it’s all over, pubs are all over, if you go to Northampton, there is a pub, at the same time, within a pub there is alcohol, it’s like they go together, the pub, alcohol, people.... (John)*

*“For entertainment purposes and to make EastEnders authentic it is good to use the pub a lot because it’s like a pub symbolises British culture, so I feel like it’s good” (John)*

*“I think they just use it as like a place to film a show because it’s obviously a place where most characters go. In some episodes they use it for alcohol but overall, they use it for filming a show” (Jason)*

*“I think they use the pub as just a setting for their storylines. It is the main place where people can get alcohol and get drunk and then stuff may happen and people get kicked out. It also shows we can go to pubs where there is alcohol and not drink too much” (Jack)*

What was even more striking about the young people’s perceptions on the representation of the pub was their ability to critically analyse specific details surrounding the pub’s representation in the storylines, such as how it is used and by which characters and compared this with their lived experiences. By so doing, the young people arrived at a conclusion that, like in real life, *EastEnders* distinguishes social drinking that normally occurs in pubs from excessive drinking that usually occurs outside of the pub, a polarised depiction unearthed in the textual analysis where the programme appears to depict social drinking as synonymous with moderate drinking while isolated drinking is associated with excessive and harmful

drinking. This is reflected in the comment below which appraises the depiction of the pub by *EastEnders*:

*“I think EastEnders is just trying to be as realistic as possible because at the end of the day, if someone wants to drink with their friends, they would go to a pub for example. But someone who is an alcoholic, naturally they would not go to the pub, they might do it in the house or on the streets because they do not want any people around them. In EastEnders on most occasions that’s what happens when Phil or Lauren are drinking a lot. They tend to do it in the house when nobody is around, because they want to be by themselves and that’s when they can go for the alcohol” (Chino)*

In addition to being a cultural symbol and a social catalyst, the young people added that the use of the pub as a central meeting place for characters was also good for fostering a communal spirit. The above views by the young people echo views of producers of the series (see above). However, the other comments made by the other young people also reinforce the critics’ concerns about a potentially contradictory portrayal of the pub. These contradictory views further testify to the complexity of the reception of media messages by audiences. The differences here cut across age, race, gender and religion and cannot be pinned to a specific factor, apart from mere differences in perception, views and opinions.

### **Normal versus excessive drinking**

#### *Normal, Moderate, Controlled and Responsible Drinking*

Views on the definition of normal drinking were similar in all groups. The girls viewed normal drinking as moderate drinking for social or celebratory purposes as demonstrated by the below comments;

*“Normal drinking to me would be if there is an occasion like my birthday and your parents will be just drinking just to celebrate or maybe New Year’s or Christmas, just special occasions, or maybe when you like feeling a little bit stressed and you want a little bit of stress relief and you just want to drink a bit of wine...not drinking to the point where you get uncontrollable you know, like unstable” (Jess)*

*“...some people work during the day and they go and enjoy a drink with their mates just to finish off the day which is completely normal. It’s not people just drinking as many bottles as they can” (Whitney)*

*“When you go out with your family to a pub, obviously if you are old enough to or if you go out to a party, or a barbeque or a family event and just have a couple of drinks, but obviously not loads” (Kelly)*

*“...when you are going out with friends say for a birthday or night out... to a pub, don’t drink loads only take a few you know you can handle and don’t allow friends to go out of control as well” (Jack)*

The discourse which the girls associated with normal drinking included phrases like, ‘enjoying a drink’, ‘drinking to celebrate’, ‘drinking a bit of wine’, ‘having a couple of

drinks' and 'not loads'. These phrases all point to what is perceived as moderate, social and responsible drinking, which is contrasted with expressions like 'not drinking to the point where you get uncontrollable', or 'drinking as many bottles as you can'. Tellingly, Jess defines drinking alcohol to relieve stress as normal drinking and yet this has been cited in alcohol studies as a sign of problem drinking (Pavis et al, 1997:311; Engineer et al, 2003: ix; Kuntsche et al, 2005:841).

The boys echoed these sentiments and used a similar discourse to the girls to define normal drinking such as, 'the right amount', 'in moderation', 'not too much' and 'as long as you know what you are doing'. This was juxtaposed with phrases like, 'drinking too much', 'getting out of hand', 'getting out of control' and 'passing out or throwing up' as seen in the comments below:

*"acceptable drinking is when you are drinking in a pub with your family" (Peter)*

*"...just the right amount, anything in moderation...." (John)*

*"As long as you know what you are doing?" (Jason)*

*"Maybe drinking once or twice a week on a weekend, not too much where you end up passing out or throwing up" (Phil)*

*"...when the fun stops, stop... if it's not making you happy, you should stop doing it" (Alfie)*

Participants defined normal and acceptable drinking in terms of the amount of alcohol intake, the purpose of drinking and the absence of negative consequences due to the ability to be still in control of all your faculties and behaviour. These sentiments echo the text's own discourse, as discussed in chapter five, where moderate drinking is portrayed as the non-harmful intake of alcohol for social and pleasurable purposes with no anti-social or related negative consequences resulting from the consumption. The group discussions however revealed uncertainty about what constitutes 'moderate' in moderate drinking.

### **Intoxication, excessive, harmful and binge drinking**

Views on excessive drinking varied between girls and boys with further variations noted amongst the girls. Boys seemed to have clearer and more confident views about excessive drinking than girls. Their perception of excessive drinking included drinking too much alcohol, usually way above one's personal tolerance, causing the individual to behave in an unusual, unacceptable and sometimes aggressive manner. Moreover, as their comments show, they felt that excessive drinking caused individuals to lose rational thinking and thus become easily influenced or vulnerable:

*"Excessive drinking is when you can't balance or you can't think for yourself and you can be influenced easily" (Alfie)*

*"Drinking every day and all-day kind of thing. Drinking way too much so you end up throwing up" (Phil)*

*"Going to parties and getting drunk ... doing it excessively, it's really stupid" (Romell)*

*"Just continuously drinking too much alcohol over time" (Greg)*

While the above was the most common definition of excessive drinking, drinking over the recommended weekly guidelines was also cited:

*"Excessive drinking is drinking over the limit, that is, the units you should have a day and stuff" (Kelly)*

*"Drinking more than you actually should, more than the certain amounts you can have in units per day" (Phil)*

I discuss weekly recommended alcohol units in detail under the alcoholism/addiction section later on in this chapter.

On the other hand, young people were also able to distinguish between different tolerance levels for different individuals (Dufour, 1999:13), as opposed to assuming that everybody had the same alcohol tolerance levels.

*"I agree with Alfie... when certain factors start to be noticeable when you start to drink, like you can't focus properly, you have blurred vision, your speech is not functioning well and also I think everyone acts a bit different...if I drank too much alcohol I might get very confident but you get other people that like get angry or really happy, you know what I mean. And also, excess drinking is not really a one-time thing but when you do it over and over again, that can be classed as excess drinking because you are drinking way too much" (Chino)*

*"It can depend on the different situations like how people can react to drinking loads. Like Lauren got really drunk and she was shouting at people but when it was a different character [Louise], she started coughing up blood, even though she had not been drinking for a long time...." (Jack)*

Interestingly, the young people's definition of excessive drinking resonates with that of a programme producer as expressed here:

*"The team at EastEnders are engaged in storytelling and don't necessarily hold informed or strident views on excessive drinking. If pushed, for a definition one might start with "an amount of alcohol that leaves you functionally incapable of being responsible for your actions or decisions". However, as a teetotaler, one drink is excessive for me!"*

Like the young people, the producer linked excessive drinking to negative physical consequences and also suggested that each individual reaction to alcohol is different. His account of how the programme avoided a strident or rigid position is also noteworthy. It echoes most literature on soap opera which suggests that the genre strives to avoid overt

didacticism to safeguard their reputation and avoid alienating viewers (Buckingham, 1987:84).

While the boys appeared to be clear on their definition of excessive drinking, there appeared to be a bit of confusion in the girls' group regarding the difference between excessive drinking and addiction, as seen in this exchange between two girls:

*"Excessive drinking is when it is absolutely essential for you to drink, like you can't function without it, like you need to have it to get through your day"* (Joyleen)

*"I think that is more of an addiction than excessive drinking"* (Jennifer) (shouting)

*"Yah, alcohol is an addiction, there is no difference"* (Joyleen)

*"I would say excessive drinking is when you just drink loads of alcohol, let's say you go out Friday and you drink loads, get wasted, go out Saturday and drink loads, and again Sunday. It's like drinking loads more than you should on a day to day basis. I won't say it's when you feel you can't function without it as that is more of an addiction than excessive drinking"* (Jennifer)

After the exchange, most girls agreed with Jennifer's definition of excessive drinking as very high alcohol intake not just on one occasion but as a continuous habit. This is echoed by Chino who emphasises that excessive drinking is not a one off but can be an ongoing practice:

*"...Excess drinking is not really a one-time thing but when you do it over and over again"* (Chino).

The gendered differences noted here in the reception and interpretation of alcohol messages by young people and the disparities in alcohol knowledge, confirm the assertion by reception analysis theory that gender may impact on the reception and interpretation of some media messages (Curran, 1990; Livingstone, 2013).

### **Alcoholism/addiction**

Participants referred to alcoholism in general terms, with the assumption that everybody knew what it was. For instance, they all knew that Phil Mitchell and Lauren Branning were the alcoholics in *EastEnders*. Furthermore, 'addiction' was used synonymously with 'alcoholism'. John, for example, said:

*"...when people are suffering or are under emotional pain or whatever is going on in their lives within EastEnders, they seem to just drink alcohol by themselves and I think that just represents addiction and the power of addiction because if you are addicted to something, you do not have self-control...if you are addicted you just want to do it and then you don't realise the strain it has on you or it affecting you"* (John)

To the participants, chronic drinking of alcohol, usually in isolation and leading to alcohol dependency and negative consequences constituted addiction, as seen above. This view of addiction echoes what other writers perceive to be alcoholism (Room (2011:143). The symptoms of alcoholism mentioned resonate with those cited in alcoholism literature (Morse et al, 1992:1), namely, the psychosocial and environmental factors, which the participant calls “emotional pain or what is going on in their lives”, lack of control as well as continued drinking despite severe consequences and denial, which the participant equates to ‘just doing it (drinking)’ without realising the ‘strain’ or ‘effect’ on the individual. Therefore, while the young people may not have necessarily used the term alcoholism in their discussions, I argue that they have knowledge of what alcoholism constitutes and were able to decode this notion as portrayed in the text.

While young people, particularly boys, demonstrated acute knowledge of acceptable and excessive drinking, and agreed that *EastEnders* carried storylines to make viewers, particularly young people, aware of both, most of them did not seem to have concrete knowledge if at all about the recommended weekly alcohol consumption guidelines or where to access such information. The below comment by Alfie shows that most young people are aware of the existence of limits and recommended guidelines, however, their knowledge only goes this far:

*“I think there is limits and guidelines as a whole and there is like different units you can have for driving and things” (Alfie)*

While all participants from schools appeared to be unfamiliar with the Chief Medical Officer’s recommended alcohol units guidelines, participants from colleges, predominantly boys, had some knowledge of this, although they were not very confident with the accuracy of the information they had, as shown in the below interview extracts from the college groups:

*“It’s like 2-3 units for women, 3-4 for men I think, a day. I am not too sure” (Cookie)*

*“I did know the normal units you can have. Like for males is 3-4 and females 2-3. I am not exactly sure if it’s a day or weekly” (Jack)*

*“3-4 units for a male and 2-3 units for females per day, or is it weekly, I am not sure now if its daily or weekly. I didn’t read that part” (Romell)*

When I asked the participants if they knew the legal blood alcohol level for driving and related information, and where to go for such information and help, they all said they did not except for one boy who had coincidentally learnt it in Chemistry that same day when the focus group discussion was held. When probed further, however, he made it clear that it was

not specifically a lesson about awareness of alcohol units but part of the topic for the day. His comment is below:

*“It’s actually a big coincidence that you said that because in Chemistry today, it was like 80 milligrams per 100 ml of alcohol in blood” (Jason)*

Others suggested that maybe the information can be found in the Highway Code. They all agreed however that there was a need for such information to be readily available and continuously refreshed in young people’s minds. The below comment echoes this view:

*“In Primary School, we had a certain programme called D.A.R.E and maybe it did mention something about alcohol but I am not sure. It was a long time ago so I think it needs to be refreshed in people’s minds” (John)*

The above sentiments about lack of alcohol-related knowledge were expressed by participants in schools. There were notable differences in knowledge between those at schools and those at colleges. Participants attending colleges were more knowledgeable about alcohol and where they could access the Chief Medical Officer’s recommended weekly alcohol units. The information was obtained mostly from alcohol research projects, alcohol cans or the internet, as seen below:

*“It is from one of my portfolios, I was doing alcohol awareness” (Cookie)*

*“I got this information from the back of alcohol cans or the internet” (Jack)*

*“From the back of a Stella can (everyone laughs)” (Romell)*

Figure 6 below, retrieved from a 2018 online article in *The Guardian* (Boseley, 2018a), shows alcohol units information inscribed on bottles in line with participants’ views above.

**Figure 6. Alcohol content (units) information on alcohol bottles and cans**



*Different types of alcohol showing different alcohol unit content in each bottle*

Furthermore, participants attending college knew about specific organisations which offered alcohol-related help, than their counterparts attending schools as seen in the below comments in response to a question about where alcohol-related information could be accessed:

*"Websites like NHS, Call Frank or Alcoholics Anonymous, you can find stuff like that" (Greg)*

*"Google, the internet" (Robert)*

*"From the web" (Romell)*

*"Online or something like that if you want to find out" (Jason)*

The disparities in alcohol knowledge demonstrated by the participants shows the lack of effective and consistent alcohol awareness intervention programmes. Alcohol specialists interviewed for this project also confirmed the reduction of such intervention strategies in schools and colleges due to cuts in government funding. Furthermore, the health professionals argued that in most schools, young people only receive alcohol education as part of the other lessons or subjects delivered in school, an assertion confirmed by one participant above, who obtained the drink-driving limit information from a chemistry lesson and not an alcohol awareness intervention. Please see chapter seven for a detailed discussion of the health specialists' views on this. Most participants were however aware that there was some form of help and alcohol-related information which could be accessed by contacting the

organisations and contact numbers that *EastEnders* provided at the end of most episodes, as discussed earlier. Participants however advised that they have never written the number down as they believe that this is not relevant to them at the moment.

### **Fake friendships and peer pressure**

This theme emerged from the discussions and was not included in the moderator's questions. Using the Framework analysis approach enables the analysis of themes that also emerge directly from group discussions in addition to the existing ones on the interview guide. Most participants believed that raising awareness on the dangers of fake friendships, or 'snakes' as one participant called it, was one of the key messages directed at young people through most alcohol storylines. Excessive drinking in some storylines was blamed on fake friends deliberately and spitefully spiking others drinks with alcohol without their knowledge. Louise's party where her drink was spiked with alcohol and got her excessively drunk and Lucy spiking her best friend Lauren's drink with alcohol, were cited as examples.

Participants believed that this was a warning to them to choose friends carefully particularly where alcohol is involved, as fake friendships could be bad influence as demonstrated below:

*"Lauren's best friend Lucy tricked her into drinking alcohol. This could portray how your friendships may not be real... in modern times, we call people snakes. This can have serious effect, and this is a serious thing as it involves alcohol. It is giving the kids a heads up on what can happen in future and what you need to watch out for"* (Jess)

*"It depends on how your friends are and how they influence you. So, Louise was getting drunk because of her friends. So her friends spiked her drink to make her go wild and drunk and she ended up being in hospital"* (Peter)

The participants' stance of blaming the excessive drinking of the young characters on other factors other than the characters themselves, can to some extent be related to Modleski (1979:32)'s concept of the 'good mother' spectatorial position. Modleski (1979:30) argues that the spectator or subject of soap opera is arguably constituted as an ideal, good and tolerant mother who understands and sympathises with her family's different behaviours and identifies with them all, rather than simply dismissing them. Both boys and girls appeared to understand and empathise with the young characters involved in harmful drinking instead of condemning them. Furthermore, they blamed the excessive drinking on what they termed 'snakes' or bad and fake friendships as well as peer pressure as seen in the below comments: *".... I think a lot of it is peer pressure in excessive drinking"* (Alfie).

This resonates with views expressed in literature about young people's drinking practices, where peer pressure is cited as one of the major causes of excessive drinking in young people

(Pavis et al, 1997:320; Engineer et al, 2003:48). Participants were thus able to decode this from *EastEnders* as a matter that affects them.

### **Entertainment-education versus formal health education**

Participants perceived soap operas to be primarily for entertainment but also expected them to have an educational role, a view echoed by participants in previous studies (Ang, 1985; Buckingham, 1987; Livingstone, 1988; Hobson, 1989). Young people reported learning significant lessons about alcohol in *EastEnders* by following the lives of characters like Lauren and Phil Mitchell. Lessons included, the consequences of excessive drinking such as unwanted pregnancies, alcohol-related diseases, relationships breakdown and impact on families. *EastEnders*' producer also confirmed its educational and other roles in the comments below:

*"...informing, educating and entertaining is implicit in how EastEnders brings its generic verisimilitude closer than other soaps to cultural verisimilitude"*

These comments are drawn from the BBC's Charter discussed in chapter one and are significant to this study because *EastEnders* is a product of the BBC and it is screened by the Corporation's oldest television channel, BBC1 (Swann and Forster, 2011:77). Findings confirm that *EastEnders* is indeed fulfilling the BBC's public service broadcasting mandate in many ways, which include, engaging and entertaining its viewers, appealing to a wide cross-section of the British public through young, middle aged and old characters, as well as provoking thought and discussions among viewers through its varied storylines.

Participants preferred the use of *EastEnders*, a soap opera, to convey alcohol-related messages to viewers, particularly young people, to formal lessons about alcohol as shown in the below comments:

*"I prefer watching it because you can actually observe what's happening. I know most EastEnders episodes are based on real life so I prefer watching it instead of listening about it for hours and hours because it gets boring"* (Peter)

*"I think watching [alcohol messages in] EastEnders is better than having somebody coming here to speak to us...when somebody speaks to you, it's full on and you can't really see the effects on the people, they are just telling you about it"* (Jennifer)

*"Watching it on a TV show kind of adds a bit more to it. I know TV characters are acting... but the speaker might not portray the message as well...So, it might just seem a bit boring and somebody might lose interest, which obviously will mean that they do not listen and the message does not come through. Personally, watching a TV show, it would stick with me because my attention is more on the TV show, watching what's happening and all. I think it would have more of an impact on me than somebody just talking to me about it."* (Jason)

*“If we were to have a health educator in front of us talking to us or lecturing about alcohol, it would be boring. We would forget about that the minute we walked out of the door. We would just remember certain parts, but as EastEnders is a soap opera and is there to entertain and it has a lot of cliff hangers in between, it’s easy for us to remember” (Jess)*

*“I would rather watch it so I can visualise like, how to react. If it was a lecture, I would find it hard to concentrate” (Janice)*

*“I would prefer watching it, because I like watching all the action, it is entertaining” (Cookie)*

*“I would prefer to watch it because it appeals to my brain more” (Harry)*

Communicating alcohol messages through entertainment worked better for participants and was more engaging and ‘stuck in their minds’ more than being formally taught about alcohol in a classroom set up. The latter could be ‘boring’, ‘full on’ and difficult to ‘concentrate’ and as such ‘interest’ may be lost by participants resulting in messages not being effectively received. These views resonate with those expressed by proponents of entertainment-education as an effective tool for conveying health messages to young people (Brown, 2000: 35; Pan American Health Organisation, 2004:1; Rogers et al, 2000:81; Waisbord, 2001:7). The strategy was discussed in chapter one.

Furthermore, participants felt that following characters in *EastEnders* presented a full picture of the effects of harmful drinking on both the individual and those around them, unlike formal alcohol lectures, as seen in the below views:

*“I think it is easier to show it through characters where they can actually show proper physical and mental behavioural impact of alcohol unlike other means which would not really show a lot whereas the soap opera can show you more detail and can also show what happens around them (characters) as well instead of just themselves. A lecture will explain how it happened but through a soap opera it shows everything in a detailed way. If someone said this is what would happen if you drink too much, you would not exactly know what it would be like although they can explain it but through soap opera it shows it properly” (Jack)*

*“.... when you are watching EastEnders, you get to follow the characters to see what happens to them afterwards so you can see how it affects their lives in the long term. You know yourself that that is excessive drinking and you can identify the stuff but someone telling you it’s hard to actually point out what’s what and what will happen in the future if you do this whereas if you can see it and follow them, it’s easy to know and it’s easy to understand what’s what” (Jennifer)*

The above comments point to the programme’s serial form and ability to show complex character evolution through its ongoing nature (Allen, 1985:19).

A soap opera was also viewed as having the ability to present multiple perspectives about alcohol to viewers which was fair and balanced and allowed viewers to make their own

informed decisions. Formal awareness lessons on the other hand were felt to be too didactic and one-sided:

*“I think the lecture on alcohol would be more biased about it whereas in EastEnders you can see different perspectives from different people and see how they react to it. That’s basically a good thing then” (Peter)*

Other participants like Jason felt the soap opera genre had the advantage of being popular with audiences and as such was an effective channel for conveying health communication messages in comparison with school-based interventions:

*“It is obviously a very popular genre and many people watch EastEnders. It’s [soap opera] a quicker and widespread way of conveying alcohol messages rather than going around schools etc to deliver the messages, especially to younger people in Britain” (Jason)*

The above sentiments echo previous study findings in which young people preferred modern, multifaceted approaches that used mobile technologies and new media than traditional ones (De Visser et al, 2013:1460). Unlike participants from previous findings who believed that alcohol interventions focussed more on the negative effects of alcohol and not the pleasure derived from drinking (De Visser et al, 2013:1460), young people perceived the representations from *EastEnders* to be balanced with both the risks and benefits of drinking alcohol depicted, which in turn made the programme realistic to them.

