

# ‘When I open it, I have to drink it all’: Push and pull factors shaping domestic alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic UK Spring 2020 lockdown

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** The closure of licensed venues during the COVID-19 pandemic meant that most alcohol has been consumed at home during lockdown periods in the UK, a phenomenon that remains under-researched despite the public health implications. **Methods.** This article draws on a study consisting of online semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 20 UK drinkers, conducted between the first and second 2020 UK lockdowns. The study aimed to explore changing and enduring UK drinking practices within home spaces during the pandemic. **Results.** Our findings illuminate specific ways in which assemblages and contextual factors may come together to encourage or mitigate against the consumption of any (or excessive) volumes of alcohol at home during the lockdown. For example, the physical presence of alcohol bottles may both encourage consumption (e.g. compulsion to finish an open bottle of wine) and cue reflection on one’s drinking (through the potentially confronting presence of empty bottles after domestic drinking). We also highlight the significance of the home as a space separate from—and different to—public drinking spaces. **Discussion and Conclusions.** With the increasing normalisation of domestic drinking during a global pandemic, this paper illuminates several factors that may encourage or curtail domestic alcohol consumption and invites us to consider the importance of assemblages, space and context. Such findings have wider applicability; for example, consideration of specific (and perhaps unique) push and pull factors of home spaces could inform future alcohol policy, health promotion messages and how guidance around ‘moderation’ or risky drinking is communicated. [Conroy D, Nicholls E. ‘When I open it, I have to drink it all’: Push and pull factors shaping domestic alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic UK Spring 2020 lockdown. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2021]

**Key words:** alcohol, home drinking, COVID-19, lockdown, interviews.

## Introduction

On 26 March 2020, licensed venues closed abruptly in England following the legally enforced ‘lockdown’ at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, centring the home as the default drinking setting. While it is worth noting that most UK alcohol consumption already took place outside of licensed venues prior to the pandemic [1], this further concentration of alcohol consumption in home spaces continues to challenge “the contemporary geographical imaginary of drinking as a city centre issue” [1, p. 537]. A preoccupation with public drinking [2] amongst researchers and policymakers has sidestepped the fact that less than a third of alcohol sold in the UK in 2017 was purchased in pubs, restaurants and bars (British Beer and Pub Association, 2018 as cited by Drinkaware 2019 [3]).

This focus on drinking practices in public venues is arguably not arbitrary and connects with a tendency to focus on ‘irresponsible’ or ‘risky’ alcohol consumption among particular groups (e.g. young people, women and girls) while other groups (such as older, middle-class home drinkers) avoid scrutiny in both alcohol research and everyday media/public discourses. Greater focus on home drinking, made more commonplace and visible since the pandemic, has been advocated in recent commentary as an area demanding further attention from a public health and policy perspective [4,5]. While such work can help us to understand lockdown as a unique and specific moment, it is also likely to illuminate wider trends in domestic drinking that policymakers cannot ignore.

Inevitably, changing drinking patterns and practices during UK/international lockdowns have received

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considerable attention from researchers who report increases in alcohol sales [6] and more frequent binge drinking [7]. Importantly, data for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics has demonstrated a sharp increase in alcohol-attributable deaths between April and September 2020 during the initial Spring lockdown. These findings have magnified concerns that health and well-being consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, including evidence of raised levels of alcohol consumption, are simultaneously apparent yet also hard to explain in straight forward terms [8]. For example, there is a risk of oversimplifying lockdown consumption practices. Important demographic variations in drinking behaviour during the pandemic include a possible ‘polarisation’ of drinking practices (heavier drinkers drinking more, lighter drinkers drinking less) [9]. A survey of 1500 UK drinkers in April 2020 reports that 47% of people who drank once a week or less had cut down or stopped drinking during the initial lockdown, compared to just one in five (17%) daily drinkers [10]. Understanding the nuances behind such figures (including factors that restrain and encourage alcohol consumption at home) is critical, as these kinds of polarisations may lead to widening social and health inequalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a new lens through which alcohol researchers can explore the widespread phenomenon of home drinking; specifically the ways in which domestic spaces might both enable and constrain consumption, and the lessons this may provide for policy and practice. Crucially, home-based drinking is associated with excessive and hazardous drinking [11,12] yet remains under-explored in academic literature [13,14], perhaps in part because public displays of drinking (including youth ‘binge drinking’ in the night-time economy) have received greater scrutiny in media representations, policy and research [2]. Alcohol research also traditionally tends to neglect *context*, space and the role of other human and non-human actors in shaping consumption. One exception is the work of Duff emphasising the importance of considering non-human actors and space when researching the consumption of alcohol and other drugs [15]. More recently, Böhling develops the concept of drinking assemblages in order to think about drinking and drunkenness as spatially-situated practices and draws attention to dynamic place-conditional effects of alcohol on subjects [16]. Similarly, Wilkinson’s work on ‘drinksapes’ considers ‘suburban indoor’ atmospheres in the context of young people’s drinking regimes [17], in particular the ways in which factors such as light and darkness can function as ‘active constituents’ of drinking occasions [17, zp. 739]. Others have drawn on the notion of