While most participants preferred receiving alcohol education through soap operas, **some boys** differed. They believed that using a soap opera to convey serious messages like alcohol, drowns the message because the entertainment aspect acts as a distraction, resulting in the message getting lost in it. They expressed a preference for a more formal, lecture-style approach:

*“I think you don’t watch EastEnders to get information about alcohol, you watch it for the entertainment but if someone came in and was talking to you directly about alcohol, then you would receive it better because there is nothing else going on” (Jason)*

*“I prefer to have a health officer giving a lecture about it because it would be more informative, while if you just watch it you will kind of have to infer the information given to you instead of just being told” (Oliver)*

*“I would rather have a health officer because it is more factual” (Clarke)*

*“I think a health officer will be better as they would know more from research and we would learn more from a health officer” (Greg)*

*“A health officer would be better because they would talk about more health-related issues than what is portrayed in EastEnders” (Rob)*

Furthermore, some boys believed young people would feel more obliged to listen attentively to a lecture and its recommendations than when watching *EastEnders* where there is no requirement to pay attention or an obligation to follow what is dramatised:

*“... With a health visitor you know that you need to actually listen to him more but with EastEnders you don't really, you see it more like a drama show even though you know it's on real life situations, you are not really going to be watching episodes and say that's what I am going to do. If a health visitor came, you going to want to follow exactly what they said”*  
(Chino)

The boys' preference of a lecture over a soap opera, can be linked to debates around the gendered spectatorship of soap operas. While this may have changed, since their inception soap operas have often been perceived as a gendered genre (Allen, 1995:3) in general, and a 'woman's genre' in particular (Nochimson, 1992; Moseley et al, 2016:4) due to their association with a predominant female audience (Ang, 1985:118; Verma, 2007), as discussed in chapter three. This study's findings confirm the above discourses about soap opera in that all female participants preferred alcohol education through soap to a formal lecture, while most boys appeared to construct a sense of self around a 'hard' factual and precise presentation of the alcohol information instead. Modleski (1984: xii) attributes the popularity of soap operas with female audiences to the way the genre “addresses and constitutes” women as spectators and thus enables certain pleasures and meanings to be derived from them (Modleski, 1984).

Still others felt that a mixture of entertainment and formal alcohol education would be more effective, as lessons would provide key factual alcohol information not available in *EastEnders*, like the recommended alcohol units and related information young people require. *EastEnders* on the other hand puts the theory into practice by dramatising the alcohol facts in an entertaining way which attracts viewers' attention:

*“I am gonna agree with everyone. I think we need a mixture because a health visitor for example will provide different kinds of information compared to EastEnders. EastEnders provides examples of how it can actually happen so you can see for yourself like what you can do. The health visitor will give you more facts like telling you how much alcohol you can drink”* (Chino)

My findings show that while entertainment-education was the preferred method of health communication, there might still be hope for school-based interventions, as some young people, mostly boys, still preferred them. This is contrary to research findings which suggest that most schools-based educational interventions are highly ineffective and not taken very

seriously by those being targeted (Jernigan, 2001:43). Unfortunately, formal alcohol education interventions in schools are now very minimal or inexistent, due to government funding cuts, which explains why most participants have not experienced them and as such most of them were using common sense in their interpretations.

Significantly, while there was a heated debate in the boys' group regarding this topic with different views being expressed, the girls seemed to unanimously agree that soap opera was more effective for young people than formal health education lessons. None of the girls preferred formal alcohol lessons whereas the boys leaned towards a mixed method approach. Based on the number of views in support of entertainment-education, it can be safely concluded that the majority of the young people preferred entertainment-education through the soap opera *EastEnders* in comparison with formal alcohol awareness talks. What became apparent from the discussions though, is that there is need for more concrete alcohol facts and information such as the Chief Medical Officer's weekly recommended alcohol units and acceptable alcohol intake for drivers, among other things, to be accessible to young people particularly this age-group, due to its proximity to the legal drinking age. This would equip them with relevant and accurate facts they require should they choose to consume alcohol. Moreover, some young people are already drinking even before reaching the legal drinking age, as studies reveal and findings from this study confirmed.

### **Young people and second screens**

This study drew on second screen concept, to understand how technological advances in the form of mobile and portable multiple media devices, have impacted contemporary television viewing, particularly by young people, who are said to be more technologically savvy and thus use these second screens during their television viewing, more than any other age-group (Blake, 2016:2 and 51; Ofcom, 2013). Below are the study findings on second screen theory, particularly with regards to the contemporary television viewing context and experience of the young people, their usage of second screens during *EastEnders* viewing and how this impacts on their reception and interpretation of alcohol messages. A detailed discussion of second screen theory is available in chapter two.

### **Traditional living room television still exists**

Contrary to recent literature arguing that the traditional living room television is fast being replaced by the advanced portable devices leading to fragmented audiences (Murray, 2012),

this study's findings show that most young people watch television in general and *EastEnders* in particular, with their families in the living room on the main living room television screen and also interacted significantly during viewing. The reason for this was that it was in keeping with family tradition. Exceptions to this tradition were when they missed the episode and the family had already watched it, they then watched it on their smart phones in their bedrooms, or, when they are not at home, they used their portable devices to watch *EastEnders*. This appears to be a convenience issue more than anything else. Family viewing is thus arguably still the main form of access but with a range of other viewing practices also being prevalent. Participants' responses when asked how they watched *EastEnders* were as follows:

*"I watch it in the living room on the TV screen with family" (Jack)*

*"On Sky with my mum, in the living room" (Romell)*

*"It depends if I have missed it with my family, I will just go watch it from my phone in bed otherwise" (Whitney)*

*"I watch it in the living room with my mum and dad and brother on the TV" (Jason)*

*"I usually just watch it with my family or I just record it when I am busy and just watch it when I have got more free time" (John)*

*"Usually I watch it because my mum is really into it... I sit and watch it with her in the living room because I do find it enjoyable... (Alfie)*

*"With me it's a mixture because sometimes I can watch with my family on the TV, sometimes I watch it by myself on the TV or laptop like now you can watch it in many different ways like BBC iPlayer. Let's say I missed it, I watch it on my phone, just anywhere really" (Chino)*

Those whose families did not watch *EastEnders*, watched it alone on their laptops and this enabled them to concentrate on it without any distractions:

*"I normally watch it on my laptop at home because nobody watches EastEnders. I think watching it on my own, I'm more concentrating and there is nobody talking so it's better" (Peter)*

Other participants like Jess below, preferred to watch it with friends on other media like iPlayer or even used other technology, depending on their situation:

*"I watch it on iPlayer, sometimes with my friend Isabel, on the TV or anywhere or if I am on the go just anywhere like where it is portable like on my phone" (Jess)*

Few participants watched *EastEnders* on their own, in their rooms on the bedroom television set or laptop, contrary to views suggesting that individual television viewing on multiple screens scattered around the household, such as bedrooms, is arguably overtaking the traditional family viewing (Livingstone, 2012), at least for this age-group interviewed.

Girls cited feeling uncomfortable watching certain *EastEnders* scenes (kissing scenes etc.) with their parents, particularly fathers, as this caused a tense and awkward situation and also

attracted lectures on the unsuitability of certain scenes, which interfered with the viewing. Consequently, as they grew older, they preferred watching it on their own on their second screens, as the comments below reveal. None of the boys reported a similar experience even though they watched with parents too. This might be due to the different socialisation girls and boys get from their parents, as they grow up:

*“As I have grown up, I have begun to watch it on my own. I would watch it with my mom and my sister when we are having breakfast in the morning, the day after but I would rather not watch it with my dad. Even if it’s just kissing in front of my dad, I have to just change channel because it’s so awkward.... and then he starts to say stuff like you should not watch things like this, it’s bad etc...” (Whitney)*

*“I would rather watch it alone, like you said you don’t know what’s going to happen, when the kissing happens it’s not always the best time like you have to make jokes in the middle just for time to go faster. I would rather watch it either with a friend or just by myself” (Jess)*

Findings revealed that young people are embracing multi-media technology and are using portable devices as an opportunity to align media consumption with their convenience and privacy. While watching *EastEnders* in the traditional family living room from the main television screen is the main practice for this age-group, other screens and platforms such as smart phones, lap-tops and BBC iPlayer are also being widely used. On occasions when second screens are used, the traditional living room is replaced by the bedroom where participants watch *EastEnders* in comfort and privacy without disruption or intimidation. This finding echoes views which suggest that second screen usage by contemporary television viewers gives them the flexibility they want (Blake, 2016).

To further test second screen theory, the study investigated if young people simultaneously used their second screens while watching *EastEnders* from the main living room television and the possible impact of this practice on their reception of alcohol-related messages.

Findings revealed that most participants used their second screens, particularly smart phones while watching the programme:

*“I go on my phone at the same time as watching it, like on Snapchat” (Jennifer)*

*“While I am watching it, I Snap-chat my friend who is very into it” (Jason)*

*“I go on my iPad to play games while watching it” (Rob)*

*“I go on games because if I just watch EastEnders it will make me feel negative because of what is happening and that” (Greg)*

*“I go on my smart phone to do other things, but not researching information about EastEnders?” (Phil)*

While both girls and boys reported using their second screens while watching *EastEnders*, it was mostly boys who used their second screens concurrently with their viewing. While some

participants used second screens to play games or go on Snapchat, the majority used their smart phones to seek information about issues they did not understand in the storylines such as diseases and practices they were unfamiliar with. Searches included both alcohol-related information and general information depicted in the storylines:

*“.... One time I searched what cirrhosis was, what Phil had and the other story that happened with Stacey, she had this syndrome and I searched that because it looked really interesting” (Peter)*

*“Most of the times I watch it quietly but sometimes I do go on the phone or laptop to see information about a lot of situations and stuff. Like, say if it was an alcoholic storyline, I would google what is the certain amount I should drink etc. It helps me understand more about it” (Jack)*

*“I also do go on the internet on my smart phone and check information on google, relating to what I will be watching” (Romell)*

*“I searched the other day but it was not about alcohol, like when Stacey thought her baby was sent from Jesus, I searched that online as I found that interesting” (Isabella)*

*“When Kush fainted randomly, I did actually search that as I had no idea what it was” (Whitney)*

The above comments resonate with findings by Nielsen on the use of second screens in America, in 2014 (Blake, 2016:10), which showed that using a portable device at the same time as watching television enabled viewers to expand their knowledge and deepen their understanding around issues discussed in the programme. Furthermore, viewers were able to use portable devices to double check or cross-check facts or concepts outlined in television programmes with other viewers or internet search engines like Google, or even access differing views, thereby empowering them to question and negotiate media messages.

Boys went further and used their smart phones during viewing to chat with friends on Snapchat or WhatsApp, call friends to discuss the programme and also exchanged video clips of interesting scenes in *EastEnders*. Unlike other viewers who are increasingly using Twitter and related live online platforms to discuss television programmes (Deller, 2011:222), as well as other *EastEnders* viewers in previous studies who used internet live chats during viewing to chat with other *EastEnders* viewers worldwide (Madill and Goldmeier, 2003:485), participants in this study restricted their *EastEnders* chats to friends and did not use platforms like Twitter to discuss it. The comments below demonstrate this:

*“Me and Chino we do have regular conversations about what is going on, on Snapchat whilst we are watching it, he would send me a quick video saying this is what’s happened” (John)*

*“Me and my friend we basically talk on I-messenger just discussing what’s going to happen next, who we hate, who we like, it just goes on for hours and hours and the next day we discuss what else is going to happen when we meet each other” (Peter)*

*“Yes, during the show as well, we text just saying omg did you see what just happened, it likes builds up suspense” (Peter)*

*“I wouldn’t go on an online platform and start talking about EastEnders...I just keep it local and discuss it with my friend Chino” (John)*

The above practices by young people confirm second screen theory assertion that the use of portable devices during television viewing by modern viewers, particularly younger viewers is enhancing the whole television viewing experience and makes it enjoyable, as viewers are now able to interact and bond with other viewers elsewhere while discussing their favourite programme (Simons, 2015:224). It also gives viewers flexibility and the ability to multi-task while maintaining concentration on programmes (Blake, 2016). Some views suggest that the simultaneous use of second screens during viewing can result in viewer distraction and loss of concentration as sometimes more attention is given to the second screens than the television (Blake, 2016:10; Holmes et al, 2012). Some participants confirmed this view while others demonstrated their knowledge of the genre by advising that soap operas are slow-moving hence it is easy to catch up whenever one missed parts of it. Others, like John below, reported using technology to pause the programme while discussing it with friends on second screens and resume it at their convenience. This ensured nothing was missed while at the same time keeping up with the fun and excitement of discussing it with friends as it happens:

*“I feel like technology allows us to pause it, so I can just pause it, whilst we talk and then resume it, I don’t miss much” (John)*

One participant, a boy, reported using his ability to multi-task to keep up with both the programme and chats:

*“I do not get distracted as I can multi-task” (Peter)*

The use of second screens during viewing may relate to the fact that the genre is oral-centric and, throughout its history, it has allowed distracted modes of engagement, often because women were multi-tasking (Katzman,1972:212). Peter’s comment above confirms this view. Modleski (1984) agrees that the narrative structure of soap opera such as the constant movement from one plot to another and one conversation to another, mimics the viewer’s domestic life where the viewing is continuously interrupted by different household chores and activities but is still able to follow the programme.

Research mostly in the field of psychology, conducted on the nature and limitations of multitasking postulates that multitasking is a myth and an impossible task because of the inability of the human brain to cope with multiple tasks simultaneously (Manhart, 2004:62-

65). Switching between tasks often results in reduced ability to concentrate on the current task (Manhart, 2004:65; Adler and Benbunan-Fich, 2012:1). However, the ability to juggle tasks also depends on the nature and type of tasks, the easier the tasks, the better the chances of juggling them and vice-versa (Manhart, 2004:64). This latter argument might explain why soap opera audiences are able to juggle soap opera viewing with other relatively easy tasks like using second screens during the viewing and still be able to follow the programme.

Other participants like Isabella and Peter below reported accessing *EastEnders* spoilers on their second screens as this enhanced their viewing enjoyment. This echoes arguments by Choi and Jung, (2016) that accessing related supplementary content from second screens while watching augmented viewers' perceptions of the programmes and also gave them programme satisfaction, particularly now that many programme providers are providing additional information on portable devices about programmes being watched on television screens, in order to meet viewers' information needs.

*"I go on Instagram to see the EastEnders spoilers and then tell you afterwards..." (Isabella)*  
*"During EastEnders and also after watching every episode of EastEnders, I search up spoilers... I want to know what can happen in the next episode, so I can find out who is leaving because I can't wait for the next day" (Peter)*

There were mixed views regarding checking *EastEnders* spoilers, with the majority of participants preferring to watch it as it was screened as opposed to knowing in advance what was going to happen, as this spoiled the fun. Participants who mentioned going on spoilers were booed by other participants and asked why they did that, to which they answered, 'because it is exciting':

*"I am the opposite. My sisters love to go on Instagram but I don't, I tell them to shut up because I don't like things to be ruined for me. I just want to watch on the spot" (John)*

Findings revealed that although young people did use their mobile devices to research alcohol-related issues, they also used them to chat about the series, look for plot-spoilers and other related activities which enhanced their viewing experience.

## **Conclusion**

Findings revealed that young people are active recipients of television media messages. They are able to critically evaluate them by drawing on their lived experiences and religious, cultural and other interpretive competences, to decide whether to accept, negotiate or reject them. This is contrary to assertions by the effects tradition (Moore, 1993), where young

people were viewed as passive and vulnerable victims of media messages. Findings also revealed that the reception of media messages is a complex process that cannot be merely explained by attributing differences of interpretation to race, age, gender, religion, culture and other variables, as this would be simplistic. While some interpretations could be aligned to the above variables, others cut across them, further complicating the process. Overall, most participants found the portrayal of alcohol messages by *EastEnders* predominantly realistic, and so decoded most of them in line with the text's preferred readings. Messages which resonated with the young people's lived experiences were judged as realistic while those that they could not relate to were dismissed as unrealistic. Due to differences in lived experiences, some depictions were viewed as realistic by some participants and yet dismissed by others as unrealistic. Although most of the alcohol messages were deemed to be realistic, participants challenged certain depictions of young people's alcohol practices by *EastEnders* as distorted, raising questions about the differences between young people as represented in the media and the real young people interviewed for this study. Findings also challenged assumptions made by literature on young people and alcohol, which tend to assume that young people are incapable of making informed decisions regarding alcohol due to their age (Engineer et al, 2003). Young people in this study seemed to be able to distinguish moderate drinking from excessive drinking and were also able to articulate the consequences of the latter. While they possessed significant knowledge on the dangers of excessive drinking, they lacked tangible knowledge regarding basic alcohol-related facts such as the recommended weekly alcohol units and safe driving units. Access to such information by most young people appeared to be difficult.

There were differences between young people attending school and those attending colleges regarding alcohol knowledge possessed and drinking experience disclosure with the latter exhibiting more knowledge and willingness to disclose alcohol practices than their counterparts. The discrepancy in knowledge can arguably be attributed to participant subjectivity and issues of respondent truthfulness in data collection as well as the potential impact of the interview contexts on the participants.

Notwithstanding the above, findings revealed that young people felt that *EastEnders* was achieving its role of informing, entertaining and educating them about social matters such as the consequences of alcohol misuse, by dramatising the issues through relatable characters. Most participants, particularly girls, preferred entertainment-education as the most effective

channel of raising alcohol awareness in young people in comparison with formal health education. Some boys however preferred formal alcohol awareness interventions instead while a third view was that both methods were essential as they had different merits.

Findings further revealed that the traditional living room audience is still alive, contrary to research (Murray, 2012) which suggests that modern multi-media technology has fragmented the television audiences and created lone viewers, particularly in young people (Blake, 2016:51). Participants were still watching television in general and *EastEnders* in particular with their families in the family living room and on the living room television screen and were also having significant discussions during viewing too. Second screen usage enhanced viewing pleasure by connecting participants to fellow viewers in real time while also enabling them to verify programme-related facts. While the traditional television audience still exists, it has become more empowered and complicated than before due to enhanced viewing practices and experience brought about by the portable multi-media devices.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### EXPERT VOICES

#### Introduction

In chapter six, I presented findings from group interviews held with young people on how they receive and interpret alcohol messages in *EastEnders*. To complement the group interviews, individual semi-structured interviews were held with some health professionals in Nottingham. In this chapter, I present findings from the latter group. The objective was to obtain their views on the portrayal of alcohol messages by *EastEnders* in comparison with real-life situations encountered in their roles as health professionals. The other goal was to establish how their interpretative codes compared with those of the young people and how they expected the messages to be received by them. The interviews are crucial to the study as they enhance the understanding of how media texts can be interpreted by different audiences, situated in different socio-cultural, age, educational, professional and occupational contexts, as well as audiences with a different level of knowledge and expertise. The health experts' data is used for the purposes of investigating and unpacking the interpretive codes that inform their readings and not as scientific knowledge against which the responses of the young people are measured, as both groups bring composite knowledge to bear.

#### Sampling of health professionals

The health practitioners were drawn from the alcohol and drug education sectors, in line with the study objectives, and were sampled using a mixed sampling method, purposive sampling (Ritchie et al, 2013:113) and snowball sampling (Noy, 2008:3) as discussed in chapter four. Sample members were carefully chosen with a specific purpose of accessing various experiences as opposed to a conventionally statistically representative sample. This enabled the study to obtain valid and in-depth findings from a handpicked sample (McIntosh and Morse, 2015:8). Local organisations which deal with health education and promotion particularly alcohol education, awareness and recovery for young people were sampled online. Emails detailing the study's objectives were sent to the respective organisations requesting interviews with relevant people and this was followed up with phone calls. As the response rate was low, snowball sampling (Noy, 2008:3) was used to recruit more respondents by pursuing referrals to potential participants who met the criteria and were willing to take part.

Four specialists from four different health organisations were sampled to enable a comparison of the data collected. The respondents were labelled with letters to protect their identity.

Below are their brief profiles:

*Respondent A* is a recovery service manager at a local alcohol recovery and addiction centre. Their role entails managing teams that provide recovery assistance to people affected by harmful drinking and also delivering that service themselves too. They also deliver alcohol education to young people in schools through interactive sessions.

*Respondent B* is a health educator for a non-profit making educational charity in Nottinghamshire. Their role is to deliver drug and alcohol education to young people mainly at primary school through a mobile classroom.

*Respondent C* is a student support and health promoter for a local higher education institution. Some of their health promotion duties with students include raising awareness about harmful drinking, mental health and other health concerns and publicising the support and services available to students through events, training programmes and social media.

*Respondent D* is a senior executive of a local health education charity that delivers drug and alcohol education to young people up to the age of 19. They mainly work in primary schools with year 6 pupils, where trained staff deliver their programmes but also provide secondary school programmes which are often delivered by teachers themselves.

Prior to the interviews, selected alcohol-related clips from *EastEnders* were viewed with the respondents to aid the discussions, although the interviews referred to the whole programme. While all the respondents had some knowledge of *EastEnders*, particularly the main characters, the clips helped refresh their memory. The same clips were played to all the interviewees in order to enable appropriate comparisons.

The data analysis which follows employs the thematic analysis approach encapsulated in the Framework analysis method (Ward et al, 2013:2425) discussed in chapter four. Common themes which emerged from the interviews and those from the interview guide were used to examine the data, in line with the Framework analysis approach (Pope et al, 2000). The analysis benefited from a comparative approach using relevant data from the group interviews with young people. The analysis is purely focussed on the meta-analysis of the health professionals' responses, how they read the alcohol messages in *EastEnders* and what knowledge, experience and other interpretive codes they draw on in their interpretations.

I begin by presenting the experts' understanding of the types of alcohol consumption and their consequences to provide a context for their responses to the programme. The drinking notions discussed include; excessive, binge, alcoholism, moderate and social drinking. I follow this up with a discussion of how they decode the alcohol messages in the programme.

## **Views on the definition and portrayal of the different types of drinking**

### **Excessive drinking**

Three of the specialists defined excessive drinking as drinking over the recommended weekly Chief Medical Officer's (CMO's) guidelines, in terms of the amount of alcohol units consumed and the frequency of consumption, resulting in loss of control over one's drinking and behaviour:

*"Excessive drinking... is difficult to describe because every individual is different...it would be drinking over the recommended units and much more frequently than the recommended units. From a female point of view, I think the recommendation is 2 to 3 units per day with 2 alcohol free days. They are always changing. It used to be 2-3 units per day" (A)*

*"When you start to lose control of normal day-to-day living like not going to work and not being able to function properly, when you feel your outlet is to drink more. Straight away I thought 'what units?' but it would be different for different people. My father-in-law used to drink quite heavily. He started drinking in the afternoon and drank all night, his relationship with his wife broke down, that was excessive drinking, it was a way of life for him" (C)*

*"Well, excessive drinking is exceeding the NHS guidelines, drinking more than 14 units a week, obviously when somebody reaches a state where they are drunk or nearly drunk, that is excessive drinking" (B)*

Respondent B's perspective appears to raise two potentially contradictory views in that, excessive drinking is initially defined in terms of exceeding the CMO's recommended guidelines but then associated with reaching a drunk or nearly drunk state regardless of whether the units have been exceeded or not.

Respondent D echoed the above views in terms of the impact on behaviour and other bodily functions and the way it varied with individuals. However, unlike the other respondents, he made no reference to the CMO's recommended weekly units:

*"Excessive or binge drinking is drinking alcohol to such a volume that you are unable to properly function, and that can be different for different people, particularly in relation to memory and behaviour and next day impact. If the next day you are unable to think or speak properly, unable to recall what's happened on the previous night then you definitely have been in the excessive drinking category..." (D)*

It is worth underlining this terminological variance between experts and also sometimes shown by one expert in their definitions of the different drinking patterns. Furthermore, some of the information cited by the respondents is not up-to-date. For example, the CMO's advice no longer offers separate guidelines for men and women, contrary to what respondent A advised above. This shows that while some responses are informed by medical knowledge, others are definitely shaped by individual hunches, lived experiences and even (socially shared) common sense, which explains the variations. It can also be argued that some of the responses highlight the challenge specialists face in keeping up with appropriate knowledge and research in this dynamic field.

### **Binge drinking**

Markedly excessive drinking was viewed as being synonymous with binge drinking by respondent D. Such variations in the definition of excessive and binge drinking extended to the young people too. While most of them were aware that both terms alluded to abnormal or huge amounts of alcohol intake in one session or over a prolonged period, leading to negative consequences, they found it difficult to articulate the meanings of the concepts and like most writers, they also resorted to defining the concepts by contrasting them with normal and acceptable drinking. The other specialists had a slightly different definition of binge drinking to respondent D:

*“Binge drinking is episodes of excessive drinking where a person gets so intoxicated, they can't remember what they have been doing. That could be weekends, every few days or once a month” (A)*

*“Drinking with the intention to get drunk is binge drinking. I don't think there is one set definition of binge drinking, there are lots of definitions” (B)*

Like specialist A, specialist B also perceived binge drinking in relation to the high amount of alcohol deliberately consumed resulting in intoxication. Unlike specialist A, their definition did not include the frequency of the drinking which differentiated it from the other types of drinking. Specialist A went further and re-iterated views about the reckless, risky and dangerous behaviour that often resulted from binge drinking by young people (Lester et al, 2016:67):

*“Binge drinkers are often more reckless with their behaviour... the younger people...the young students may be out on a night out and a bunch of lads getting so drunk they think they can climb up some scaffolding or run in front of the tram or not see the bus that's coming and they get hit by a bus. It's that kind of thing that puts them into so much risk” (A)*

The health experts however noted a potential contradiction between the impact of binge drinking on young people and the alcohol advertising targeted at them in pubs and supermarkets:

*“Bars aimed at young people, with pictures of booze and 2-for-1 cocktails, there is a lot of advertising around shots and things like that, the amount of alcohol that person might take in that night could be life threatening and ultimately it will stop them breathing” (A)*

*“Looking at the fact that alcohol has gone relatively down in pricing, it is possible to buy very cheap alcohol and it is also sold in greater volumes ...in the past you could buy a 4 pack, now they are selling alcohol in boxes of 10 or 12” (B)*

These views echo concerns about the impact of the night-time economy on young people, a phenomenon viewed as encouraging binge drinking among this age-group and impacting on their health (De Visser et al, 2013:1460).

### **Alcoholism, dependency drinking and addiction**

The experts defined alcoholism in terms of addiction and dependency echoing common definitions in the field (Room, 2011:143):

*“Some people call it [alcoholism] dependency and some addiction. These are the other words that people might use that fit the description of needing a drink rather than choosing to have a drink. So, it’s that loss of control where the body is physically dependent and there is a strong psychological dependency on it as well” (A)*

*“There are different types...functional alcoholism which is to do with dependency, where somebody’s life is dependent on alcohol. I would say if somebody was drinking everyday feeling as if they needed a drink...” (B)*

*“Alcoholism and addiction are when you can’t live without alcohol...” (C)*

*“Alcoholism is used to describe addiction.... a behaviour controlled by your chemical reactions... being unable to properly function and distinguish between harm you are causing yourself and you are driven to a point where there is a need for you to have something that you believe sustains yourself and that craving goes beyond a normal need and it is not something that you want but something that you must have” (D)*

Alcoholism, addiction and dependency were thus defined as loss of drinking control, leading to chronic, harmful and physical and psychological dependency drinking. The experts emphasise the drinker’s ‘need’ for a drink as opposed to ‘choosing’ to have one, which distinguishes this type of drinking from the rest. Their definitions went further to include other negative characteristics of alcoholism, which further differentiates it from other drinking patterns:

*“It’s like an everlasting cycle where drinking causes problems and problems cause more drinking i.e. a vicious circle and that goes on for years, for some it takes a real crisis to resolve to come for treatment like losing their jobs, severe health problems, the wife and children may leave or they may lose their home” (A)*

*“I had a friend who drank secretly and would hide a bottle in her clothes drawers, in the end she split up with her partner because he could not deal with it anymore. It’s a shame that people end up like that” (C)*

*“...where people make decisions such as sell their goods or steal things or do things that they would otherwise not normally do to achieve whatever they want, which is the alcohol or drugs they are addicted to” (D)*

The experts’ comments highlight the common consequences of dependency drinking on the individual and those around them. These include; relationship breakdown, family breakdown, job loss, health problems, stealing, irrational decisions such as selling personal or family belongings to fund the addiction. Similarly, most young people also showed knowledge of what alcoholism entailed and, like the specialists, used alcoholism, addiction and dependency synonymously and were also aware that it entailed lack of control over one’s drinking and attracted negative consequences as a result. They used the following phrases to define and describe the notion of alcoholism; ‘addiction’, ‘lack of self-control’, ‘unable to function without alcohol’ and ‘drinking on your own’. Likewise, the specialists used similar phrases which include: ‘loss of control’, ‘needing a drink as opposed to wanting a drink’, ‘drinking on a daily basis’, ‘can’t live without a drink’, ‘life is dependent on alcohol’, ‘vicious cycle’, ‘unable to properly function’ and ‘physical and psychological dependency’. Isolated drinking was also mentioned by the experts as a symptom of dependency drinking.

### **Views on moderate, responsible, sensible and acceptable drinking**

The experts expressed their view on what constituted moderate, responsible, sensible and socially acceptable drinking:

*“As a service, we would always be recommending the government guidelines, which are, the last time I looked, 2-3 units per day for females with 2 days alcohol free. I think it’s 3-4 for men, with 2 days alcohol free” (A)*

*“Not being drunk, drinking with food, following the NHS guidelines really.” (B)*

*“When you know where to stop. When you have your breaks through-out the night, when you do not feel pressured when you go out that you have to drink” (C)*

These views indicate that specialists perceived moderate, responsible, sensible and acceptable drinking patterns as relating to the consumption of alcohol in line with Government guidelines and exhibiting control of one’s drinking. Respondent D however argued there is no longer any safe alcohol consumption and cited Public Health England as the source of this latest advice. When delivering their alcohol education to young people, D makes no mention of safe or acceptable drinking levels, in line with the current official medical health advice:

*“Well, you have got Public Health England who will say there is no level of alcohol that is safe to drink. I drink alcohol myself and I understand about the risks and therefore I have a*

*view about my personal choice, i.e. what I think is sensible use of a drug that is causing me harm in the long term. We do not tell them [young people] what level of drinking is acceptable. We tell them that there is no safe level of drinking alcohol which is the medical health advice at this stage. We talk about alcohol as a drug and that all drugs do harm and that it is the volume and amounts and regularity which depicts how much harm” (D)*

We can see divergences in the experts’ viewpoints here. Some are happy to recommend general government guidelines. Others are more guided by individual circumstances and draw on their own experience as much as official guidelines. They disagree over what constitutes a healthy drinking pattern as the contrast between D’s account above and A’s below illustrates:

*“If I look at my own drinking, I probably don’t stick to the government guidelines because at a weekend, Friday and Saturday, I have half a bottle of wine with a meal, then say, if I was in a restaurant, my husband and I would share a bottle of wine then we might go for a couple of drinks afterwards. So that is definitely over the government recommendations. And maybe on a Sunday afternoon, if it’s a nice day and we are sitting in the garden, I might have half a bottle of wine then, might even open a second bottle later with dinner. Yes, I think it’s definitely over government guidelines, in my opinion that is safe for me. I wouldn’t be drinking necessarily in the week because I have to get up and go to work...So, I have got the ability to choose and the ability to drink sensibly. Sadly, I think there are a lot of people around that are not able to choose what they drink and how they drink because they are addicted to it and once alcohol is in their system, they need more” (A)*

It can be argued that A’s comments are informed by their role as a problem drinking expert hence someone less concerned with social or moderate drinking than public health practitioners might be, thus highlighting the different positioning of the health experts in their decoding of the alcohol messages. B, a health education specialist below, tellingly argues that in their health education interventions, they always encourage young people to stick to the Chief Medical Officer’s recommendations and the NHS guidelines:

*“My basis is the NHS guidelines although I do not know where they got those from, I guess they are quite random.... We, however, normally quote the Chief Medical Officer” (B)*

The difficulty of defining moderate drinking was evident amongst both young people and the experts with both groups defining it predominantly in contrast to excessive drinking. This difficulty is further highlighted in alcohol scholarship where the concept is not only seen as hard to articulate but usually inaccurately constructed in public and social discourses (Yeomans, 2013:58). Significantly, specialist B’s comments about the guideline for weekly alcohol units perhaps being ‘quite random’ echo one of Yeomans’s arguments about the lack of scientific backing of the concept of moderation, discussed in chapter one. The lack of definitive answers about the concept of moderate drinking and other concepts discussed in this study, can be linked to the approach employed by public health and safety

communication to simplify public health messages so as to avoid “asserting certainty” (Guttman and Salmon, 2004:541) as discussed in chapter one.

### **Views on recent findings about ‘No Safe Alcohol Consumption’**

Specialist A’s experience-based view of the safety of moderate drinking is contrary to recent research whose findings revealed that there is no such thing as safe or risk-free alcohol intake anymore, as all alcohol intake, regardless the amount is now linked to seven types of cancer (World Cancer Research Fund, 2018; American Institute for Cancer Research, 2018). In response to the recent findings, the specialist argued that although they appreciated that the role of research was to highlight concerns about certain practices, sometimes they found research to be contradictory:

*“I am always sceptical about new research because somebody will come up with a piece of research but then there would be somebody else who would counter [it]. Alcohol has been around since biblical days...and people will always drink it but, like anything, there is always more and more research being done on anything that we consume or drink whether it is food or alcohol. I suppose people who do research have a responsibility to raise any issues of concern” (A)*

Specialists B and C were equally concerned about the recent findings and like specialist A, were cautious in their approach:

*“I would challenge that and ask why they have got a national guideline on alcohol intake. Why have they got the Chief Medical Officer’s 14 units per week guidelines? To say the best advice is not to drink at all challenges the current guidelines. To say do not drink at all would be very difficult to enforce, I think. I would have to see the statistics and evidence to prove that one drink a week is still going to increase your chances of getting cancer and things like that” (C)*

*“That is very interesting. I have had a drugs update which I have not read. Is that on the NHS website? And is it one piece of research? We tend to use the NHS when we are talking to children because when it’s on the NHS website, we know it is safe to advise. It may well be but I don’t know whether it has filtered through to the mainstream” (B)*

While three of the specialists had been unaware of the recent findings, respondent D was aware of this body of evidence and commented on it before I asked the question. Unlike their counterparts who were sceptical about the new revelations, respondent D’s organisation was already communicating this advice to young people as part of their alcohol education.

Although D may seem to be closer to official advice, their choice of words suggests the advice they give leans more towards a personal and common-sense position:

*“My personal and professional view is that people should know that alcohol is a poison that is causing harm to their body and it is about how much of it their body can tolerate, which is very personal to them and that they have to make that choice themselves about how they want to live their life. If they choose to drink excessively, and whatever excessively is, it is entirely*

*in their view, and do so in the knowledge that these things are likely to cause harm to you and will affect you at a time when you least expect it” (D)*

### **Social drinking**

Below are the specialists perceptions of social drinking:

*“I suppose it is drinking in groups. Social means groups, doesn’t? So, it is drinking with friends and family” (B)*

*“For me it’s just sitting down with your preferred drink and just having a chat” (C)*

*“Mainly described as people collectively coming together for a social environment and drinking at the same time...” (D)*

Unlike the above definitions which seem to imply that social and moderate drinking are synonymous, specialist A went further to distinguish moderate drinking from social drinking and acknowledged that social drinking patterns vary, with some social drinkers consuming more alcohol than others and as such leading to different health impact:

*“I suppose again it’s about quantity and how social drinking affects a person’s life, family and work. You can have someone who does social drinking and drinks 2 to 3 pints and goes home on a Friday night but you might find another person who perhaps drinks 6 to 7 pints” (A)*

Having established the specialists understanding of the different drinking patterns, the following section looks at how they believed these patterns have been represented in *EastEnders*. In terms of whether *EastEnders* portrayed the concept of harmful drinking well, the specialists agreed:

*“They do depict harmful drinking...It is very clearly depicted...” (D)*

*“...people there who get drunk and get in a fight as a one off, that is definitely harmful drinking, a consequence of being intoxicated.” (A)*

Based on the textual analysis conducted, it can be argued that *EastEnders* does portray harmful drinking through different characters, young and old. While the programme does not reveal the units of alcohol consumed by characters, it uses on-screen audiences to comment on and sometimes rebuke the excessive alcohol consumption of colleagues. This is in line with how the programme transcodes alcohol messages into its own generic frameworks.

Broadly, the experts were also convinced that *EastEnders* had realistically and successfully depicted alcoholism, dependency drinking and addiction notions through the characters of Phil and Lauren:

*“I think it [EastEnders] has definitely caught the dependency drinking, certainly with Phil and Lauren. Particularly with Lauren, with hiding alcohol bottles, and daily drinking and all*

*the consequences, that's not binge drinking. It is obviously all harmful but there are classic symptoms they are trying to portray in my opinion, of dependent drinking" (A)*

Furthermore, the health experts were mainly in agreement with the portrayal of moderate or normal drinking in *EastEnders* as seen in specialist A's comments:

*"Yes, I would agree that EastEnders portrays normal drinking. A lot of people do spend a lot of their time in pubs, that's where they socialise, I guess, not only in the centre of central London where that is depicted but also in the other soaps showing village life ... Emmerdale ... the pub in a village is the hub, it is kind of where the life is, where people meet up." (A)*

In addition to excessive drinking, alcoholism and moderate drinking, the health experts argued that *EastEnders* also depicted social drinking by portraying characters going out for social drinks without getting intoxicated or engaging in anti-social behaviour, which is arguably a realistic portrayal of some sections of the British society:

*"I think all the soaps promote social drinking. Not everybody in EastEnders is getting drunk and getting out of order. There is a lot of chatting, groups of people going out and socialising and I guess a lot of British society do that" (A)*

*"Social drinking is depicted actually in EastEnders, because the pub is at the centre of life. People come to the pub for a purpose, let's meet at the pub tonight, they don't say let us go and have a pint first, they will meet at the pub and then happen to have a drink as part of the meeting. I think there is an element of social drinking depicted in EastEnders rather stereotypically but probably ten years out of date. In the community life of EastEnders, whether it is a child that has been born or somebody has died, they would go to the pub and they will celebrate with alcohol" (D)*

Specialist D's comment points to the genre's nostalgic vision of community and thus exposes the tension between realism and nostalgia, which is a common trait in most British community soap operas. While efforts are made to mirror societal transformations, consistently with the genre's realist requirements, the weight and centrality attached to the local pub as a communal meeting space testify to a nostalgic desire to maintain traditional community life.

The specialists' comments about the depictions of moderate and social drinking by the text appear to suggest that they viewed the two drinking practices as connected. The textual analysis also revealed that *EastEnders* portrays social drinking as a moderate drinking pattern which promotes a sense of community. This is evident in that all social events in the programme are accompanied by alcoholic drinks and this appears to be the norm and not exception, a view echoed by specialist D above.

Young people also used the notions of moderate and social drinking synonymously. Their assumption, which is also the text's implicit assumption, was that social drinking is moderate and equates to safe and risk-free drinking. This view has been challenged by critics who argue that the notions are different in that not all social drinking is moderate and as such it may still be unsafe despite those practising it not engaging in negative or anti-social behaviour (Dufour, 1999). Like the young people, most of the specialists argued that they were generally in agreement with how *EastEnders* draws the line between normal and problem drinking in their portrayals of the two notions of drinking, except for respondent D, who argued, as we will see, that the programme has gone for a polarised and stereotypical depiction of normal and problem drinking.

### **Views on the portrayal of alcoholism by *EastEnders* as an individual problem:**

#### **Trauma and alcoholism**

The textual analysis revealed that *EastEnders* might be portraying alcoholism as an individual problem rather than a socially created one. Specialists' views on this were two-fold. Firstly, they commented favourably on *EastEnders*'s portrayal of recovering alcoholics Phil and Lauren as both having a troubled past which was depicted as being responsible for their current drinking problems. They perceived the depictions as real and resonating with the real-life circumstances of most alcoholics whose alcohol-related problems can be traced back to trauma and other life-changing situations they have experienced, like poverty, relationship issues, domestic violence and mental health problems and for whom harmful drinking was a coping strategy or form of escapism:

*“Yes, the portrayal is very realistic...most of the people we see in this treatment centre have some level of trauma in their backgrounds, whether it is childhood trauma or relationship stuff, there is usually trauma that writes the script for that person's life... they are going to use that substance more because it kind of takes the pain away” (A)*

*“For example, somebody living in an area of poverty, there may be a break-up of family so there may be a level of trauma there with one parent not being there. There is never enough money so there is tension in the family, they struggle. They will also not function well at school so their education gets affected. So that child really has got a lot less opportunities than somebody else and my opinion is they are a sitting target to become addicted to a substance or at least even if not addicted, to use a substance much more frequently than perhaps somebody else who has got other opportunities. Because there is so much against them, that person is going to want to get away and go out on the street with other teenagers and discover alcohol as a way of escaping” (A)*

Additionally, the depictions were perceived to highlight how problem-drinking had more to do with an individual's dysfunctional life and less with the availability of alcohol in the pub:

*“It is fair to say the alcohol extremes depicted in EastEnders are attributable to the individual and people with chaotic lifestyles which have led them in that route. It is not all about excessive drinking in the pub. It is more to do with an individual who is on a pathway. I agree with that analogy” (D)*

The specialists posited, however, that, due to biological and other differences between individuals, it would be inaccurate to assume that all individuals who have experienced trauma and other difficult circumstances resorted to alcohol or ended up being dependent drinkers:

*“But again, it is not about blaming addiction on trauma because there are many people including myself that have been through traumatic situations and have not developed addiction...” (A)*

*There are a lot of people that have very traumatic events in their lives but not everybody is an alcoholic, it is complicated” (B)*

### **Alcoholism as a genetic problem**

Secondly, although this was not an aspect we identified in our textual analysis, the specialists argued that alcoholism was genetic, and as such, individuals from families with a history of alcoholism, were likely to follow the same pattern than those not pre-disposed genetically:

*“If you have it in your family you are more likely to be addicted yourself. But there are many factors, mums, dads, brothers and sisters may drink heavily and then there is one person that doesn’t. Whether that is a choice on their part or just a genetic thing and it never really happened to them, nobody really knows” (A)*

*“I would imagine that the portrayal of alcoholism as an individual problem is real! Why do some people have an alcohol problem and why do others not? My personal theory is that some people are just more prone to becoming dependent on alcohol or a drug so I think perhaps, it might well be, there is not a gene that has yet been discovered but the fact that for some people it is more of a problem than others could suggest that perhaps it is something genetic. My personal common-sense theory is that there might be some genetic cause, combined with other circumstances, like traumatic events, they are going to tip somebody into relapse...” (B)*

*“I agree with the portrayal of alcoholism as an individual problem. I think it’s good to know what the family history is like, even with mental health, alcohol and smoking. You are five times [more] likely to smoke if your parents smoked. If you grew up with it thinking it’s a habit you would think it is ok to do it, if you are surrounded by it there is an influence there and you may also do it” (C)*

The comments by specialist B where he outlines his ‘personal, common-sense theory’ are a classic example of hybridised non-expert / expert analysis of alcoholism, in that the expert appears to use a speculative and personal approach in his analysis rather than one backed by medical or professional evidence. Other specialists also applied a similar approach in their interpretations with common sense and hunch appearing to overrule professional expertise.

Common sense and hunch here are used to refer to understandings and general assumptions in everyday circulation which may or may not be objectively valid.

The perception of alcoholism as an individual problem is evident in *EastEnders*' depictions of alcoholics, in that both characters had a parent who drank heavily and their home environment was depicted as unstable, chaotic and dysfunctional. This depiction echoes views which perceive alcoholism as a condition brought about by genetic, psycho-social and environmental influences (Morse and Flavin, 1992:1).