drinking affordances, that is, characteristics of environments/spaces which ‘request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage, and refuse’ alcohol consumption [18, p. 241]. This body of work challenges an understanding of drinking spaces as ‘passive backdrops’ for alcohol consumption, highlighting the active role that spaces and the objects within them can play in shaping drinking practices and how various assemblages flexibly and relationally co-construct drinking occasions and opportunities. These approaches share a focus on considering the ways in which non-human and human assemblages become entangled to create specific contexts, or potentialities for alcohol consumption, encouraging consideration of affect, environment and space in alcohol research.

In this article, we draw on these approaches to think about what *types* of constraint or opportunity to drink alcohol might be presented by the home environment, and the objects, spaces and bodies within it, drawing upon empirical data from recent research. Using lockdown as an unprecedented opportunity to pivot our attention to the neglected experience of home drinking, we addressed the following research question: ‘How is home-based alcohol consumption facilitated and/or inhibited during the 2020 UK lockdown?’.

## Methods

Our study explored drinking practices among adults who self-defined as regular drinkers living in the UK during the Spring 2020 lockdown. We gathered interview and focus group data about domestic/home-based drinking practices during a time of unprecedented uncertainty and social restriction following the initiation of the first lockdown in England in March 2020 when drinking in licensed venues was not possible for 4 months. Exploring alcohol consumption during these circumstances was intuitively of interest; individuals’ familiar drinking patterns and practices had been disrupted (perhaps permanently) in terms of new drinking spaces, new routes of access to alcohol and a new, more limited, social context for alcohol consumption to place.

Our exploratory study aims sought to understand drinking practices within a novel societal/global context (the COVID-19 pandemic), but also to understand drinking practices within home spaces and households. As discussed above, home-based drinking, despite representing a substantial and increasing proportion of overall adult alcohol consumption in the UK [1], has been neglected as an area of research attention from a health promotion and alcohol harm perspective [4,19].

Sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. Most participants were still working during the pandemic (for some, at home) and, while several had children, none mentioned additional caring responsibilities or living in precarious or unstable living situations. Institutional ethics approval was obtained and an opportunistic sample was recruited via social media drives, email recruitment messages and word-of-mouth. Interviews were conducted with 20 individuals comprising four small household focus group interviews (FGI)—each with two participants—and 12 one-to-one semi-structured interviews (SSI). The methods were used in tandem to provide participants the option to either engage with the project individually or as a ‘household’ comprising all adults over 18. All interviews took place between May and August 2020, between the first and second national lockdown in England. Licensed venues re-opened on 4 July 2020, with eight SSIs and two FGIs taking place before this measure and four SSIs and two FGIs taking place following the reopening of UK pubs (among other eased restrictions at that time). We did not observe significant differences in the data collected pre and post the reopening of the hospitality industry; where data collection took place after 4 July, this was within a few months of pubs reopening and many participants were still drinking at home and had not yet felt able to fully resume their pre-pandemic drinking practices.