While the experts concurred with the portrayal of alcoholism as an individual problem predominantly caused by trauma and genes, they disagreed with neo-liberal discourses and other views and representations which tend to put the full blame on the individual while ignoring the harmful potential of the substance itself and other social, political and economic structures at play. The experts argued that the global alcohol industry should demonstrate social responsibility by contributing to a fund meant to financially assist addiction treatment centres, particularly in light of funding cuts by the Government in the UK:

*“Just going back to...the producers of alcohol saying it is the responsibility of the person. I mean, that's just ridiculous because if people could take responsibility, they would. Some people lose that responsibility because of addiction. What the alcohol industries should perhaps be thinking about is, out of all the money that they make, maybe they should start contributing regularly to treatment centres because the treatment for substance misuse across the whole country has been cut as the government are having to cut all health services and this service is being cut” (A)*

Similarly, specialist B picked up on how *EastEnders* appears to be blaming the individual with the alcohol problem for turning into an alcoholic, while other characters are depicted as having the ability to manage and control their drinking and so do not end up with an addiction problem:

*“... in terms of what EastEnders is portraying, the contradiction between the pub or the fact that they are all in the pub drinking alcohol but the one that drank too much is the one that obviously has a problem. So, yes, that is very interesting. I think, looking at society and the fact that alcohol has gone relatively down in terms of pricing, it is possible to buy very cheap alcohol and it is also sold in greater volumes. EastEnders is portraying it as an individual problem and not as a problem in society really, it is interesting” (B)*

Furthermore, B noted that *EastEnders* is silent on the relatively low alcohol prices and high alcohol volumes being sold at a discount by some retailers, thereby encouraging people to drink more and yet when the individuals get an alcohol problem, it is attributed to them and

not society and other factors around alcohol regulation and pricing. The textual analysis revealed similar findings to respondent B. On the other hand, young people appeared to read the message in line with the text's preferred reading and as such tended to attribute the drinking problem to the excessive drinker who cannot control their drinking resulting in negative consequences. Unlike the experts, perhaps due to their age, limited exposure and lived experience, they were unable to unpack the deeper socio-economic and other factors at play such as alcohol pricing and advertising.

### **Realism of alcohol portrayals in *EastEnders***

Realism of alcohol storylines was the major theme that emerged from the interviews. Most respondents found the alcohol messages and storylines depicted in *EastEnders* predominantly realistic in that they resonated with what they experienced in their line of work and in their lived experiences too. The portrayals of Lauren Branning and Phil Mitchell were specifically cited as very realistic depictions of the negative impact of harmful drinking on individuals and other people in real life. The precision and accuracy of the depictions led specialist A to conclude that:

*"Whoever is consulting on the programme obviously understands it well, they know their stuff. They have obviously considered the effect on other people around them and the effect on the person" (A)*

Expert B agreed, arguing that the strength of the portrayals lies in what can be termed a direct approach to the depiction of harmful drinking through the alcohol storylines. By so doing, *EastEnders* does not convey 'mixed messages' to viewers but realistic messages which highlight the negative consequences of excessive drinking and the promotion of abstinence for those with a drinking problem:

*"...from an educational point of view, it is quite a realistic portrayal of a problem, the fact that it is ruining people's lives...it is also good in a sense that it does not give any mixed messages" (B)*

*"Also, because they are not glorifying or glamorising alcohol, which is good. They are pretty much showing it how it is. They are showing the struggles that the individuals have particularly with regard to withdrawal. The message they are getting across is complete abstinence" (B)*

Furthermore, the portrayals were seen as reflecting the normative approach health educators use in that characters portrayed as having a drinking problem are in the minority, while the majority do not appear to have drinking problems. This approach sends realistic and accurate messages to young people and other viewers by emphasising that in real life, those with a drinking problem are in the minority and that not everybody who drinks alcohol will end up

an alcoholic, and that it is possible to drink alcohol and not have a drinking problem.

Respondent B commented:

*“We use the normative approach in alcohol and drug education which is basically stating that some of the young people and adults will definitely have problems with alcohol and drugs but most young people don’t. The approach looks at statistics. The fact is that there are people who do have an alcohol problem but they are not in the majority. I suppose it’s good in the sense that they show that Phil Mitchell is not the majority but an individual and Lauren is not the majority” (B)*

Expert C echoed views expressed by the other specialists. They drew on their experience as a health campaigner but also cited the more anecdotal example of a real-life celebrity as evidence that the alcohol storylines are depicting true-to-life experiences:

*“I think the storylines in EastEnders are definitely realistic. I am sure I read somewhere that Brian Clough who used to manage Nottingham Forest, would come home and have a glass of wine, but I think one drink led to more and more drinks and then it was kind of progressive. In both of those cases [Phil and Lauren], we can see how it progresses, one drink can go on to two drinks and then so on and so forth and then it can become a problem before you know it” (C)*

While the three respondents were in agreement here about the realism of the portrayals, they appeared to focus on different aspects of the depictions, using interpretive codes informed by their profession and life experiences. This recurred throughout their interpretations showing the significant complexity involved in meaning-making processes. The health educator, B, was particularly focussed on how the portrayals resonated with their health campaigns in their line of work, while the student health campaigner, C, leaned more towards the mental health consequences of harmful drinking, which forms part of their health campaigns:

*“I already know it affects mental health so it is kind of a side effect for mental health for some people when they are struggling or having issues, that they may jump to alcohol but we know that alcohol is a depressant. At the time it might be the right thing to do but it can change moods and they become quite aggressive and probably say things they would not normally say and being a bit irrational in the way they make decisions, and also it has an effect on families very strongly as it shows in the EastEnders clips really” (C)*

Specialist A also drew on their day-to-day experience at the recovery centre and their personal experiences. While all experts picked up on the impact of alcohol misuse on families, relationships and other aspects of life, respondent A was quick to observe the violence and aggression of excessive drinkers, as this is what they encountered at work on a regular basis, which might not be the case for the other specialists. Although their focus varied, the specialists were all able to relate to an aspect of the portrayals as realistic, indicating that *EastEnders* is endeavouring to depict a rounded picture of harmful drinking. These findings further confirm the complexity of reception and meaning-making processes

and how they are indeed informed by multiple factors. The diversity of interpretations and focus mirrors the experience with young people, as discussed in chapter six.

Relapse as depicted in *EastEnders* was perceived as a common behaviour exhibited by harmful drinkers:

*“I think the portrayals are quite realistic as we see a lot of people in this service that maybe have had drink problems for years. They come into treatment and they get well and then if they don’t follow the recommendations or look after themselves... to stay sober, then relapse can occur quite frequently” (A)*

The way the characters hide alcohol from excessive drinkers and keep the homes alcohol free or refuse to fund the drinking habits of harmful drinkers echo advice given to families of affected individuals in addiction centres:

*“We also see that in the service as well, where families have tried everything they can, from hiding the booze from the person... trying to bail them out financially, which is never a good idea.... or giving them money and being manipulated by the drinker sort of saying I need money for this and that but actually the money is enabling them to carry on drinking” (A)*

While the above were perceived as realistic portrayals, they are arguably leaning more on the expert’s expectation that the programme should have a pedagogic dimension than its realism.

Similarly, young people also argued that, from the Lauren and Phil storylines, they were able to see how alcohol misuse does not only affect the individual concerned but families too.

The specialists were however able to read further messages and specific details from the text in relation to this aspect, in comparison with the young people, perhaps as a result of the differences in experiences, age and expertise. Notwithstanding this, based on the interpretations of the two groups, there is not a simple expert-non-expert divide and both groups bring composite knowledges to bear.

Losing friendships due to excessive drinking was perceived by the experts to be another realistic portrayal particularly relevant to younger audiences:

*“I think Lauren’s portrayal was realistic.... particularly all her friendships falling by the wayside and people wanting to detach. A lot of young people drink socially but when there is somebody within that social circle that has a serious problem, their friends start to notice that the need to keep on drinking is different to their behaviour and that their drinking is different from their own pattern of drinking. That was quite realistic because it was kind of saying look at this young girl’s drinking pattern, it is affecting her home life, college, friends, boyfriend and ultimately it would affect her mental health and physical health” (A)*

As discussed in detail in chapter three of this thesis, the realism of media representations is a complex concept which attracts inconsistent and ambiguous meanings (Grodal, 2002). It is commonly evaluated in terms of the relationship between the media representation and the physical and social reality that exists outside the representation. The closer and more positive the perceived relationship between the representation and the world outside the representation, the more realistic it is judged to be (Ang, 1985:36; Grodal, 2002). Ang (1985:36) calls this type of realism, where the comparison between reality inside and outside the text is vital, *empirical realism*. It can be argued that the interpretations of both groups (the experts and the students) were leaning more towards drawing on verisimilitude and empirical realism to make sense of the text. Portrayals had to be recognisable and usually something that they had experienced, seen, heard of or read about in real life for them to be taken as realistic. In addition to verisimilitude and empirical realism, the specialists were also able to identify emotional realism in the camera shots of the excessive drinker's family and linked the emotions of despair and agony with those experienced by real-life families of addicts:

*"What was quite realistic is the shots of the family, their faces, you know, when they get upset and get frustrated with the drinker because we also see that in the service as well, where families have tried everything they can..." (A)*

*"... they have shown not just the physical harm but the emotional harm" (B)*

Of significance was the realisation by the specialists that while some depictions came across as exaggerated, this was expected as the soap opera also serves an entertainment purpose:

*"I think the portrayal was realistic, maybe Lauren's behaviours in the pub were a little bit dramatic, and I get that because it is a soap opera and that's kind of what it's about" (A).*

Specialist B agreed, arguing that while there may be exaggerated acts of drunkenness in some scenes, the depictions were still realistic at a thematic and empirical level and also confirmed real-life statistics about alcohol-instigated violence, and as such, still conveyed the right message:

*"Obviously, it tries to be as dramatic as possible but then the potential hazards are realistic. I know they do it in a very dramatic way with the crane, driving and violence etc but it is all realistic. There is a statistic I read that says alcohol is linked to almost half of all violent crimes" (B)*

A similar observation was made by the young people, which underscores how soap opera audiences' familiarity with genre conventions and expectations aids their interpretations and enjoyment of the genre.

It is worth noting the similarities in interpretive codes between the specialists and the young people regarding the representation of alcohol in general and alcoholism in particular, by *EastEnders*. Both groups identified Phil and Lauren as alcoholics and both groups largely felt the depictions were recognisable, realistic and life-like, further undermining the simplistic expert-non-expert polarity.

### **Unrealistic and distorted portrayal of harmful drinking**

While three experts perceived the portrayal of harmful drinking in *EastEnders* as largely realistic, respondent D found the depictions unrealistic and distorted: *“I think it is a distorted perception of alcohol use and abuse. It is distorted so it does not portray reality”*.

*EastEnders* was thus viewed as depicting an inaccurate picture of the problem which might mislead young people:

*“What we face in educating young people is to de-myth [sic] the myths that exist. Young people, sometimes through programmes like EastEnders acquire a view about the use and abuse of alcohol and what the social norm is. And as a consequence of that distorted view use that sometimes to justify their own behaviour as in that I am just part of the gang, I am one of many like this. In some respects, EastEnders is showing extremes of alcohol abuse which are actually a very small minority. A very small minority of people will need a liver transplant. A very small minority of people will need to go to detoxification programmes. The vast majority of people can actually take care of their alcohol use through their use of willpower and education, their own means and their own social groups that help and support them to control that or in fact do not consume alcohol at all.” (D)*

It is worth noting the potential contradiction and inconsistency in the above decoding, in that, on the one hand *EastEnders* normalises ‘social’ drinking by focusing on extreme cases, on the other, the vast majority of presumably ‘social’ drinkers can take care of their alcohol use. While part of the comments by respondent D echo the normative approach employed by respondent B in their alcohol education regarding emphasising that young people who do not abuse alcohol are in the majority, the difference between the two respondents lies in how they decode these depictions in *EastEnders*. Respondent D perceived the depictions as not following the normative approach but instead as depicting extremes only, while respondent B believed that *EastEnders* is using the normative approach in portraying excessive drinkers as being in the minority and moderate drinkers as being in the majority, as seen in their comment about this earlier.

It is worth noting the similarities in approach used by the health educators as well as the differences in their decoding and interpretation of the messages which can be attributed to,

among other things, differences in the knowledge of the programme as a whole as the two respondents have similar subject knowledge.

While acknowledging the realism of most portrayals, respondent C however noted that representations of excessive drinking where the drinking is sustained and unhealthy but has not reached crisis levels were arguably absent:

*“The only concern is that both of those situations were extreme, it did not give comparatives. It would be good to see the different levels of drinking where somebody realised they might be having a drinking problem and sought help. It would have been good to see different comparatives really between the two” (C)*

He argued that by focussing on extreme drinking, *EastEnders* fails to address the more routine dangers of drink. Depicting this drinking pattern would enable audiences to see characters who are developing a drinking problem but are able to address it before it escalates. The textual analysis confirmed that the drinking pattern discussed above is not portrayed in *EastEnders*. This could be due to the tension between communicating a public health message about alcohol and the generic requirements of soap opera where the narrative demands drama, which comes from conflict, and excessive drinking which has yet to reach crisis point is unlikely to yield the required conflict or drama.

### **Stereotypical portrayals**

Further contradictions and variations in interpretations were evident in how the experts perceived the portrayal of alcoholics by *EastEnders*. While three of the specialists were in agreement with the foregrounded depiction of alcoholics by the text, respondent D was critical of the representation:

*“The stereotype that is being portrayed is that an alcoholic is a dishevelled, disorientated, out-of-control, violent, aggressive individual... in constant aggressive dialogue with those people around them and that their lives are slowly crumbling around them, as they progressively get worse in their use of alcohol” (D)*

Respondent D disagreed with what is arguably a stereotypical depiction of alcoholics by *EastEnders*, which is not characteristic of all alcoholics in society. For this expert, the social construction of stereotypes (Dyer, 1999: 247) typified in the depictions is inaccurate and rigid and might mislead viewers and young people in particular while also perpetuating a certain social norm and view, rather than challenging them.

What was particularly striking was another contradiction in interpretation among the experts, in that all the other experts found the ‘dishevelled’, disorientated’, ‘out-of-control’, ‘violent’ and ‘aggressive’ behaviour dismissed by respondent D an accurate portrayal of most alcoholics in real life and something that some of them had encountered at work. Similarly, the young people were also able to relate to the depiction.

### **Omissions in alcohol portrayals**

While most of the depictions were perceived to be realistic, the experts reported omissions in alcohol depictions that were more relevant to young people, such as portraying more specific physical health effects of alcoholism experienced by young people in real life. These include the impact of harmful drinking on the young person’s skin and looks. Currently, *EastEnders* is arguably not showing Lauren, a young recovering alcoholic’s skin deteriorating or any concerns being raised about her diminishing looks. Instead she is depicted as looking the same as before:

*“One of the things that is not always projected through the media is some of the physical symptoms that young people acquire through drinking. Women, particularly take pride in their appearance and there can be all sorts of complications health-wise through drinking. Because it is so toxic, it dries the skin out so it could get very dry and itchy. Obviously, it affects the liver ...and appetite, so people most often lose weight and they stop bathing, eating and looking after themselves basically. There [in EastEnders] is a lot of young people looking in the mirror and getting their nails done etc but with young people, most of their money goes on booze and they cannot afford to take care of themselves very well...” (A)*  
*“I think this particularly applies to young females. There are moments where a young person would wake up in bed and look down at themselves and maybe see bruises and the deterioration of their good looks” (A)*

Figure 7 (below), a screen grab of Lauren looking presentable, with her hair and nails done while in the middle of a relapse and harmful drinking crisis echoes the specialist’s view that the text’s portrayal of the physical appearance of the young alcoholic, Lauren, is contrary to what is seen in real life and in addiction centres.

**Figure 7. Lauren in the middle of a relapse but looking presentable**



While the text arguably neglects to include some of the acknowledged physical symptoms, it does use on-screen audience in the form of Lauren's sister Abby who is heard asking her why her skin had changed colour. The text also does endeavour to depict Phil Mitchell, the older alcoholic, as exhibiting some of the physical symptoms caused by harmful drinking mentioned by the addiction specialist, such as neglecting to take care of himself and refusing to eat, as seen in Figure 8, below:

**Figure 8. Phil Mitchell in the middle of an alcoholism crisis**



Unlike expert A, expert C, believed that *EastEnders* was accurately depicting the impact of harmful drinking on the individual's health and skin as seen in the deterioration of Phil's appearance and complexion caused by his alcoholism, and as such felt that although frightening, this might be a good way of raising awareness:

*"Phil's alcoholism was more advanced because his complexion was changing. When your kidneys stop being effective you get really pale and red eyes. That was quite frightening but that is a good thing. It is trying to send a message and it is a good way to use the soap opera to get the messages out there thus how serious it can get in terms of how it affects the family and you" (C)*

This is yet another instance of varied and contradictory readings of the same media text by similar audiences.

The absence of strict home boundaries for young harmful drinkers was cited as a further omission in the portrayals. While an effort is arguably made by the programme to depict Lauren's parents trying to keep a close eye on her movements in an attempt to monitor her drinking, specialist A posited that in real life, and also from the perspective of addiction treatment, more stringent measures should be put in place in the home to prevent alcohol

access by the individual. This includes, monitoring and controlling their movements and laying strict ground rules for the individual:

*“Maybe where they [EastEnders] could show more process is showing the family putting boundaries down. Lauren’s mum tried to say ‘where are you going?’ and to stay home and keep an eye on her. What we would be looking at from a treatment perspective is helping in putting firm boundaries down, like saying we do not want drink in the house, we will search your bag when you come in, no alcohol is allowed, these are the boundaries and if you break them, then you are out. It sounds harsh but if you don’t, you are just enabling that person to carry on and it will only lead to more crisis” (A)*

### **Vulnerability of young excessive drinkers**

The apparent absence of portrayals of young girls who become more vulnerable to rape or other sexual crimes due to excessive drinking was cited as yet another omission:

*“...there is that vulnerability around being sexually violated by men because they have lost control. I know in EastEnders some of the topics have been pretty hard-hitting on topics like that, so they are not frightened of raising those issues and I think raising the issue around young people getting into situations with men that they would not ordinarily get into can be a product of misuse of alcohol” (A)*

The respondent argued, however, that *EastEnders* can be credited for its boldness in addressing sensitive social issues over the years. This is in line with the British version of the genre which is predominantly socio-realistic (Ang, 1985:62). In any case, the above comments were made before *EastEnders* ran a storyline on the sexual abuse experienced by young women made vulnerable by excessive drinking. The storyline about a young woman, Ruby Allen, who was raped by two men while drunk, is currently being portrayed in the programme, with both men having been convicted of rape in a recent episode. *EastEnders* is working with Rape Crisis on this storyline about sexual consent in the context of vulnerability caused by excessive drinking (Heatworld, 2018).

In response to the question about whether there were potential omissions in the depiction of harmful drinking, respondent C reported that the programme has successfully and clearly depicted key messages about harmful drinking. This was achieved by wittingly using two of its main characters of different gender and age as alcoholics so as to appeal to different audience groups. The specialist argued that it is rare for popular characters to be given alcoholic roles and by so doing, *EastEnders* is significantly drawing the attention of audiences and conveying a message that implies that alcoholism can happen to anybody:

*“They [Phil and Lauren] were both quite aggressive and their alcoholism progressed, two similar cases but it’s good that it depicts males and females, and Lauren is a young female so*

*[a] different age category as well. I think it's very clever how they have done it. How they have chosen two key characters within the show. It is a change from the usual really" (C)*

This view was confirmed by one of the programme producers interviewed:

*"Characters such as Phil Mitchell and Lauren Branning have a long-established complex relationship with alcohol and through them, we have been able to explore issues around excessive drinking for both men and women, young and old"*

Significantly, the young people interviewed found the use of characters of different age-groups to portray alcoholism effective for them and other audience groups.

Respondent C, however added that to enhance the depictions, *EastEnders* could have considered showing Lauren's full recovery:

*"Maybe they should include scenes where Lauren is going through recovery. It would be good to see the recovery episodes and how the recovery helped and what the recovery looked like within the episodes other than just cutting it off there" (C)*

### **Scaremongering tactics**

Furthermore, respondent C argued that the programme's use of 'scaremongering' tactics may help some viewers struggling with excessive drinking to be frightened by Phil and Lauren's experiences and maybe use this as a prompt to take the next step to seek help, or those who are not yet at that stage to pro-actively avoid it:

*"Definitely using those scare tactics is good. Sometimes scare tactics work. Phil's alcoholism was serious and could have killed him... if they notice that their drinking might be becoming more, they might say I don't want to get like that, I should get support. From a health promotion point of view, sometimes that's all that people need. They would say, that's me, maybe I should contact that number provided. It gives a clear message and it maybe a nudging effect that people need" (C)*

Respondent B echoed these sentiments and added that portrayals should depict the harsh reality such as showing that alcoholism can cause severe illness and even death. He however acknowledged that, although the most realistic outcome for viewers would have been to see Phil lose his life due to his severe and long-term problem drinking, he appreciated that seeing him in intensive care waiting for a liver donation and subsequent transplant, was also effective and realistic. Here, we see the specialist calling on both expert knowledge and awareness of the genre:

*"If Phil Mitchell had been that heavy a drinker for all those years, he would probably be dead by now but they can't kill him, can they? Perhaps seeing him in hospital is a more realistic portrayal" (B)*

Further to respondent B's comments above, although soap operas rarely kill their main characters, they sometimes do: *EastEnders* has in the past killed some of its main characters such as Angie Watts (Wikipedia, 2020).

Young people interviewed indicated that they were shaken by Lauren's predicament and that her experience frightened them and caused them to look at alcohol consumption in a different light. This view confirms specialist C's assertion that using scare tactics might work for some audiences or at least raise the much-required awareness.

### **Pub setting misrepresents British society**

As highlighted earlier, most specialists were in agreement about the general realism of the portrayals. However, they raised serious concerns about the central role played by the pub in *EastEnders* in particular, and some British soap operas in general. Respondents A, B and D raised this concern before they were even asked this question, which shows the extent of their concern. Similarly, young people raised this concern before I asked them the question. The specialists' concerns were twofold. Firstly, it is arguably not an accurate representation of British society as the implication is that alcohol occupies a central part of most people's lives, which is not true of everybody in society:

*"I have mixed feelings about the portrayal of alcohol-messages because EastEnders is based around the pub mostly. I know there is the café and the car lot... but the main focus is around the Queen Vic. So, it's portraying that pub life, that is where life is, everybody goes to the pub" (A)*

*"My only concern from the health education point of view is ...with the use of the pub as the main place where people meet and that most of the action is in the pub ... we all know that there are some people who never go to the pub or some that only go occasionally. This portrayal is the one thing that is a big problem" (B)*

*"What I say to children when they are talking about EastEnders... is that there is a difference between soap opera and reality because if you believed EastEnders was reality, you would think that everybody goes to the pub every night which is not the case" (B)*

*"One concern is that the central theme of the programme is centred on the pub where the social norm is that everybody goes to the pub and the pub is a central part of their lives. Subliminally, the message is that alcohol is in everybody's lives. The concern there is that they are not challenging the social norms, in fact that is not the norm for most people" (D)*

The specialists further argued that although other communal spaces and settings were occasionally used, the pub was the main venue and setting for everything. The textual analysis discussed in chapter five confirmed that the pub might indeed be given a symbolic and narrative centrality in the fiction that it may not deserve. Studies conducted on British soap operas also concluded that the pub setting in most British soap operas accounted for the

high alcohol consumption instances in the British programmes and *EastEnders* in particular, compared to those of other countries (Furnham et al, 1997:527-528).

It is significant that, specialist A also observed that in present-day England, pubs, which were usually considered the heart of communities are being closed down, have limited opening times or are marketed primarily as places to eat:

*“A lot of people do spend a lot of their time in pubs, that’s where they socialise, I guess, not only in the centre of central London where that is depicted but also in the other soaps showing village life ... Emmerdale ... the pub in a village is the hub, it is kind of where the life is, where people meet up. It is a very common kind of pastime for a village life and a lot of the pubs nowadays are either closed or have limited opening times” (A)*

Based on the textual analysis conducted, *EastEnders* has not yet included this depiction in their storylines but still foregrounds the local pub as the centre of life in the community.

Interestingly, the comment below about the centrality of the pub, which was also made by respondent A, appears to contradict the above comment they made while commenting on a different aspect of the pub;

*“To be fair, probably, some people’s lives are probably based around the pub but if I look at my own friends, family or circle of people, they are not always in the pub. I am not saying they are not drinkers ...but I have always been concerned that all the soap operas are based around the pub and I don’t think that is a very good message because it is not a reflection of society really. It is for some and not for all” (A)*

Morgan and Krueger (1998:34-35) argue that examining consistency of participants’ comments, that is, changes of views, opinions and positions by participants, and seeking an explanation for it, is important in data analysis. The contradiction and change of position explained above could be attributed to the differences in the contexts of the responses. Furthermore, this scenario points to the complications of data collection processes in social research, where participants’ responses can sometimes be contradictory or inconsistent for various reasons.

Likewise, young people raised similar concerns surrounding the centrality of the pub.

Although the decoding of this portrayal by both groups was quite complex, young people demonstrated a deeper knowledge of the generic factors in their interpretation than the specialists, in that they were aware that characters met in the pub to catch up and advance the plot, in line with the genre expectation (Allen, 1995:20). It can however be argued that other communal spaces could also be used for the same purpose but the pub has been deliberately given the prominence which raises concerns about the potential contradiction between the

genre's needs and the harmful drinking message that the programme is trying to foreground.

Specialist B supports this assertion:

*“The only mixed message EastEnders gives is that everybody goes to the pub, I can understand from the producers’ point of view... obviously pubs are a social space where people meet. They are not just about alcohol... but, I suppose if they need somewhere, they have the market, the café and the restaurant and people’s houses. They need more scenes elsewhere because life does not revolve around the pub” (B)*

There was also a potential contradiction noted between the harmful drinking recovery messages which *EastEnders* is trying to foreground and the actual representations in the soap opera. This is in relation to the depictions of recovering alcoholics Phil and Lauren in the pub surrounded by alcohol and yet having an orange juice or water while everybody else is having alcoholic drinks. The concerns are that in real life and also in alcohol recovery centres, recovering alcoholics are discouraged from going to pubs as this could lead to a relapse. Furthermore, portraying recovering alcoholics having water and orange juice is arguably a mockery of the recovery process and makes recovery “look miserable”. To enhance accuracy and avoid misleading portrayals, depictions should be modelled around real-life situations:

*“I think it’s a bit double-standards [sic] really, because in reality, people coming here for treatment for alcoholism, we would never ever suggest that they still carry on going to the pub. So, in a way it does not sit that comfortably with me as an alcohol practitioner. I get that EastEnders is about East End life and maybe a lot of it does revolve around the pub but I think you have got to decide what message you are going to try and depict... If you are a non-drinker, you do not normally want to be around people who drink a lot so I think that might need some looking at in a way” (A)*

While experts A, B and D were concerned about the centrality of the pub in *EastEnders*, specialist C had no concerns about this portrayal and instead believed it was an accurate reflection of British society, where pubs occupy a central space in most communities and should not be viewed as mere alcohol sources, but social spaces:

*“Yes, it comes across negative [sic]. However, pubs are a great social space and not just where people go and get drunk and become alcoholics. The Queen Vic is a key space and I can see why they have used that. I think it’s not just the pub setting where people drink, people also drink quietly at home too” (C)*

Like Specialist C, some young people also argued that *EastEnders* is endeavouring to show that public drinking places are not the only places where alcoholism can develop but solitary drinking at home was also equally risky for people with a drink problem.

## Pre-loading

The experts further reported that by portraying the pub as the central drinking place, *EastEnders* overlooked depicting current drinking trends and patterns for young people such as pre-loading, which may be contributing to harmful drinking. While young people may have been previously associated with pub drinking, recent trends indicate that this practice is no longer common as they are now engaging in pre-loading (Barton and Husk, 2014:1). This involves buying large quantities of cheap alcohol elsewhere and consuming it in other premises, such as homes or university students' accommodation before going out:

*“People going into the pub is not actually where our problems are. Our alcohol problems are actually in the home and in non-home environments. Young people are not even buying alcohol when they go out clubbing and dancing it is too expensive, so the consumption is prior to socialising, often in isolated groups... university is a catalyst for alcohol consumption and alcohol abuse. That is not portrayed in EastEnders” (D)*

*“People feel that it's pubs where people go in particular to drink. Of course, students go out to different places to drink but there is also an issue of drinking before they go out” (C)*

These comments highlight a possible challenge and limit faced by the soap opera genre in its endeavour to represent life accurately, while also maintaining genre conventions. This is in relation to the central part played by nostalgia in the soap opera genre (Jordan in Dyer, 1981:35), which tends to promote the traditional organic community where the pub is the backbone of the community and a central meeting point for everybody in the soap opera. Although this may now have changed due to the re-engineering of the urban environment in the UK in recent years, which has seen people moving away from the local communities to other social drinking places and in the case of young people, drinking from home as opposed to the pub, soap operas in general and *EastEnders* in particular, are still reflecting the past and as such run the risk of misrepresenting contemporary society.

Mixed views regarding the place of the pub in British society are also reflected in the wider society in general as evidenced by a recent media campaign initiated by Britain's Beer Alliance in July 2018, entitled 'Long Live the Local' (Britain's Beer Alliance, 2019), a campaign against a proposed increase in beer duty. The campaign argues that the pub is an important British institution and the 'spine' of England and therefore should be protected. Among the reasons cited against the increase in duty is the fear that with the rise in alcohol tax, more pubs will close when already three pubs are arguably closing daily in the country thus leading to the loss of 'the heart of the community' and 'springboard of culture' represented by the local pubs (Britain's Beer Alliance, 2019). These sentiments echo

Specialist C's views and those of some young people. While the other specialists acknowledged that the pub may be a key social space for some members of British society, what was deemed inaccurate was the central role given to it in comparison with other social and public spaces.

While the British Beer Alliance campaign glorified the pub as part of our national culture, on the other hand, the pub and the frequent alcohol imagery associated with it in some British soap operas, namely *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*, have been recently criticised as encouraging young viewers to take up drinking (UKCTAS, 2018), as discussed in chapter three.

What is particularly significant is that the UKCTAS report used the screen grab (figure 9) from *EastEnders*, showing some of the *EastEnders* characters drinking excessively in the local night club. This imagery echoes concerns discussed earlier.

**Figure 9. *EastEnders* characters drinking alcohol shots in the local night club**



### **Specialists' views on the accessibility of alcohol help for young people**

Mixed views were presented by specialists when asked whether young people knew where to access alcohol-related help and information or not. Some thought young people might know as alcohol information was strategically distributed to places where it was likely to be accessed such as universities, libraries, GP practices and night clubs. Schools were however still viewed as better positioned to communicate this information to school-going young people as this was the most efficient way of getting it across to a wider group:

*"As a service we try to get our information out to GP Practices, libraries and universities. We have a team that goes out into night clubs and we give harm minimisation advice for drug and alcohol. I guess if you try to think about young teenagers, I don't know whether they would know where to go. There is a service in Nottingham for teenagers where they can go and get help with... substance misuse guidelines but if you didn't know about that service then you won't know where to go, so schools are in a good position really" (A)*

Furthermore, the specialists argued that most young people would also use their smart phones to search for the information online through 'google' should they require it:

*"I guess most kids have phones and they would probably Google it" (A)*  
*"Probably yes, they know where to access the alcohol information because of the internet. There is the 'Talk to Frank' website, Drinkaware.... They are probably not publicised like they used to be, because there is less drug and alcohol education in schools now than before" (B)*

Expert C differed arguing that most young people had insufficient knowledge about where to access alcohol-related information and help, hence the need for health awareness campaigns to focus on this:

*"I don't think young people know where to access alcohol-related information and that is the thing we need to do, to put out constant messages really." (C)*  
*"I think it could be better. With students, we always give them the health sheet guide with contacts and health information and alcohol is also dropped in there, it's having that constant message, issuing out leaflets, using campaigns and all that educational stuff so they know where to go. Some of the staff is on websites and is updated all the time and then using your key times of the year like Alcohol awareness week and things like that" (C)*

Similarly, respondent D postulated that evidence from their alcohol interventions revealed that most young people did not know where to access crucial alcohol-related information, and this was attributed to government funding cuts, which have seen a reduction in health intervention programmes and alcohol resources for young people:

*"Do they know where to go? No, they don't, in fact, some of the websites and resources that were out there have actually gone because of the funding cuts. Google search at the end of the day will deliver most things. If you ask the question in Google search, 90% of the time you will get an answer but to do that you have got to be inquisitive and I am not so sure that the majority of young people are clamouring to find that out" (D)*

*“But there still has to be a reliable accurate source, for example, you can get a Wikipedia page that tells you black is white” (D)*

While acknowledging a view raised by other specialists about searching for the information online, specialist D argued that this was not the best way as most young people would not know which websites to visit and what information to look up and may end up on unofficial websites which may contain unreliable, unverified and misleading information. Furthermore, only a few keen young people would arguably take time to search for alcohol-related information online. It is worth noting though that findings by this study revealed that most young people actively watch *EastEnders* while also simultaneously using portable multi-media devices or second screens to look up programme related information that is of interest to them, some of which included alcohol-related information.

Focus group findings exposed disparities in alcohol knowledge between participants attending schools and those attending colleges. The former had less alcohol knowledge and did not know where to access alcohol help information while the latter possessed significant alcohol knowledge and knew where to access further information. Interestingly, as predicted by the experts above, young people suggested ‘Googling’ the alcohol-related information should they require it.

### **Helpline numbers**

The experts commended *EastEnders* for providing a helpline number for viewers to call for alcohol-related help. They were however curious to know if the strategy worked and if viewers called the numbers:

*"The fact that they [EastEnders] publicise those numbers, or signpost them, that is another good thing" (B)*

*"It would be really good to see how many people reacted to it [the alcohol storylines] and called those hotline numbers" (C)*

I confirmed that an investigation was made with the relevant organisations which receive the calls from viewers, and that findings revealed that significant call volumes were consistently received from callers affected by the storylines, seeking alcohol advice for themselves or their loved ones. Please see chapter five for a detailed discussion of this. Most young people also acknowledged seeing the helpline numbers and thought it was a good idea, as it made it easier for themselves and other viewers to know where to go, should the need arise.

While it is generally acknowledged in the audience studies field that it is not possible to accurately measure or quantify the direct effects of media products on audiences due to the complexity of the reception process (Barker and Petley, 2002; Rowland, 1983), it can be argued that, by providing the helpline numbers, which evidence shows are being used by audiences, the programme is subtly highlighting a possible connection between the health messages being depicted and their reception by the audience.

### **Alcohol intervention strategies and young people**

Experts reported that alcohol intervention strategies are crucial in raising alcohol awareness in young people, which explains their inclusion in the National Curriculum. However, expert B believed such strategies were more effective if delivered to young people from an early age as opposed to the teenage stage where most of them would have already made up their views on most things:

*“...they are part of the National Curriculum. We go in at an early age because if you go to teenagers, sometimes they would have already made up their minds” (B)*

*“I think they are really good in terms of education and increasing people’s knowledge on key health things, it’s good to get those educational messages out in terms of units and the negative effects of alcohol and what to look out for” (C)*

### **Engaging, interactive and innovative intervention strategies**

The experts reported that alcohol education was seen as challenging because alcohol, unlike drugs, is a legal substance which is generally acceptable in society and as such its harm is usually underestimated in comparison with drugs which are less likely to be perceived in the same way. As such it is arguably vital to come up with effective awareness strategies which are taken seriously by young people:

*“Alcohol is legal, acceptable and encouraged, weddings, funerals, parties it’s just out there all the time. When you walk into a supermarket, the first thing you see is beer that’s on offer. So, it is socially acceptable and its consequences are vastly under estimated. Even with the general public, they are more concerned and more vocal about drug use and how terrible it is, but if you then start talking about the dangers of alcohol and what the recommended units are, they [young people] kind of switch off because it is legal” (A)*

*“Alcohol education is quite complicated because obviously people can drink safely so it is more complicated than other drugs where there is no safe way of taking drugs and it is a legal drug. It can be sold and it is socially acceptable” (B)*

*“There is a statement that says the dangerous thing about alcohol is that people do not think it is dangerous. You cannot go into a shop without seeing alcohol whereas cigarettes are concealed behind the counter in shops” (B)*

In light of the challenges faced in alcohol interventions, the experts advocated strategies that are tailored to young people as a specific age-group and not generic messages, because what

might work for other age-groups, might not work for them. As such, engaging, interactive and innovative alcohol intervention strategies, were key for this age-group. Strategies involving social media, popular television, role plays, videos and creative school-based interventions among others, were recommended:

*“We actually do that [alcohol intervention] as a service. We go into schools and we do workshops on drug and alcohol consumption and the negatives associated with them. We take beer goggles which is a set of goggles they can wear. It makes them all laugh. So, you do need to have a certain kind of approach to younger people especially school-age people. You’ve got to give them something to interest them. So, things like EastEnders and using social media and that kind of thing to get them engaged definitely needs to happen and when you have got them engaged it’s about dropping that really important information to them”* (A)

*“We do it [alcohol intervention] as part of a broader health agenda and we do it in an interactive way and we have our own environment such as mobile classrooms. The evaluations from children show that 90% of the children enjoy the experience because we make it interactive. We use life-size body models, videos, role play, so we make it fun”* (B)

*“If it’s young people and you are using an intervention, it would probably be different from somebody who is a little bit older. It needs to be pitched at the right level. It is very important to do what works. We use the little sausage dog, then we use leaflets for alcohol.... We do it subtly by not challenging their drinking but encouraging safe drinking, rather than right in their face saying ‘do not drink at all,’ you will not achieve anything”* (C)

Lectures or strategies that are too knowledge-based are considered less effective for young people:

*“If you make it too knowledge based, that’s not good. It should be knowledge, skills and attitudes. We focus on assertiveness skills because research shows that people are not forced into using drugs, it is usually with friends so we do a lot around having your opinions and making up your own mind and seeing yourself as equal to other people and if you do not want to do something, you do not have to do it”* (B)

Most young people echoed these sentiments about the ineffectiveness of knowledge-based alcohol-interventions and were also able to decode warning messages from *EastEnders* about the dangers of peer pressure. Of all the participants, only some boys preferred conventional alcohol lectures over entertainment-education.

### **Alcohol intervention strategies and funding cuts**

While evidence from national statistics, previous and current research findings all point towards the need to address harmful drinking, particularly among young people, alcohol and drug intervention programmes in schools have ironically been reduced due to austerity measures by the government (The Health Foundation, 2018). Health experts interviewed reported this concern which they argued has resulted in inadequate alcohol education for most young people or compromised the quality of such education being delivered in schools

by teachers, most of whom arguably merely use free resources provided by charitable organisations, as schools can no longer afford to bring in trained professionals to deliver the programmes. The free resources are arguably not delivered professionally or consistently, which raises concerns:

*“...we receive no funding and obviously schools have to pay for us, we are now doing much less. In the last ten years, the number of schools reached has dramatically fallen in Nottinghamshire so they are getting less alcohol and drug education from external providers than they were 10 years ago. It is due to financial constraints; we are in austerity” (B)*  
*“I do not think there is quality alcohol education material put together that is consistently delivered to young people. Schools will take free resources available and do a lesson or two... but unless it forms part of the longer-term process the teacher is leading in the classroom, it will not be very effective. Charitable organisations may produce a programme and then stick it on the website. Our experience is that teachers are quite lazy unfortunately, they will take that resource from the website, not probably understand the full subject matter and deliver it in their own way. That doesn't produce an appropriate standard of education for young people. Every child should get a quality programme but not every child is getting one, we should be more careful about what we are teaching young people” (D)*

Moreover, most schools have arguably become more focussed on other goals and performance targets which have consequently side-lined the alcohol education agenda. Further compounding the situation is the difficulty faced in accessing young people at secondary schools due to tight timetables in comparison with primary schools:

*“Schools have so many other targets and so I don't think it [alcohol education] is a particular issue with a lot of schools. There is a huge focus on results” (B)*  
*“We find it difficult to get into secondary schools because their time tables are tighter than primary schools” (B)*  
*“We have effectively been pushed out of secondary schools. We occasionally still sell programmes to secondary schools and train the teacher on how to deliver it but secondary schools, for all the reasons you have been told, are just not interested in pursuing it. Head teachers... what they are after is good quality attainment levels. If they provide an appropriate environment in which young people who are facing, 68% drug and alcohol issues at home are supported, that child will get better outcomes” (D)*

These comments explain why most young people interviewed could not recall having alcohol intervention lessons at their schools with the exception of one participant who vaguely remembered a school-based programme on alcohol awareness delivered at his primary school years ago by an organisation called D.A.R.E (Drug Abuse Resistance Education). The reduction of such crucial programmes in schools makes intervention strategies, such as the use of popular television to deliver health communication messages, all the more important for young people.

## **Alcohol education and popular television**

In light of the challenges of alcohol education discussed above, popular television is viewed as one of most effective strategies for reaching out to young people as it uses different genres. Soap operas for instance are popular with most audience groups and can also encourage conversations and discussions about sensitive topics in families thereby bringing them to light:

*“Popular television is a useful educational tool. What we say to parents is, using soap operas and storylines is a good springboard for discussing. Hopefully parents when watching EastEnders with their children could discuss and say for instance, what do you think of Phil Mitchell, is it all his fault and how has he got to this? It raises awareness which can then be used by other health educators like myself as a springboard to increase knowledge” (B)*

*“I think popular television is a useful education tool. It absolutely is. All those elements young people engage with help to build an appropriate balance in a child’s life at that period when they are vulnerable to risky behaviours, those influences can produce positive impacts, whether it be an app, a game or lesson. They do need to have some experience that is well-informed, well- constructed, well delivered and appropriate for their age” (D)*

*“Yes, soap operas can be a good educational tool in a balanced way, balanced as in the message is appropriately delivered” (D)*

Other television genres like talk shows and celebrity interviews on sensitive topics like alcohol could also appeal to other people and thus raise awareness:

*“Popular television is a potentially useful educational tool. With mass media, you hit it at every angle. Say somebody does not watch EastEnders, then drop in something else really. Chats with celebrities about their experiences are useful. It would be good to have some celebrity to talk about their alcoholism. X Factor sometimes they have some key messages out there where people have recovered from things like that” (C)*

Furthermore, young people are arguably more inclined to receive harmful drinking messages positively from the media as opposed to other delivery vehicles, which could be viewed as top-down or patronising and as such, resisted:

*“Yes, popular television shows are a good opportunity to relay messages to young people and are more likely to absorb information from the media rather than authority” (A)*

Young people interviewed echoed these sentiments arguing that alcohol intervention strategies that incorporated the media were more appealing to them than formal lectures which they viewed as being top-down and patronising. Like the experts, most young people confirmed the effectiveness of the soap opera genre in stirring debate between them and their parents during the viewing of *EastEnders*.

While popular television in general and soap opera in particular were viewed as useful educational tools by the experts, others added that the strategy is more effective as part of a wider strategy:

*“I think as part of a wider strategy, definitely, popular television is a useful educational tool” (B)*

Furthermore, accuracy of messages depicted by the television programmes should be checked to avoid communicating misleading information to audiences:

*“Provided people doing the storylines do their research so they are not misreporting or misinterpreting. As long as it remains factual and responsible and not just based on one person’s perspective” (B)*

*“I think that [education] is part and parcel of TV’s role because it is a very intrusive, learning tool. I think there is a degree of trust in the programme providers providing a balanced approach to the social issues. I think that would be a strong message from us to those people who are trusted to put images directly into our homes and into the minds of young people” (D)*

Evidence from alcohol intervention lessons held by expert B indicates that soap operas in general and *EastEnders* in particular are used by some young people as points of reference for harmful drinking discussions hence why it is crucial that the information depicted is accurate:

*“I have heard occasionally, somebody will say, ‘oh! Like Phil Mitchell’, I have heard that, they do view and pick up storylines in the media, definitely” (B)*

To ensure that the alcohol intervention strategies were working, the experts postulated that it is crucial to constantly evaluate them:

*“It’s quite good to monitor and evaluate them to see if they are working and making enough impact. If it works then keep doing it. As you said about people calling the hotline after the Phil and Lauren storylines, it proves that the soap opera and helpline number work” (C)*

Although the experts reported that like most strategies, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of alcohol interventions, the expectation was that, through the different strategies employed, key messages will remain in the young people’s minds and help them make wise and informed decisions regarding their drinking:

*“It’s always difficult to know whether something has worked or not because you can give a lecture but how does that person know whether it had the desired effect or whether it is going to influence somebody to change their life. And the same if you go into schools and get them involved physically in something that makes them laugh then it will impact on their memory so they will remember it and it maybe later in life that they feel the impact of that. So, it is hard to quantify” (A)*

## **Overall views on how alcohol messages might be decoded by young people**

Apart from the concerns surrounding the centrality of the pub, the experts reported that most portrayals of harmful drinking, particularly Lauren's struggles with alcohol could potentially be received positively by young people. This was because they resonated with real life experiences and could be viewed as a true reflection of a cross section of young people in society:

*"The message to young people is a good message around how Lauren has become ... because it is showing how easily it can happen. You can still have issues that you need to deal with and crises and problems but it doesn't mean to say everybody turns into an alcoholic. She has had her own problems no doubt but I suppose it gives you a snapshot into a group of young people and any one of them could end up being addicted to alcohol" (A)*

The expert noted further that if taken in isolation, Lauren's harmful drinking storyline could potentially mislead some young viewers into thinking that excessive drinking is the solution to life's problems. However, *EastEnders* was applauded for depicting a balanced portrayal through following up the harmful drinking representations with harsh consequences, as a warning to viewers:

*"The way Lauren's character is depicted as out of control, I think other girls or boys may identify with how she is feeling and see it as a solution so it could impact in a negative way but I think whoever writes the stuff would be aware of that then they would follow that up with the negative consequences. I think people would identify with being upset, boyfriend trouble and taking the top out of a bottle and glugging it down...but it is important that it is followed up like it is with how devastating that can be afterwards. It might look appealing or look like that is the right thing to do but actually it has such negative consequences and it is not worth it" (A)*

Interestingly, some young people felt that some depictions portrayed alcohol as a 'go to' for people with problems. However, other participants were able to link the depictions with related consequences and as such concluded that the portrayals were not misleading but fair and balanced. The variation in interpretations among young people confirms expert D's view about how he thought the messages would be received by young people. He postulated that the reception might vary for various reasons, resulting in some interpreting them positively and others negatively, although the majority are expected to interpret them as expected by the programme producers:

*"There is a majority of young people who are rational thinking, even though sometimes emotionally driven, that can work through these issues and can come to an appropriate conclusion. There is a small minority that is susceptible to this type of messaging. So, I think the vast majority if given a well-balanced programme and information are able to work it out themselves" (D)*

## Conclusion

Findings revealed that the experts predominantly found alcohol-related portrayals in *EastEnders* realistic and reflective of real-life experiences. Unlike the young people whose evaluation of realism leaned more towards empirical realism, the specialists' evaluation comprised both empirical and emotional realism. The depictions of harmful, moderate, social drinking and alcoholism were commended as predominantly accurate and so was the way the programme drew the line between normal and problem drinking. The experts therefore believed young people would potentially receive the messages as intended by the text, more so because, in storylines where messages could potentially be misconstrued and misinterpreted as encouraging young people to resort to harmful drinking to resolve life challenges, *EastEnders* followed this up with consequences as a deterrent. One specialist viewed some representations as sometimes biased, unrealistic, dated and stereotypical. Furthermore, some potential omissions in the representation of harmful drinking were noted with concerns that this created a gap in the depictions of a progressive problem like alcoholism.