All interviews were internet-mediated and took place via Microsoft Teams, Google Meet or Zoom. The interview schedule was devised by both authors together and designed broadly around three themes; features of drinking/social life pre-pandemic (e.g. ‘What was your social life like?’), during different periods of the pandemic (e.g. ‘Do you feel you have established any new routines around drinking since the lockdown started?’) and how socialising/drinking were anticipated post-pandemic (e.g. ‘Will resuming some of your previous drinking routines be part of your plans, post lockdown?’). Although exploring changes in drinking practices is not the focus of the research reported in this article per se, questions on altered (or enduring) drinking practices were relevant to our central focus on home-based alcohol consumption during the Spring 2020 UK lockdown. The schedule was used flexibly giving scope to focus on the concerns of participants. Piloting with a colleague (not included in the final sample) led to minor adjustments to schedule content and sequencing. Interviews lasted 40–79 min ( $M = 60.8$  min,  $SD = 11.4$ ) and anonymised interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Fourteen participants completed a ‘drinks diary’ (six individual diaries before SSIs and four paired diaries before FGIs), recording all drinking occasions for

1 week prior to their SSI or FGI, the amounts consumed and reflections around their consumption. This provided an indication of actual consumption levels and practices. Drink diary entries were considered both as a data elicitation device when conducting the interviews (e.g. using drink diary details as prompts for discussing recent drinking practices) and as part of the wider body of text to contextualise/frame ongoing analysis.

Data were subjected by Author 1 to thematic analysis with a ‘Big Q’ orientation which emphasises the researcher/analyst’s role in interpreting underlying meanings apparent in textual accounts of phenomena [20,21]. Transcripts were read and re-read to develop an understanding of meanings and patterns, leading to conceptual codes (e.g. ‘anticipating not drinking at home post-lockdown’; ‘preference for drinking outside the home’) which formed the basis of experiential themes. Themes were refined iteratively until a coherent, well-evidenced set was established. Author 2 reviewed the codes and themes and independently cross-referenced data against themes and put forward additional ideas for grouping/regrouping existing themes. For example, an early thematic structure proposed by the first author purely around ‘push and pull’ theme headings was, following discussion with the second author, revised so that these broader headings encapsulated more focused sub-themes in the eventual/final theme structure. A final set of themes concerning the role of domestic space as presenting/limiting opportunities to drink alcohol was jointly agreed.

## Findings

### *Pulled towards home drinking*

We will first consider factors/dynamics indicating how home spaces *pulled* individuals toward instigating alcohol consumption during an occasion and/or toward heavier drinking.

*Affordances of home spaces.* Interviews suggested that the environmental characteristics and norms of home spaces could facilitate (at times excessive) alcohol consumption. In many cases, the sheer proximity, accessibility and availability of alcoholic drinks in the home during lockdown had prompted higher levels of consumption. Participants described an ability to obtain alcohol with ease, as ‘essential’ shops remained open throughout lockdown. Purchasing patterns varied, from regular trips to local shops as and when alcohol was required to ordering alcohol online as part of a weekly online shop or through specialist alcohol