The central role occupied by the pub in *EastEnders* was predominantly perceived as a potential hindrance to the harmful drinking messages the programme is foregrounding and a misrepresentation of some sectors of British society. One respondent however found the representation accurate, which is reflective of the complications of the reception of media messages and the different interpretations possible, even from audiences with potentially similar professional interpretive codes. Additionally, the discrepancies noted in the experts' interpretations could be attributed to differences in expertise, focus and approach to service delivery, programme knowledge and lived experiences. Notwithstanding the disparities, there was more common ground than differences.

In terms of interpretive codes, many similarities were noted between the experts' and young people's interpretations, particularly regarding realism of portrayals, the use of the pub and consequences of harmful drinking. Although some differences in the reading of some of the messages were also observed, there was no straightforward young people-expert polarity found as both groups demonstrated complexity in their decoding of the text and both drew on a range of interpretive codes, although both privileged their lived experiences and common sense.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

This thesis has looked at various factors informing the reception and interpretation of health communication in the form of alcohol-related messages portrayed in *EastEnders* by young people. Chapter one set the study context by highlighting the patterns of alcohol consumption amongst young people in England, as well as cultures of youthful drinking and the negative impact of these on different sectors of society such as health, economic, social and education sectors. The chapter also discussed various intervention strategies employed by different sectors to address the problem of harmful drinking among young people, with media engagement being one of the strategies, through their entertaining, educational and informative programmes. Chapter two critically discussed the reception and second screen theories employed by the study, to conceptualise how young people are receiving and interpreting alcohol messages depicted in *EastEnders* in the context of a modern television viewing environment characterised by multiple screen usage. In chapter three, different studies carried out to-date on the reception of soap opera by media audiences were reviewed, revealing the gaps which this study is filling, its main contribution in this area being that it is the first qualitative study to investigate the reception of a specific soap opera message by young people in a multi-media reception context.

Chapter four outlined the benefits of the qualitative methodology and methods employed to obtain views and perceptions of the participants about their reception and interpretation of alcohol messages in *EastEnders*. The methods used are long semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews, due to their ability to elicit rich data able to answer the research questions in nuanced ways. The individual interviews allow for an understanding of how health professionals perceive the pedagogical value of *EastEnders* while the focus groups provide for an opportunity to explore the dynamics at play in the construction of shared meanings. The chapter also highlighted some of the challenges encountered during fieldwork and how the chosen methods yielded the desired results overall. In chapter five, I presented a detailed textual analysis which unpacks the discourses of the text by looking at messages foregrounded and prioritised by it, which could have implications for reception by the young people. In chapters six and seven I presented and discussed the research findings and also analysed the data through thematic analysis encapsulated in the Framework analysis

approach. As a requirement of reception analysis, textual discourses obtained through textual analysis were at this stage compared with those of the audiences obtained through fieldwork.

In this chapter, I present the main study conclusions drawn from the thesis journey summarised above, with particular focus on the implications of the findings in three key areas; the reception of media messages in general, reception of the soap opera genre and reception of health communication messages. The discussion will also address how the research findings provide answers to the research questions restated below:

- How do young people from diverse social, cultural, religious, racial, gender and other backgrounds, interpret and negotiate alcohol messages in *EastEnders*?
- How do the alcohol representations compare with their lived experiences and their own alcohol practices, and are the messages incorporated into their everyday lives?
- How do young people perceive or view the use of the soap opera genre to convey alcohol-related messages?
- What role do second screens (smart phones, tablets and laptops) play in the young people's viewing and interpretation of alcohol-related messages portrayed in *EastEnders*?
- How do alcohol professionals evaluate the pedagogic value of *EastEnders* and what knowledge do they use to arrive at their views?

The chapter will conclude by highlighting the study's contribution to knowledge and also state recommendations for further studies.

It is worth mentioning at the outset that I did not start the research project with a hypothesis to prove or disprove but with research questions detailed above, to guide the field work. I have therefore allowed the empirical data to direct and guide me in my analysis and as such, I have presented the findings of the investigation as they are and also used them to advance the reception analysis, second screen and soap opera theories in explaining how young people construct and develop meaning, in line with the constructivist approach (Creswell, 2013:8).

### **Family viewing is not dead**

The goal of this study was to explore how British teenagers receive and interpret alcohol messages portrayed in *EastEnders*. The study has addressed this by investigating both the physical television viewing environment and the meaning-making processes involved in decoding the alcohol messages as both aspects inform the reception process. As discussed in

chapter two, current debates surrounding the reception of media messages suggest that the emergence and proliferation of modern multi-media technology and portable devices, commonly known as second screens, has impacted on the traditional living room family viewing environment and the reception and interpretation of media messages thereof, particularly by young people who are arguably technologically savvy (Blake, 2016:51). This is perceived to have fragmented television audiences and created isolated or lone viewers, as viewers, particularly young people are now using portable devices to view television programmes in locations other than the traditional living room thereby eliminating family interaction. Other views further argue that the living room television audience is not only fragmented but does not exist anymore due to this.

While the above concerns about contemporary television viewing practices of young people may be true for certain television forms, this study's findings revealed that for the soap opera form, and this age-group, family viewing is still central and key. It can thus be argued that traditional living room television viewing practices still exist and as such, the living room television audience is arguably alive. In light of this, the study suggests that family viewing can thus be seen as an interlinked group of practices rather than a single practice. Young people are still watching television in general and *EastEnders* in particular with their families in the family living room and on the living room television screen and are also having significant discussions during viewing too. Exceptions to this practice were when they missed the programme or were on the go or when family members did not watch the programme. On these occasions, young people used their second screens, particularly smart phones to watch *EastEnders* in their bedrooms. My findings showed that second screens were used to watch the programme for convenience and privacy purposes. However, the family viewing tradition still took centre stage but with a range of other complementary and associated viewing practices. It has also become more empowered, enhanced and complicated than before.

Family viewing dynamics also played a significant role in the young people's viewing and interpretation of alcohol messages. This was however more evident in the girls only group possibly due to focus group dynamics. Most girls revealed that their parents (particularly mothers) used alcohol storylines involving young people as an opportunity to give them moral lectures on the consequences of alcohol misuse, an experience not discussed by the male participants, thus highlighting the consequence of traditionally gendered parenting practices as well as the gendered relationship to alcohol in some societies and cultures. This also ties in with one of the goals of the soap opera genre in general (Katzman,1972:212) and

the aims of *EastEnders* in particular, as confirmed by one of its producers in an interview, which is, to trigger debate among viewers around topical issues of the day or issues that are affecting a particular social group. Furthermore, this finding also echoes Tania Modleski's (1984) analysis of soap opera in which she argues that soaps provide both a matriarchal fictional space, and a matriarchal spectating position which is contrary to traditional male-oriented films and novels whose address was perceived to be directed at a male spectator and reader. Buckingham's (1987:163) study also revealed that most young people believed that *EastEnders* provided a rare opportunity for them to discuss sensitive social issues with their parents which they would not ordinarily discuss.

### **Second screen usage during television viewing enhances viewing experience**

The other concern raised by second screen theory is that the use of multiple screens during television viewing caused the viewer to miss out on important programme information conveyed via the main television screen, while looking at the second screen or engaging in what has been termed the "look up and down exercise" (Blake, 2016:3), mainly associated with young viewers. Furthermore, the practice is also argued to promote lone viewing. Findings revealed that many young people used second screens to a significant extent, particularly smart phones, simultaneously, while also watching *EastEnders*. Contrary to the above views, however, the practice was found to enhance their viewing experience and enjoyment in different ways. Firstly, as a platform to discuss the programme live with friends. To this end, second screens were used to chat to friends on social media (Snapchat, iMessage and WhatsApp) or text messaging and even calling to discuss the programme. This practice enhanced their viewing experience by connecting them with other fans of the programme, thereby enabling a real-time discussion of their favourite programme. This echoes findings by Madill and Goldmeier's (2003:485) *EastEnders*' study which cited the pleasure of talking about the programme with other viewers as paramount. Unlike viewers in previous studies who used Twitter and live online platforms to discuss television programmes in general (Deller, 2011:222), and *EastEnders* in particular (Madill and Goldmeier, 2003:485), young people in this study restricted their *EastEnders* chats and discussions to just their friends on snap chat, text messaging, mobile phone call and WhatsApp. This is contrary to arguments that cite lone viewing as a consequence of second screen usage during television viewing (Katz and Scannell, 2009; Murray, 2012). Secondly, the portable devices were also used as tools to access and verify programme-related information live online and

thus improve their knowledge and understanding of programme content, a view echoed in previous studies on second screen usage (Blake, 2016:106).

### **The soap opera genre complements second screen usage**

While it may be true for some genres that using second screens concurrently with television viewing is distracting, this study's findings revealed that this was not the case with soap opera, at least for this audience group. Young people argued that they did not lose concentration due to multiple screen usage because the slow pace of soap enables them to multi-task and still catch up should they miss out on key information while using second screens. D'heer and Courtois' (2016:9) participants also cited soap opera as one of the genres that allowed for second screen usage as it did not require serious concentration like other genres. Wilson (2016:175) supports this assertion by positing that genre plays a more significant role in second screen usage than age or gender. These findings echo the view that, throughout its history, soap opera has allowed distracted modes of engagement, often because women were multi-tasking. The genre, as scholars have noted, is also quite oral-centric which allows a more distracted engagement (Katzman,1972:212). Worth noting, however, is a body of research within the field of psychology, that suggests that multi-tasking is a myth and an impossible task (Adler and Benbunan, 2012:1). Arguably, each time we shift our focus we switch on and off and information is lost with respect to the different things that we are seeking to multi-task.

### **Young people are critical interpreters of health messages and not vulnerable victims**

Common views triggered by moral panics (Goode, 2017:1) and expressed in early media theories such as the media effects tradition (Silverstone, 1990:177; Moores, 1993:5) and literature on young people in general (Martinic and Measham, 2008; Roberts, 2004) suggest that young people are vulnerable and incapable of making informed decisions about certain social behaviours, such as their drinking practices or engaging in critical media reception and meaning making processes. Empirical findings from this study revealed that this assumption is simplistic. Findings also highlighted the difference between the real young people interviewed and those implied in other public discourses. Study results revealed that young people are very active recipients of television messages, a view also confirmed by Buckingham (1987:200-201). As such, they are able to critically evaluate alcohol depictions by drawing on their lived experiences and religious, cultural and other interpretive competences, to decide whether to accept, negotiate or reject them. Furthermore, participants

were able to analyse and critique harmful drinking practices portrayed in *EastEnders* and to commend depictions that they believed demonstrated responsible and sensible drinking. Consequences of excessive drinking on both the individual and those around them were easily picked up by all young people, demonstrating their ability to make sensible judgement on alcohol use. Moreover, most participants were able to draw useful lessons from the depictions, which they would arguably use in their everyday lives, to make informed decisions about their current and future alcohol intake.

The study noted that the concepts of sensible, moderate and excessive drinking are problematic due to their fluidity and subjectivity, as discussed in chapter five. While the Chief Medical Officer's weekly guidelines appeared to be a common benchmark to assess different drinking patterns, there is no universally acceptable understanding of the concepts due to a lack of scientific evidence to substantiate discourses around these drinking patterns (Yeomans, 2013:58), resulting in multiple subjective definitions and understandings. The lack of definitive understandings of the concepts can be linked to the approach employed by public health and safety communication to simplify public health messages and avoid "asserting certainty" (Guttman and Salmon, 2004:541). Chapter one provides further details on the public health communication strategy.

While most alcohol depictions were decoded by young people in line with the discourses prioritised and foregrounded by the text, portrayals of young people that were viewed as inaccurate, biased and unrealistic were challenged. Examples included the depiction of young people's parties as being always alcohol-fuelled, chaotic and dysfunctional. These were dismissed as exaggerated and a misrepresentation of reality, as not all teenage parties were like that. This further demonstrates the critical capabilities of young people, contrary to assertions by the effects tradition (Moore, 1993:5), that young people are passive and vulnerable victims of media messages. Findings also revealed that the reception and interpretation of media messages is a complex process that cannot be merely explained by attributing differences of interpretation to race, age, gender, religion and culture. While there were instances where interpretations could be aligned to the above variables, there were other instances where differences in interpretation cut across the variables, further complicating the process.

### **Realism of health messages enhances dominant decoding by young people**

Broadly speaking, most alcohol messages portrayed in *EastEnders* were perceived to be realistic by young people and as such positively received. Findings revealed a correlation between the perceived realism of alcohol portrayals and positive reception. Messages that resonated with the young people's lived experiences and world-views were deemed to be realistic and were received positively. These included consequences of excessive drinking on the individual and family such as; relationship problems, family breakdown, violence, drink-driving offences, one-night stands, unplanned pregnancies, alcohol-instigated diseases such as liver cirrhosis. However, messages that could not be related to or personally experienced were rejected and dismissed as far-fetched and unrealistic. The idea of realism that young people mainly drew on is empirical realism which is closer to verisimilitude, where the portrayals had to mirror the real world to be perceived as real. Complexities in the interpretations of portrayals as realistic emerged within this group due to differences in lived experiences and age. While there were common interpretations which cut across age, race, gender and religion, others varied from participant to participant based on their own personal lived experiences, resulting in some portrayals being deemed realistic by some yet rejected by others as unrealistic. Limited exposure and life experience could have restricted the young people's interpretive competences in comparison with older viewers, like the health specialists, whose competences might have been enhanced by their extensive lived personal and professional experiences.

Knowledge of the soap opera genre also enhanced the perception of alcohol depictions as realistic. Portrayals that could have been dismissed as exaggerated were still viewed as conveying a realistic message about excessive drinking due to the appreciation of the genre's need to entertain viewers first and foremost and then also educate and inform. Furthermore, knowledge of soap opera production processes, mainly that most *EastEnders* issue-related storylines are based on real-life situations, also aided the young people's interpretations of alcohol messages as realistic and true to life.

### **Collaboration with health organisations aids realism of alcohol messages in *EastEnders***

Findings revealed that in order to adequately achieve its goal of educating viewers about social issues and enhance the accuracy and realism of its messages, *EastEnders* engages key health organisations and experts in its construction of harmful drinking storylines such as alcoholism, liver cirrhosis and alcohol rehabilitation. As discussed in chapter five, an

employee from one of the health organisations interviewed by this study confirmed that they provided advice, guidance and expertise regarding the Phil Mitchell liver cirrhosis storyline, which involved checking the script for accuracy. Judging by the views and perceptions obtained from both young people and health professionals regarding the realism of the alcoholism storyline in particular and excessive drinking storylines in general, it can be argued that the programme has achieved its goal of providing a true to life portrayal of this medical condition, aided by its production processes discussed above. This study thus highlights the significance of production, text and reception moments of the circuit of culture in meaning making processes.

### **Helpline numbers and claims to the real**

One of soap opera's claims is to realism (Jordan in Dyer, 1981). As highlighted above, producers employ different strategies to enhance the realism of their messages. This study argues that by sign-posting helpline numbers for different health organisations at the end of most harmful drinking storylines, *EastEnders* enhances its realism by creating a direct connection between its health messages and real audiences watching the programme. By providing numbers which audiences can call to talk to professionals in real-life health organisations and obtain accurate advice on harmful drinking concerns triggered by a soap opera storyline, the programme could arguably be claiming to link the world of the soap opera with that of its audiences, as if the two worlds were directly connected. This claim is further augmented by the study's findings, which revealed that real audiences were using the contact information provided by *EastEnders* to seek advice on excessive drinking, liver disease and other medical conditions portrayed in the programme, for themselves, their families and friends. This suggests that the contact information prompted the desired reaction and debate from viewers about a social matter considered to be detrimental to health, in line with soap opera's claim to arouse debate within society about topical matters. While the young people interviewed for this study had not yet used the contact information, they were aware of its existence and applauded *EastEnders* for providing useful information for audiences going through similar situations. Alcohol experts interviewed correspondingly commended *EastEnders* for providing contact information for key health organisations and concluded that confirmation received from the organisations that handle the calls from viewers, was evidence that the strategy is working and as such an effective way to convey health communication.

### **The place of religion in young people's interpretation of alcohol messages**

In addition to lived experiences and perceived realism of depictions, religion played a significant role in the interpretations of alcohol messages. Findings showed that most young people who indicated that they were non-religious, appeared to possess more alcohol knowledge, experience and exposure than religious ones. Muslim participants in particular noted that their alcohol experience was minimal due to restrictions imposed by their religion on drinking alcohol. They argued that they had never consumed alcohol and were never going to in the future. Due to lack of lived alcohol experience to draw on, these participants found some depictions abstract and not relatable. Despite this, they still found the programme entertaining and educative. This echoes findings by the US National Alcohol Survey on Religion and Alcohol (2007), which revealed that religion was a strong, important and influential variable for drinking behaviours and patterns particularly in abstention, with the Muslim religion having the highest prevalence of alcohol abstention (Michalak et al, 2007:1). Furthermore, the Qur'an which is highly respected and obeyed by Muslims, forbids alcohol consumption (Michalak et al, 2007:1), something confirmed by Muslim participants.

### **The place of gender in young people's interpretation of alcohol messages**

Gender also significantly impacted some alcohol interpretations. Boys appeared to possess more alcohol knowledge and exposure than girls. Most boys were thus able to articulate the different drinking patterns such as excessive, binge, moderate, responsible drinking and alcoholism with more ease than most girls. Furthermore, only male participants openly shared their drinking experiences. The disparities in alcohol knowledge and experience could reflect the gendered nature of alcohol use and perception in some social groups where it is not only acceptable for men to drink but to also do so excessively, as a sign of masculinity (Roberts, 2004). On the other hand, in some societies, women have traditionally been discouraged from drinking at all, let alone doing so excessively, as they are perceived to be family custodians (Holmila and Raitasalo, 2005:1765) and as such need to be exemplary and sober to enable them to perform their role effectively. There were no notable differences in interpretations with respect to other socio-demographic categories such as race and age.

## **Disparities in alcohol knowledge and lived experiences between young people in schools and those in colleges**

Findings revealed further complexities in interpretations among young people in that, not only did lived experiences, religion and gender impact readings but further differences were observed between young people attending schools and those attending colleges and youth centres. While those attending schools demonstrated active and critical engagement with the programme, they occasionally came across as less open than their counterparts in colleges, particularly in regards to their own alcohol practices. All the participants attending schools said they had not yet started drinking alcohol due to being under the legal drinking age, and as such had no personal lived experiences. On the other hand, participants from colleges freely shared their personal drinking practices and experiences and drew on these in their interpretations of alcohol depictions in *EastEnders*, although most of them were also under the legal drinking age. This may inevitably raise questions of truthfulness of participants in social research and the impact of group dynamics, which may lead to self-censorship and conformity by less confident participants (Carey, 1994:236). Another reason could be the influence of the interview venue on the participants. As the interviews were conducted at school premises, this could have impacted on some of the responses, as some participants may have felt obliged to say what was legally and morally expected of them as students in a school environment.

Young people in youth centres appeared to possess more alcohol knowledge than their peers. For instance, participants in schools had no knowledge of the Chief Medical Officer's weekly recommended alcohol units and did not know any organisations that they could turn to for alcohol assistance. On the other hand, some participants in colleges were able to cite the weekly recommended alcohol units and were also aware of where the information could be found. They were able to name organisations they could turn to for alcohol information and assistance. It cannot however be concluded whether the disparities in alcohol knowledge is a result of differences in institutional practices or not as investigating this was beyond the scope of this study. All young people were however aware that they could use their second screens to look up information online should the need arise. Potential concerns about them doing this however relate to the accuracy of the alcohol information which they could come across if they did not go on official websites.

### **Centrality of the pub in *EastEnders* hinders and contradicts alcohol messages**

The textual analysis revealed that of all public meeting venues and communal spaces in *EastEnders*, the pub (Queen Victoria) is the most used venue and setting for most scenes. Findings revealed mixed views on this portrayal, with some participants positing that the portrayal was an accurate reflection of some sections of British society where the pub occupies a central place in people's lives, a view echoed by one of *EastEnders* producers interviewed for the study. This was also perceived to be in line with the soap opera genre requirements where public places such as the pub are used to bring characters together, motivate conversations and advance the plot. Other views, which constituted the majority, strongly believed that for a soap opera endeavouring to foreground responsible drinking messages, the central role played by the pub is not only a misrepresentation of majority social practice but is misleading to viewers, particularly young people and also contradicts harmful drinking messages being depicted. While it can be argued that the centrality of the pub fulfils the genre's needs and requirements, it can also be argued that the pub might be given a symbolic and narrative centrality in the fiction that it may not deserve. It can further be argued that for a soap opera championing responsible drinking, other public spaces could be used more.

### **Soap opera genre an effective alcohol awareness raising tool for young people**

Findings revealed that young people believed that *EastEnders* was successful in raising awareness about the consequences of harmful drinking on younger and older viewers alike. Through its entertainment-education approach, the genre was viewed as playing a key role in effectively conveying health messages to this age-group, in comparison with school-based alcohol interventions. Soap opera's entertainment value appealed to participants and enabled them to engage with the programme while also learning crucial information about harmful drinking. Dramatising the alcohol messages allowed young people to follow the journeys of affected characters and also visualise the consequences suffered and, in the process, use the experience as a warning and deterrent. *EastEnders'* use of young characters in most alcohol storylines was particularly singled out as a key attraction for young people and an effective strategy, as they identified more with people their age than any other age-group. One of the programme producers argued that featuring more young people than most British soap operas is a strategy used by *EastEnders* to retain this audience group for a long time, that is to keep them watching from an early age until adulthood.

Soaps in general and *EastEnders* in particular, were commended for presenting multiple dimensions of harmful drinking and thus enabling viewers to pick and choose aspects that related to their circumstances. This caused them to be perceived as fair and balanced. Conveying harmful drinking messages through entertainment-education in particular, arguably had a more lasting effect than formal alcohol lessons viewed as ‘boring’, ‘full on’, top-down, unbalanced and not captivating or engaging enough for young people and as such had minimal and temporary impact. While all girl participants and some boys preferred soap opera or entertainment-education, some boys preferred formal alcohol lessons or a mixed strategy approach. This was because they believed using a soap opera to convey serious messages like alcohol, drowns the message because the entertainment becomes a distraction, resulting in the message getting lost in the entertainment. A combination of both entertainment-education and formal alcohol education was preferred. This was yet another instance where gender played a significant role in participants’ interpretations, perceptions and views, a finding also noted by earlier audience studies (Morley, 2003; Curran, 1990; Livingstone, 2013:5-6). The gender differences reflected in the young people’s preferences could also relate to the gendered nature of soap operas, in that, they are usually associated with a predominantly female audience. Similarly, alcohol professionals interviewed by the study also recommended a multi-strategy approach to health communication targeted at young people. Notably, all but one participant interviewed confirmed that they had not had any formal alcohol intervention lessons at their respective schools and colleges and were therefore using common sense in their submissions. This has been attributed to government funding cuts which have seen most school-based alcohol intervention programmes being scrapped. The health specialists interviewed for this study confirmed this and that some of their organisations’ school-based alcohol interventions have also been stopped as schools can no longer afford them. I discuss this in more detail, in subsequent sections of this chapter.

### **Pedagogic value of *EastEnders* as perceived by alcohol professionals**

To obtain a broader perspective on the portrayal of alcohol messages by *EastEnders* and to assess the educational value of the programme on its young viewers, the study interviewed health professionals drawn from various alcohol and drug education sectors. The objective was to establish, investigate and unpack the interpretive codes that inform the health professionals’ readings of alcohol messages, how these compared with those of the young people and how they anticipated the messages to be received by the young people. The interviews were a vital part of the study as they enhanced the understanding of how media

texts are interpreted by different audiences, situated in different socio-cultural, age, educational, professional and occupational contexts, as well as audiences with a different level of knowledge and expertise.

The majority of the alcohol specialists believed that *EastEnders* predominantly achieved its educational role and also depicted health messages in a responsible and accurate manner which was not misleading to younger viewers. Alcohol portrayals were perceived to be realistic and reflective of real-life experiences which the specialists encountered in their professions and everyday lives, and as such young people were likely to relate to them. Examples included the depiction of the consequences of harmful drinking on the individuals and families and friends of the excessive drinker. While some of the specialists' responses were informed by their medical knowledge, others were shaped by their individual hunches, lived experiences and even (socially shared) common sense, which explains the variations that were inherent in some of their interpretations.

Unlike young people who predominantly judged the realism of portrayals in terms of empirical realism, most specialists' evaluation referenced both empirical and emotional realism. The depictions of harmful, moderate drinking and alcoholism were particularly commended as predominantly accurate and so was the way *EastEnders* drew the line between normal and problem drinking. Specialists thus argued that young people would potentially receive the messages as intended by the text, more so because in storylines where messages could potentially be misconstrued and misinterpreted as encouraging harmful drinking to resolve life challenges, *EastEnders* followed this up with consequences as a deterrent.

While most alcohol representations were perceived to be predominantly accurate, informative and educational, there were concerns with some depictions. The major concern, also raised by young people, relates to the central role occupied by the pub in *EastEnders* and other British soap operas. Most health professionals saw this as a potential hindrance to the harmful drinking messages the programme is foregrounding, and a misrepresentation of some sectors of British society whose lives do not revolve around the pub. It also had the potential of negatively impacting upon the reception and possible interpretation of alcohol messages by young people. Specialists recommended that programme producers should consider modelling portrayals around real-life situations in order to improve their accuracy and reception. However, one specialist, like some of the young people, found the representation

of the pub in *EastEnders* and its role in society in general realistic and accurate, and did not believe that it could contribute to negative reception of messages by young people. This further highlights the complications of reception of media messages by different audiences and further exposes the tension between *EastEnders*' professed attempt to engage with health and social issues (such as alcoholism), and its generic demands (for example, of having the pub as a key location).

### **Omissions in alcohol representations noted by alcohol specialists**

Potential omissions in the portrayal of alcohol misuse was another concern noted by health professionals. *EastEnders* arguably only portrays extreme cases of excessive drinking through its main characters Phil and Lauren, both of which result in alcoholism. Other representations of excessive drinking where the drinking is sustained and unhealthy but has not reached crisis levels are omitted from the portrayals. It is worth noting here the tension between communicating a public health message about alcohol and the generic requirements of soap opera. The soap opera narrative demands drama, which comes from conflict, and excessive drinking which has yet to reach crisis point is unlikely to yield the required conflict or drama. While it would be difficult to try and portray this alcohol consumption pattern, the health specialists posited that it would be beneficial for the programme to at least include multiple representations of a problem to allow multiple identification and engagement by different audiences who might be at different stages of harmful drinking.

Another view was that *EastEnders* has missed out some key representations which reflected current alcohol consumption patterns of young people, such as pre-loading and was instead still depicting traditional alcohol drinking venues like the pub as the main ones. This was perceived to be an inaccurate depiction because young people nowadays are known to be consuming alcohol privately in homes or university accommodation, prior to going out as a way of saving money. This is yet another instance where generic demands are in conflict with the requirement to reflect reality, as discussed in detail in subsequent sections of this chapter.

A further misrepresentation was cited by one of the specialists who posited that *EastEnders* was portraying all alcoholics in a stereotypical manner, that is, as 'dishevelled', 'disorientated', 'out-of-control', 'violent' and 'aggressive', when in real life not all of them exhibited those characteristics and behaviours. However, all the other specialists found this portrayal accurate and true to life, as did the young people. These and other multi-layered and

sometimes contradictory interpretations observed among the specialists are reflective of the complications of the reception of media messages and the different interpretations possible, even from audiences with potentially similar professional interpretive codes. The discrepancies noted in their interpretations could arguably be attributed to differences in expertise, focus and approach to service delivery, programme knowledge and lived experiences. Notwithstanding the disparities, there was arguably more common ground among the professionals than differences.

### **Popular television enhances alcohol education**

Health specialists revealed that alcohol education was seen as challenging because alcohol, unlike drugs, is a legal substance which is generally acceptable in society and as such its harm is usually underestimated in comparison with drugs which are less likely to be perceived in the same way. Therefore, it is vital to come up with effective awareness strategies taken seriously by young people. To this end, the specialists advocated alcohol intervention strategies that are specifically tailored to young people as opposed to generic messages. This is because what might work for other age-groups, such as adults, might not work for young people, because they need approaches that will engage their interests and attention and at the same time deliver serious facts about harmful drinking. Strategies involving social media, popular television, role plays, videos and creative school-based interventions were recommended as ideal for young people, as they are engaging, interactive and innovative and consequently might have a lasting effect.

Popular television was viewed by the health professionals as one of most effective strategies for reaching out to young people, because different television genres can appeal to different audiences. Soap operas are particularly popular with most audience groups and as such can encourage conversations and discussions about sensitive topics in families and society in general (Katzman,1972:212), thereby bringing them to light. Furthermore, young people are arguably more inclined to receive harmful drinking messages positively from the media than other deliveries, which could be viewed as top-down or patronising and as such, resisted. These sentiments echo this study's findings, where young people confirmed the assertions made by the experts here.

### **Multi-strategy approach to health communication**

Notwithstanding the role of popular television in general and soap opera in particular as a useful educational tool, a multi-strategy approach that incorporated the media, entertainment education and school-based interventions was recommended by the health experts, a view echoed by boy participants. A further recommendation from the experts was for popular television messages to be checked for accuracy to avoid communicating misleading messages to audiences. This study's findings confirmed that *EastEnders* liaises with key health organisations to ensure the accuracy of medical conditions and health messages it portrays.

### **Funding cuts are detrimental to alcohol education**

While evidence from national statistics, previous and current research findings as well as views obtained from the health specialists, all point towards the need to address harmful drinking in society, particularly among young people, alcohol and drug intervention programmes in schools have ironically been reduced. Austerity measures taken by the government, which have seen a reduction in funding for these programmes (The Health Foundation, 2018) is one of the reasons for the reduction. This has resulted in the absence of alcohol education or compromised the quality of such education as it is no longer delivered by professionals. Moreover, as institutions shaped by neo-liberalism, most schools have arguably become more focussed on other goals and performance targets which have consequently side-lined the alcohol education agenda. Further compounding the situation for health educators is the difficulty in accessing young people at secondary schools due to tight timetables in comparison with primary schools. These assertions were confirmed by this study's findings as all but one participant could not recall having school-based alcohol intervention lessons. The reduction of such crucial programmes in schools makes intervention strategies, such as the use of popular television to deliver health communication messages, all the more important for young people.

### **Implications of study findings on the reception of media messages**

As we have shown, young people are active and critical receivers and interpreters of media messages and health communication in particular. They possess key knowledge and awareness of the soap opera genre, which significantly aided their reception of alcohol messages. An understanding of popular television production processes enhanced their conceptualisation of media messages as realistic and not mere fiction. Like previous studies (Curran, 1990; Livingstone, 2013:7), this study confirmed the key role played by socio-

cultural dynamics, historical and educational influences, gender, age and religion in the reception of media messages, with religion and gender playing a more critical role than other factors. A new aspect however emerged from the findings, which significantly impacted the reception and interpretation of messages by young people: this was the educational institution the young people attended. Unlike previous reception studies, this study has unearthed evidence which suggests that different educational institutions young people are affiliated to may impact on their knowledge of some media topics, in this case alcohol as well as their confidence and willingness to share their lived experiences about depictions and messages that may appear to contradict the status quo, ethical and legal expectations of them by school authorities and society as a whole.

I argue that participants from a more formal setting of a school may have felt obliged to say what they felt was legally and ethically acceptable by their schools, while those from colleges and youth centres may not have necessarily felt the same duty, due to the greater informality and more relaxed setting of their environment. This perception, I argue, may subtly and indirectly lead to self-censorship by audiences and as such impact on their interpretation of media messages. This finding further demonstrates complications of reception and meaning appropriation and the impact of the interview venue or context, as this may also have been a contributing factor. In qualitative research, research context plays a significant role as meaning is viewed as being context specific (Flick, 2018:21). Reception analysis theory also argues that meaning making is a complex process embedded in the context of media usage (Livingstone, 2013:5-6). Focus group venue is thus crucial as it can enhance or negatively impact on the quality of data collected (Stewart and Shamsadani, 2014:17). While schools may be a convenient venue for school-going participants, focus groups held at schools may arguably be affected by participants behaving like pupils in the discussions (Gill et al, 2008:294). I argue that the interview context may have contributed to the differences in decodings between young people attending different educational institutions, as people arguably interpret things in context. Had different contexts been used, the interpretations could possibly have been different. While I was aware of the importance of holding focus group discussions at a neutral venue, for logistical and safety reasons, it was not possible to hold them elsewhere other than at the school or college premises.

Findings revealed further complications embedded in the reception of media messages. While most interpretations by young people were significantly aligned to variables like gender,

culture and religion, significant variations within some of these variables occurred. Nor was the reception process straightforward either among the health professionals whose interpretations were multi-layered and cut across their gender and profession. Although some of the interpretations were informed by their professions and lived experiences, others appeared to lean more towards common sense and hunch, that is, understandings and general assumptions in everyday circulation. Furthermore, some of their interpretations of similar messages were sometimes not only diverse but contradictory. The discrepancies could be attributed to differences in expertise, approach to service delivery, programme knowledge and lived experiences. It can also be argued that the way in which the alcohol professionals used their common sense, hunches and lived experiences to make sense of the alcohol messages in *EastEnders* more than they drew on their medical knowledge and expertise again underscores the complex, layered and sometimes contradictory way audiences respond to media texts. Notwithstanding the disparities, there was arguably more common ground among the professionals than differences, with the major concerns for all being the importance of conveying accurate, realistic, responsible and effective messages to young people through alcohol intervention strategies that work, and soap opera in particular being one of them.

Significant similarities were noted in terms of interpretive codes exhibited by the health specialists in comparison with the young people, particularly with regards to the realism of the portrayals, the use of the pub and consequences of harmful drinking. While differences in interpretations also existed between the two groups, there was no straightforward young people-expert polarity found as both groups demonstrated complexity in their decoding of the text and both drew on a range of interpretive codes, although they both arguably privileged their lived experiences and common sense.

Major differences were noted in how the two groups defined the notions of moderate, binge, excessive drinking and alcoholism. The health professionals predictably exhibited more knowledge and precision and were able to differentiate the concepts with ease. While some young people had some knowledge of the concepts, most of them struggled to articulate and differentiate them.

### **Implications of findings on the soap opera genre and health communication**

Findings revealed that the soap opera genre is popular with young people, and that both young people and health professionals believed that it is appropriate and effective in conveying health messages in general and alcohol representations in particular. As such, *EastEnders* was viewed as largely fulfilling its mandate of informing, entertaining and educating its viewers in general and young people in particular, about topical societal issues and key health messages including harmful drinking. This study's findings nonetheless exposed a possible contradiction within the genre conventions which could possibly impact on its ability to effectively convey health communication messages, as explained below.

Intrinsic to, and in tension with, the social realist aspect of soap opera genre, particularly the British version, is nostalgia, which is a yearning for the past and the desire to promote and maintain an organic and closely-knit community. To this end, change, development and modernity are often deplored within the genre. This presents a contradiction in that, on the one hand, soap opera is expected to reflect and represent real life but on the other hand, it is fixated on celebrating the past. This means that it can arguably fall short in representing life as it is now but instead depict an idealised version of life as it was in the past. This contradiction is reflected in *EastEnders* in that, to fulfil the requirements of the genre, the local pub is portrayed as the main drinking venue and public meeting space for the local community, as it might have been in the past. Everybody including young people is seen drinking there. Reality on the other hand points to the contrary in that, as part of the re-engineering of most urban centres, most people are moving away from local pubs to drink in the city centre where it is vibrant due to the significantly different drinking environment fashioned in the new night-time economy. Furthermore, young people nowadays rarely use pubs as drinking venues but are pre-loading elsewhere in private venues before going out for further drinks and clubbing in the city centre. *EastEnders* however is silent on depicting both modern-day scenarios as this would be a contradiction to the generic demands of the soap opera where the pub is the only communal drinking place for all. This was perceived by the health professionals as an inability to reflect modern drinking practices of young people and as such viewed as one of the programme's weaknesses in its portrayal of harmful drinking.

Furthermore, this generic convention influenced by nostalgia, gives the pub a symbolic and narrative centrality which might potentially weaken the excessive drinking messages the programme is aiming to foreground. While the pub is more than a mere location in

*EastEnders* and in most British soap operas in general, as it is tied to key characters around whom most of the drama revolves, I argue that this generic requirement, may be a stumbling block to harmful drinking messages.

### **Soap opera realism and the neo-liberal principle of individualisation may potentially restrict health communication**

The conventions of soap opera realism require problems to be resolved at an individual or personal level and not at a social level (Longhurst,1987:634). This generic convention which draws on neo-liberal principles of responsabilising the individual, has implications for health communications and harmful drinking representations. Findings revealed that *EastEnders* appears to be predominantly portraying harmful drinking and alcoholism as an individual problem rather than one instigated by broader social issues such as socio-economic inequalities, problems with alcohol regulation and pricing among other factors. This depiction arguably takes away the responsibility from the state and instead makes the individual accountable for their own health choices. I argue that, in a society where government funding cuts have resulted in lack of alcohol education for young people, responsabilising the individual for a problem partly created by broader social factors seems to be ironic. The textual analysis conducted revealed that this neo-liberal view of alcoholism was prioritised and foregrounded by the text while other potentially competing or contradictory views were omitted resulting in a biased portrayal. In turn young people interviewed for the study appeared to be reading the depiction in line with the discourses prioritised by the text. The health specialists on the other hand were however able to read these contradictions from the text. Partially complicating the above is the role of the community in supporting individual alcoholics. While the problem is figured as an individual one in its origins (trauma and biography) it is portrayed as one requiring the support of a nostalgically imagined community to resolve it.

This study has thus comprehensively illustrated that *EastEnders* reflects broader neo-liberal discourses present in most health communication and public discourses thereby raising further contradictions between this generic convention, the reality on the ground and health communication as a whole.

### **Contribution to knowledge**

One of the key strengths and contributions of this study is its multi-perspectival approach in unpacking meaning-making processes carried out by media audiences. To this end the main moments of the circuit of culture which have a direct bearing on this study, namely production, text and reception have been investigated while regulation and identity (Du Gay et al, 2013:3) were largely outside the scope of the study. The study has also endeavoured to bring in different voices such as those of producers, young people, health experts and representatives of some health organisations that *EastEnders* works with in constructing alcohol storylines, for a broader perspective and holistic understanding and evaluation of the reception process and the programme's pedagogic value. This makes it the first study to take such a holistic approach and as such contributes new knowledge to the fields of reception theory, soap opera analysis and health communication.

This study is also the first to qualitatively investigate the reception of a particular soap opera message by a specific audience group, in a modern multi-media reception context, characterised by second screen usage. Not only does it fill the gap left by previous soap opera studies, most of which predominantly focus on the general reception of the genre by audiences and its popularity per se, but it has also heeded calls by most researchers in the field for future audience research to focus on the reception of specific soap opera messages for an in-depth understanding of meaning making processes.

Additionally, the study is positioned within the contemporary multi-media reception context, a factor which is missing in most previous reception studies, making the study relevant, up-to-date and one of the first few to pilot research in this area with young people, thus contributing valuable knowledge and insights into the reception and interpretation of media messages particularly by young people who are avid users of portable multi-media devices.

This research is also the first to contribute empirical evidence which arguably challenges the assumption made in some contemporary literature on modern television viewing that second screen usage is detrimental to family viewing and has consequently fragmented and to some extent eradicated the living room audience and created lone viewers.

Moreover, findings revealed that second screens are an asset to young television viewers as they aid their reception of media messages in general and health communication in particular.

This is because they use them to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the programme and specific messages portrayed, and to discuss the programme with friends in real time thus connecting them to other viewers and enhancing their overall television viewing experience.

Additionally, the study revealed a possible complementary relationship between the soap opera genre and second screen usage and argues that the generic conventions of soap opera such as its slow pace and multiple entry points enable second screen usage without loss of key programme information by the viewer.

This research is also the first to unpack a possible limitation of the soap opera genre's educational capacity, due to some inherent generic contradictions. While the genre can be broadly credited for its popularity with young people and its pedagogic value, nostalgic influences lead *EastEnders* to undermine the portrayal of contemporary life as it is in terms of the drinking practices of young people. The genre instead remains stuck in the past where the community pub occupies centre stage and thus falls short of depicting reality and potentially misleading viewers.

As discussed in chapter one, significant scholarly views suggest that the government may be prioritising revenue generated by alcohol tax over enacting policies and strategies that can help reduce harmful drinking in England. Similarly, this research noted that despite acknowledging that harmful drinking mainly by young people, was negatively impacting many sectors of society, the government was continuously cutting funds meant for alcohol intervention in schools and youth centres resulting in a lack of alcohol education, as confirmed by both young people and health professionals interviewed. This leaves popular television as one of the main sources of health communication for those young people who engage with it in that way. However, the messages carried by the media programmes as the study shows, tend to shift the health responsibility from the state to the individual, who then becomes viewed as the cause and solution to any potential health issues due to having a free will to make choices. Consequently, any failings by the state in health-related matters, are then construed as individual failures.

While not claiming to break new ground in terms of highlighting the complexity of reception and meaning-making processes, how texts may shape interpretations and the multiplicity of

interpretations possible, as well as the impact of factors like realism, lived experiences, age, gender, religion, occupation and educational level on the reception of media messages, this study has definitely contributed valuable insights in the field particularly with regards to this age-group. Contrary to assumptions commonly made about young people's inability to make responsible and informed judgements regarding their media consumption and alcohol drinking practices due to their vulnerability, this study revealed that most young people are not only active decoders of media messages but are also critical analysers. While limited exposure to life experiences in general due to age may have restricted some interpretations, I argue that this does not necessarily equate to vulnerability as commonly assumed.

### **Recommendations for future research in the field**

This research clearly illustrates that the educational institution young people are affiliated to may impact significantly on their knowledge, reception and interpretation of sensitive health communication messages like harmful drinking. To better understand the implications of these results, future studies could pursue this insight further and also consider interviewing school authorities to garner diverse views. Investigating a wider population of young people from both schools and colleges and authorities from these educational institutions may reveal important dynamics which may account for the disparities in alcohol knowledge and approach exhibited by young people in different educational institutions and as such contribute vital knowledge and understanding of the reception practices of young people, and in the process enhance the effectiveness of health communication. It was not possible for this study to conclude whether different institutional practices or the context of the focus group interviews accounted for the differences in alcohol knowledge and interpretations, as an investigation into institutional practices was not carried out due to being outside the scope of the study, hence a recommendation for future research to consider pursuing this area further.