**Table 1.** Participant demographic and alcohol consumption characteristics pre and post initial lockdown

Interview details	Pseudonym (gender), age	Self-defined ethnicity	Contextual, employment status <sup>a</sup> during lockdown and household details	Interview date <sup>b</sup> (day 100 = 4 July 2020, UK pub-reopening)	Typical approximate drinking patterns during lockdown	
					Days per week	Units <sup>c</sup> per occasion
SSI#1	Robert (M), 45	White British	Academic; lives with wife and 3 children	59	7	12 (initial 2 weeks) 5 (last 2–3 weeks)
SSI#2	Kayla (F), 39	White British	Part-time student and full-time worker in creative design (initially furloughed but now full-time work); lives with husband	62	4	15 (initial 3 weeks) 8 (last 3–4 weeks)
SSI#3	Damien (M), 38	White British	Full-time student; lives alone	63	2	14
SSI#4	Stephen (M), 45	White British	Academic; lives with wife	67	2	5 (if not socialising) – 18 (if socialising)
SSI#5	Alison (F), 41	White	Academic; lives with husband	70	0	0 (stopped entirely in mid-lockdown)
SSI#6	Lois (F), 58	White	Events producer; lives alone	73	2–3	16–24
SSI#7	Mel (F), 37	White British	Project manager; lives with husband and young daughter	74	5–6	10–20
SSI#8	Charlotte (F), 43	White	Teacher; lives with husband and young son	90	4–5	8–10
SSI#9	Kriss (M), 32	White British	Employed; lives with female partner	118	6–7	2–6
SSI#10	Paul (M), 64	White British	Self-employed; lives alone	119	7	16
SSI#11	Indra (F), 32	White Latvian	Full-time student; lives with male partner	145	1–2	10
SSI#12	Rachel (F), 52	White British	Academic; since lockdown has either lived alone or with male partner	153	7	70 (c. April–May) Reduced amount since June.
FGI#1	Jess (F), 27	White British	Student and support worker; doing PhD, lives with Lucie	94	1–2	9–10
FGI#2	Lucie (F), 26 Joan (F), 65 Nigel (M), 65	White British White British White British	Teacher; lives with Jess Retired; lives with Nigel Retired; lives with Joan	105	1–2 3–5 7	9–10 30–36 42+
FGI#3	Bob (M), retired Susan (F), retired	White White	Retired; lives with Susan Mental health nurse; lives with Bob	109	1–2 0–1	3 Very low amounts. Has not really been drinking.
FGI#4	Tina (F), 51 Kev (M), 52	White White	Academic; lives with Kev Not supplied; lives with Tina	138	4 4	14–16 14–16

F, female; FGI, focus group interview; M, male; SSI, semi-structured interview. <sup>a</sup>Unless otherwise stated employment status unchanged post lockdown. <sup>b</sup>Day 0 = 26 March 2020 (i.e. start of legally enforced UK lockdown). <sup>c</sup>UK alcohol units, estimated or approximate.

websites. Alcohol was thus easy to purchase/access and was usually present in the house for almost all participants. Several participants described almost 'subconscious' or habitual consumption (such as going immediately to the fridge to grab a beer at the end of the working day). In addition, the mere presence of alcohol could act as a driver to consume:

Mel: *"The thing about a bottle of wine, because Steve doesn't drink wine... is that when I open it, I have to drink it all in a couple of days. But then that makes me want it again the next night if you know what I mean... it becomes a thing. And I think if Steve shared the bottle with me, then I probably won't think about it the next day because it's just been gone..." SSI#7*

Here, combinations of human and non-human assemblages (Mel, her husband Steve, the bottle of wine) are significant, and alcohol is infused with a form of agency that may propel consumption. Consumption is initiated here not necessarily by a desire to drink, but by the presence of a half-empty bottle itself and seemingly by the fact that husband Steve does not participate in wine consumption; thus, leaving half-drunk bottles for Mel to finish. Mel's use of the phrasing 'have to drink it all' also suggests she has a sense of *diminished* agency; perhaps something of a compulsion or sense of pressure to finish an open bottle. At the very least, the visible presence of the wine bottle serves to facilitate consumption across 'a couple of days', with Mel admitting she 'probably wouldn't think about it [drinking] the next day' without the opened bottle prompting continued consumption. The bottle of wine becomes an actor in this particular context and space (in a way that it presumably would not if Mel was ordering a glass of wine in a pub); the fact that it *has* to be finished positions it as integral to co-producing this particular act of drinking and challenges any notion of objects as mere backdrops to consumption.

Others also alluded to the diminished agency in discussions of subconscious consumption and new drinking habits that might take place with little reflection or thought. This is illustrated by participants such as Lois, who argues it is 'easy to lose track' of home consumption, and Kriss:

Kriss: *"[In public] I don't think I would have been so drunk cos I'd have been more concerned with playing up in public so... I'd be drinking slowly and err... probably be getting up and walking around and chatting to different people so you'd be having to think whereas I was just sat in the sun in a little chair with a book and continuously topping up my glass... I mean I wasn't aware what I was doing... of how quickly I was drinking." SSI#9*

Apparent here is the importance of non-human actors or objects in creating a comfortable drinking space, with the presence of the sun, chair and book encouraging Kriss to remain more stationary and the domestic context allowing Kriss to easily and 'continuously' top up his drink. The significance of social dynamics and the potentially constraining impact of the presence of others in public space is also relevant. Without the company and distraction of others in the pub environment, Kriss describes an acceleration of drinking when alone in a space that lacks the (potentially curbing) social norms of the pub environment. By drinking at home, Kriss' intoxication can pass unnoticed (and the potential embarrassment of 'playing up in public' is avoided), removing further obstacles to heavier drinking in home spaces. In this way, the different atmosphere of the home environment and the absence of other bodies whose mere presence might act as 'checks' on excessive drinking and drunkenness could make it easier to drink more quickly or heavily.