Based on the study findings, two methodological recommendations emerged. Firstly, holding focus group interviews in neutral venues as opposed to school or educational premises may yield more robust data and insights, particularly for sensitive health topics such as harmful drinking and also primarily for this age-group. Taking this approach may eliminate potential self-censorship in young participants which could skew the data.

Secondly, this study re-affirms previous assertions about group dynamics in terms of group composition and size (McLafferty, 2004:189), although the recommendation stated here

refers specifically to young people. For best results and robust discussions, I recommend small groups rather than big ones as well as same gender groups instead of mixed ones, particularly for sensitive health-related topics like harmful drinking. Findings revealed that smaller and same gender groups created a more conducive and open discussion environment for most participants and as such generated rich data with varied perspectives in comparison with mixed groups where boys tended to dominate discussions and bigger groups where a few confident participants appeared to stifle the views of less confident ones. While acknowledging the key role of the moderator in ensuring equal participation by all, I argue that getting the group size and composition right is paramount.

### **Recommendations for *EastEnders* producers**

While acknowledging the overall pedagogic value of *EastEnders* and the programme's endeavour to portray realistic harmful drinking messages that young people can relate to and learn from, I argue that considering some recommendations from the study results may enhance future harmful drinking portrayals for young people in particular and other audience groups in general. Based on the study conclusions, *EastEnders* producers should consider using alternative public spaces more as settings for the programme instead of the pub, as this would augment the effectiveness of harmful drinking messages being portrayed and also safeguard against potentially misrepresenting society and misleading audiences. Most young people and alcohol professionals interviewed felt that the prominence given to the pub by a soap opera endeavouring to convey health messages was potentially detrimental to its reception. While I acknowledge the generic requirement for drama facilitated by the pub in *EastEnders*, I argue that this creates tension between generic requirements and the sought for public health message.

Additionally, re-aligning some harmful drinking depictions with contemporary drinking practices would also augment the realism of the programme and messages portrayed and enhance positive and preferred readings by audiences. This includes portraying alternative and present-day drinking venues facilitated by the re-engineering of most urban centres and showing the different drinking patterns that real young people are currently engaging in, such as pre-loading as opposed to inaccurately portraying the pub as the drinking and meeting place for all.

### **Recommendation for future health communication**

This study has shown that popular television in general and soap opera in particular are effective tools for conveying health communication to young people due to their appeal and wide reach. Evidence from this study however suggests that a multi-strategy approach to health intervention may be more beneficial for this age-group, as it caters for diverse preferences and learning needs of young people. As such, future health communication could consider employing a multi-prong strategy that incorporates contemporary, realistic and engaging health messages through the use of popular television, school health intervention programmes and other strategies, as findings from both young people and health professionals indicate that this approach would be more effective than stand-alone interventions.

### **Reflection**

As we have seen, this study has broadly deployed a media and cultural studies approach to investigate the communication of a public health message (harmful drinking) by BBC 1's soap opera *EastEnders*, and its reception by young people. I start the reflection by positioning this study within a media and cultural studies approach and follow this up with a brief outline of the health communication approach and how the two approaches differ. I then look at how this study's approach relates to other work that sits on the boundary of the fields of media and communication studies and health communication such as Lesley Henderson's work. I follow this with a brief discussion of the tensions between a media and cultural studies approach and a health communication approach.

The media and cultural studies approach to reception, which is the approach broadly adopted by this study, views mass communication as a complex, non-linear signifying process (Hall, 1980; Casey et al, 2002). It thus calls for a holistic approach to communication by studying the encoding/production and decoding/reception moments and the socio-cultural processes influencing each stage (Wood, 2007:76). On the one hand, media texts are perceived as cultural products which are 'polysemic', that is, they have multiple meanings that audiences could potentially read from them (Fursich, 2009:243). On the other hand, media audiences are seen as active decoders of messages. Hence there is no guarantee that the message encoded/constructed and circulated by the producers will be decoded/received as intended. To holistically unpack the relationship between the media and their audiences, cultural studies calls for a qualitative textual analysis of media texts to unpack the meanings

foregrounded by the cultural products as well as an investigation of how media audiences situated in different socio-cultural contexts receive and interpret the messages encoded in the media texts. Reception analysis, an interdisciplinary approach to audience studies has been used by the study in conjunction with cultural studies, due to its complex model of text and audience relationship.

This study has used the combined approach described above to investigate the reception of alcohol messages in *EastEnders* by young people because of its suitability in studying the nature of the media text under review. *EastEnders* is a cultural product which enjoys the possibility of multiple interpretations by audiences, it is also a soap opera guided by certain generic expectations. Its audiences thus engage with this text in ways different to the way in which they engage with texts belonging to other genres. I conducted a close and detailed analysis of the text to unearth possible messages foregrounded and prioritised by it, and then used the storylines to investigate the reception of the text by young people from different socio-cultural, age, gender, religious and other backgrounds through focus group interviews. This allowed the study to unpack the complexity of reception and meaning-making processes in general and for this particular genre, audience and health message. This is something which may not have been possible to achieve through different approaches such as the mainstream health communications approach discussed below. Through this holistic approach to communication advocated by media and cultural studies and qualitative methods used in the investigation, the study produced in-depth knowledge concerning the strengths and shortfalls of the soap opera genre in conveying health communication in general and to young people in particular. Below I briefly discuss a different approach which sits within the field of mainstream health communication and how it constructs and communicates public health messages to target audiences.

The formal and mainstream approach to health communication is based on the engagement of communication strategies which aim to inform and motivate individuals and communities and persuade them to adopt behaviours which promote and enhance public health outcomes (Schiavo, 2014:3; Cickusic, 2010:219). Public health messages are communicated to targeted communities through communication campaigns which include packaging educational health messages in print materials (leaflets, brochures) as well as through mass media campaigns, among others (Schiavo, 2014:7; Cickusic, 2010:221). Health communication campaigns are mainly based on theoretical models of behaviour change, which guide the development of the

messages (Snyder, 2007:36-37). While knowledge of the target audience, specific content presentation and use of certain linguistic strategies and tone in the construction of messages are seen as key for effective health message design and communication (Snyder, 2007:37; Maibach and Parrott, 1995: viii), the strategy tends to predominantly use a simple top-down approach to communication and to envisage the reception of health campaign messages by a 'passive' audience (Maibach and Parrott, 1995:8). Comparing pre- and post-campaign data for behaviour change (Snyder, 2007:38) is one of the common ways of evaluating if the strategy has been successful or not. The design and presentation of messages and language used are seen as important factors in determining positive and negative reception of messages (Snyder, 2007:37).

The goal of both the media and cultural studies approach and that of health communication is to evaluate the effectiveness of communication about specific health issues, the methods used by the approaches are certainly different, as we have seen above as is the model of text and reception. Given this, this study uses a qualitative textual analysis and a complex reception analysis technique to analyse reception and meaning-making processes by audiences in different socio-cultural contexts, thus enabling the production of deep and complex insights into the reception process. On the other hand, health communication approaches tend to use simple communication and reception models. I argue that the two strategies are suitable and effective for different types of texts and indeed different audiences and generate different lessons. While certain health messages might be better conveyed through mainstream health communication channels to enable factual and complex information to be accurately communicated to audiences, the reception and effectiveness of other health messages can indeed be enhanced through entertainment-education formats, as this study has revealed. It is also worth pointing out that the respective texts (health communication texts and entertainment education/*EastEnders*) also serve different purposes. Readers of health-related literature may turn to this type of text for the purpose of finding out information about certain health issues. On the other hand, the audience of *EastEnders* undoubtedly turn to it for other reasons (storylines, drama, habit etc), and if there is some communication of health messages, it tends to be subservient to those other reasons.

Henderson (2018) takes a similar approach to mine, in that she predominantly uses a media and cultural studies approach to analyse the reception of mediated health communication by different audiences including young people (2017). Her approach is premised on the view

that, “the media play a crucial role in framing public health debates and shaping public perceptions by selecting which issues are reported and how they are represented” (Henderson, 2018:373). Through a qualitative approach (semi-structured interviews), she investigates the effectiveness of communicating health messages through popular television genres such as soap opera and medical dramas and the tensions inherent in the approach. Henderson (2007:135) posits that popular television fiction in general, British soap opera in particular and *EastEnders* specifically, provide an opportunity to raise awareness about sensitive social and public health issues, in comparison with factual formats (Henderson, 2018:108). This is because, unlike other formats, these popular entertainment genres attract large and loyal audiences, offer different perspectives, allow emotional identification with characters and also generate discussions about health topics being portrayed (Henderson, 2010: 209). She nevertheless concludes, “the impact of health stories in television soap opera [...] is assumed to be significant but has been relatively understudied” (Henderson, 2010:209-210).

It is worth noting the increasing collaborations between media and health professionals to try and enhance the communication, effectiveness and reach of public health messages (Henderson, 2018: 106). As this study and Henderson’s studies (Henderson, 2018; 2010) revealed, soap opera health storylines are checked with relevant health institutions for accuracy before inclusion in the programmes.

While the collaboration may enhance the quality and potential reception of some health messages, tensions resulting from the inclusion of health messages in a predominantly entertainment genre (soap opera) have however been unearthed both by this study and by Henderson’s work (2010;2018). The main tension relates to the limitations inherent in using an entertainment genre to communicate public health messages. This is in light of views which suggest that while media entertainment facilitates public engagement which fulfils its informational mandate, the programmes should however not be judged on their ‘accuracy’ or ‘truth’ (Curran, 2000:102). Therefore, the genre’s requirement for entertainment and drama, as a priority, arguably conflicts with the requirements of health communication which call for factual and accurate communication of health messages to the public, thus creating tension between the genre’s needs and its capabilities to effectively and accurately communicate health messages. As we have seen, this study has revealed these potential tensions where, for instance, some health communication messages (harmful drinking that has yet to reach crisis

level, for example) were omitted by *EastEnders* because they would not have generated the desired drama for entertainment, with more dramatic conditions (alcoholism) being portrayed instead. Henderson's (2018:111) interviews with members of health institutions who collaborated with soap opera producers revealed a similar concern. They posited that while drama and entertainment formats may be well suited to represent everyday experiences of certain medical conditions (2018: 111), certain aspects of health conditions (mental health) were however excluded from the scripts and only aspects that generated drama and entertainment were included as a result of the generic demands.

Henderson (2018:374) thus argues that while the mass media health campaigns may be credited for reaching large numbers of people quickly, they are often criticised for obscuring power dynamics and structural constraints by focussing on individual choice and behaviour, and also tend to address health issues at an individual and not a collective level, a finding also revealed by this study. She thus concludes that, "entertainment television operates within limited ideological frames" (Henderson, 2018:106), and thus advocates for the study of the political economy of the media for a holistic approach (Henderson, 2018:374).

Notwithstanding these points of broad agreement, I differ with Henderson in the following ways. I argue that there is scope for the different approaches to health communication to strengthen their collaboration and achieve positive outcomes in relaying effective health messages that audiences would relate to, and incorporate into their lived experiences. As this study revealed, soap opera audiences interviewed appeared to engage with the entertainment-education aspect of the genre positively and also benefitted from health lessons conveyed by the strategy, even though some of them picked up on the omissions resulting from the tensions discussed here.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1:

#### **INTERVIEW/MODERATOR GUIDE USED FOR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE**

##### **Topic**

*How do British teenagers aged between 16-18 years receive and interpret alcohol-related messages portrayed in the popular British soap opera EastEnders?*

**DURATION:** 1 hour

**INTRODUCTIONS** - Moderator and group participants to introduce themselves, to enable everyone to be at ease (pseudo names to be used to protect participants' identity). I will use the introductions as an ice-breaker and ask participants to say something about themselves and their interests.

**EXPLAIN THE PURPOSE OF THE GROUP DISCUSSION** – to find out how you (participants) receive and interpret alcohol-related messages portrayed in *EastEnders*.

**Re-iterate the following:**

1. **Confidentiality**, with regards to the use of the data collected from group interviews, and protection of participants' identity. Participants to be reminded not to use their names during the discussions, and that if names are accidentally mentioned, they will be replaced with pseudo names during transcription to protect their identity.
2. **Recording of interviews** – alert them of this.
3. **Right to withdraw at any point** – re-iterate this.
4. **Remind participants to avoid talking over each other during the discussion.**

**PLAY A FEW SHORT CLIPS FROM EASTENDERS** (two clips to be more alcohol-focussed and one with background drinking in the pub)– this is meant to jog their memory, although it will be made clear that the discussion will focus on the whole film not just the clips.

#### **QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED IN THE DISCUSSION**

- What do you consider to be excessive drinking?
- What in your opinion would you say is normal or acceptable drinking?
- Where do you get information or guidelines on excessive and acceptable alcohol intake, and how trustworthy are these sources of information?

We have just watched some clips from *EastEnders* on my lap top (or television screen, depending on device used to show the clips),

- How do you all watch *EastEnders*?
- Where do you all watch *EastEnders*?
- Why do you all watch *EastEnders*?
- Do you ever use, or go on your smart phones, laptops or tablets while watching *EastEnders*, to access information from the internet relating to *EastEnders* or any other information for that matter?
- For those who look up *EastEnders*- related information on the internet while watching *EastEnders*, how does that impact the way you understand alcohol messages in the soap?
- What storylines in your view relate to alcohol in *EastEnders*?
- Can you relate to the alcohol storylines in *EastEnders*?
- How would you say the storylines relate or do not relate to your own experiences in real life regarding alcohol?
- What is your opinion about how alcohol is portrayed through the storylines or characters in the soap opera?
- What message or messages, if any, do you think *EastEnders* is trying to convey to viewers in general and young people in particular, with regards to alcohol?
- In one of the clips we watched, characters were discussing different issues in the pub, while other people in the pub were having drinks. What are your views about the regular use of the pub in *EastEnders* as a setting for most storylines, and would you say this impacts the alcohol messages being conveyed by the soap or not?
- What are your views about the use of the soap opera genre (*EastEnders*) to talk about alcohol-related issues?
- Are there any additional views or contributions that have not been expressed at all concerning this topic, that you would like to add to the discussion.

## APPENDIX 2:

### INTERVIEW GUIDE USED FOR LONG INTERVIEWS WITH HEALTH EXPERTS

*Prior to the discussion, two short video clips from EastEnders specifically focussing on alcohol storylines, will be played to aid the discussion.*

#### **Discussion Points**

- What are your views on the portrayal of Alcohol in *EastEnders*?
- Do you have any concerns at all with the portrayal of the alcohol messages from the perspective of alcohol/addiction specialists?
- What would you like to see in the portrayal which you think might add impact to the depiction of alcohol messages, in other words, what would you include or exclude?
- What are your views on how you think alcohol-related messages will be received by young people?
- What are your views regarding the use of the pub as the central setting for *EastEnders*?
- What would you describe as excessive drinking (binge drinking, harmful drinking etc)?
- What is Alcoholism and what is Addiction?
- What in your view is Moderate, responsible and acceptable drinking?
- What is social drinking?
- My analysis of the text shows an attempt by *EastEnders* to portray different realities about alcohol use. There is the acceptable or normal drinking as well as excessive drinking. Within excessive drinking, there is an attempt to attribute excessive drinking to individuals' underlying issues (Phil Mitchell and Lauren Branning both have a troubled family history). What are your views about these issues? Is this a realistic portrayal and does it resonate with what happens in real life in terms of alcohol addiction or excessive drinking.
- Do you think there is any 'safe' alcohol consumption? What are your views on recent research findings that state that all alcohol consumption is unsafe health-wise?
- What are your thoughts about Alcohol intervention strategies targeted at young people in Schools and other areas?

Do you think young people know where to find alcohol-related information such as recommended weekly units, drink-driving limit etc and alcohol-related help from organisations such as this one?

- How do you feel about the challenges of alcohol education and whether popular television is a potentially useful educational tool?
- Would you agree with the way the programme (EastEnders) draws the line between normal drinking and problem drinking?

## **APPENDIX 3:**

### **NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY**

#### **Research Consent Information Sheet**

**Title: Focus Group interviews**

**Principal Investigator: Adilaid Mpofu.**

**Telephone: 07943638970**

**Email:adilaid.mpofu2010@my.ntu.ac.uk**

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of the study is to investigate how young people receive and interpret alcohol-related messages portrayed in the popular British soap opera *EastEnders*.

#### **What are we asking you?**

The study seeks to find out the following:

- a) how teenagers from different socio-cultural and other backgrounds make sense of the alcohol messages in *EastEnders*.
- b) How the alcohol representations/storylines in *EastEnders* and solutions if any, suggested by the soap to address excessive drinking, compare with your own lived experiences and practices.
- c) Your perceptions about the use of the soap opera genre to communicate health related messages to young people.
- d) How you watch *EastEnders* in this day and age of digital technology, whether you watch it from the main television screen in the living room with family or from a portable mobile device like a tablet, smartphone or laptop or even whether you access any information relating to *EastEnders* from your portable devices while watching *EastEnders* and how that impacts your understanding of alcohol- storylines in the soap opera?

#### **How we would like to use the information provided**

The information you provide will potentially help inform strategies used by health communicators to raise awareness about harmful social practices such as excessive drinking, that may be affecting young people in England, and thus contribute towards improving their welfare.

#### **Compliance with the Research Data Management Policy**

Nottingham Trent University is committed to respecting the ethical code of conducts of the United Kingdom Research Councils. Thus, in accordance with procedures for transparency and scientific verification, the University will conserve all information and data collected during your interview in line with the University Policy and RCUK Common Principles on Data Policy (<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/datapolicy/>) and the relevant legislative frameworks. The final data will be retained in accordance with the Retention Policy. All data will be anonymised and made available to be re-used in

this form where appropriate and under appropriate safeguards.

### **What are the possible risks or discomforts?**

Your participation does not involve any risks other than what you would encounter in daily life. If you are uncomfortable with any of the questions and topics, you are free not to answer.

### **What are my rights as a research participant?**

- You have the right to withdraw your consent and participation at any moment: before, during, or after the interview. If you do wish to withdraw your consent please contact me using my contact details as above (TIME FRAME).
- You have the right to remain anonymous in any write-up (published or not) of the information generated during this interview.
- You have the right to refuse to answer to any or all of the questions you will be asked.
- You also have the right to specify the terms and limits of use (i.e. full or partial) of the information generated during the interview.
- You have the opportunity to ask questions about this research and these should be answered to your satisfaction.

If you want to speak with someone who is not directly involved in this research, or if you have questions about your rights as a research subject, contact Professor Michael White, Chair for the Joint Inter-College Ethics Committee (JICEC) at Nottingham Trent University. You can call him at 0115 848 2069 or send an e-mail to michael.white@ntu.ac.uk.

### **What about my Confidentiality and Privacy Rights?**

Participation in this research study may result in a loss of privacy, since persons other than the investigator(s) might view your study records. Unless required by law, only the study investigator, members of NTU staff and the sponsoring organisation [details] have the authority to review your records. They are required to maintain confidentiality regarding your identity.

Results of this study may be used for teaching, research, publications and presentations at professional meetings. If your individual results are discussed, then a code number or a pseudonym will be used to protect your identity.

### **Audio/visual recordings**

Permission to use audio or visual recordings of your participation, for presentations in the classroom, at professional meetings or in publications, is requested below, as this may be necessary to understand and communicate the results.

Any recorded data will be kept confidential and in a secure place in line with the Research Data Management Policy and destroyed in line with the current RCUK/University Guidelines.

### **Who should I call if I have questions or concerns about this research study?**

Please find my contact details above.

## APPENDIX 4:

### CONSENT FORM PROFORMA

Dear Research Participant

There are a number of questions we would like to discuss with you. However, you only need to respond to the ones which you want to. There is no time limit on this interview it may be as long or as short as you wish. Most interviews last around [one hour]. All interviews may be recorded and transcribed into text form with identifying features removed (e.g. names and places). Relevant quotations may then be included in the final report. All recordings will be stored securely and remain confidential.

All participation in the project is voluntary. If do you agree to be part of the project, we would like to use the information to develop a report; but your name and identity will remain anonymous. If you decide at any stage, you no longer want to be part of the project, just let us know and we will make sure any information you have given us is destroyed.

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Nottingham Trent University Joint Inter College Ethics Committee.

Please read the following statements:

|   |
|---|
| I have read the above project description, and had an opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers to any questions. |
| I have had sufficient information to decide whether or not I wish to take part in the study.  |
| I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time by informing the researcher of this decision.                                       |
| I understand that the information I give will be treated in the strictest confidence.   |
| I agree to take part in the study.  |
| I agree that this interview can be recorded.  |
| I understand that quotations, which will be made anonymous, from this interview may be included in material published from this research.                 |
| I am willing to participate in an interview as part of this research project.   |
| I understand that anonymized data may be used in other studies in line with the University Research Data Management Policy                                |

I confirm that data obtained from the study can be used in the final research report. I understand that the data will be used anonymously: names, places and identifying details will be changed.

Full Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions please contact me on the above details.

In line with the Research Data Management Policy, requests may be made to use data from this study for other projects. If you do not wish your anonymized data to be used for future studies please tick here

**APPENDIX 5:**

**RELIGION AFFILIATION QUESTIONNAIRE**

What is your religious affiliation? (Please feel free to leave blank if you would rather not disclose)

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## APPENDIX 6:

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR *EASTENDERS* PRODUCER

- As a Public Service Broadcaster, to what extent would you say that *EastEnders* aims to fulfil the mandate of informing, educating and entertaining the public?
- Who are the target audience of *EastEnders*, and how significant a component of that audience are young people?
- Do you know what percentage of the audience is aged between 16- 18 years, and if so, how this compares with other British soap operas?
- Are there any specific themes in *EastEnders* that you would say are targeted at young people?
- To what extent would you say that the dangers of excessive drinking is one of the main themes in *EastEnders*?
- How would you define excessive drinking or what is excessive drinking in your opinion?
- Does the fact that the pub is such a central location for the series raise any particular issues or difficulties for the makers of the series?
- Do you have any figures concerning the extent to which your audience watches *EastEnders* on tablets, laptops and smart phones, rather than on a television set?