*Reimagining home spaces.* Characteristics of home spaces could also magnify the potential for alcohol consumption. For example, alcohol helped re-imagine mundane household spaces to break up monotony and to salvage/re-live pleasurable pre-lockdown socialising:

Jess: *"We turned our shed into a little bar [...] We go in the shed for a night now just because it creates some sort of division, like, moving room... we've had three like heavy-ish nights where we've stayed up to 4:00 am since lockdown... we've been having tequila there because that's what we would do when at a club... so we're trying to replicate some of the ways that we used to drink before to get that sense of the sameness."*

Lucie: *"Yes, it's just a bit novel to be able to go out there... we took the speaker out..."*

Jess: *"Someone from work gave us some fairy lights to put in it... we've not actually built a bar, we've just turned the shed into a bar... it looks more like a normal internal room... [there's] blankets in for when it gets cold, we've just tried to foster it as like a different space. To be fair, I've probably been in there once not drinking... other than that we use it primarily to drink in, so it is definitely a symbol of alcohol in our household now." FGI#1*

Without access to socially charged, atmospheric nocturnal environments, Jess and Lucie re-imagined a relatively inhospitable home space (their garden shed) to produce an exotic, stimulating space. Here, home

drinking practices channelled creative energies during a period of social restriction, and household objects such as fairy lights, speakers and blankets take on significance in co-constructing a new drinking space. Data here suggested how novel/external drinking spaces were actively sought out for perhaps different reasons. Apparent was a desire to recreate pubs/club environments where alcohol consumption felt more appropriate/legitimate in a space clearly marked apart from 'the house'. But there was also a sense of the desire to create a space where alcohol-induced sociability could be forefronted during an era where such activities had been abruptly curtailed and in-so-doing perhaps to use alcohol and newly appropriated spaces to produce (albeit fleetingly) a return to 'normal life'. It is also worth noting the ways in which heavier alcohol use appeared as the central active/catalytic ingredient ('symbol of alcohol'), and how new space offered a like-for-like replacement in the absence of missed social environments, apparent in terms of drink choices. Other participants also talked about using alcohol to create a sense of 'holiday' from everyday life, with Mel describing how a bottle of rum (an atypical drink for her and her partner) helped transform her home into a 'hotel' during the pandemic. In these examples, particular beverages become significant or agentic in transforming drinking spaces and practices and in establishing 'liminal' spaces (such as nightlife space or holiday space) situated outside of the home. Space and alcohol are entangled here; with alcohol co-creating new drinking spaces; for example, 'novel' or 'exotic' drinks helped Mel to produce a theatrical sense of holiday. At the same time, particular spaces may enable new drinking practices, with the 'shed bar' facilitating 'heavy-ish nights' and the consumption of shots of tequila that would not be consumed inside the house.

#### *Pushed away from home drinking*

We now turn to dynamics suggestive of how home spaces inhibited the initiation of drinking or might cue reflection on drinking and reduce the likelihood of heavier consumption.

*Drinking debris.* As previously highlighted, domestic environment characteristics could work interactively to facilitate alcohol consumption. But dilemmas/discomfort linked to home-based alcohol consumption also seemed to *constrain* personal alcohol consumption. This constraining force was apparent partly in discomfort around the visibility of empty alcohol containers symbolising recent consumption:

Rachel: *"It's just more obvious when you're drinking and when you're not drinking cos you're not having to go to the effort of going out so it's... so I'm just noticing more... there's the evidence of it the next day... I have to go downstairs to the ground floor and carry the recycling bin to outside the front of my house and just a couple of times it being very obvious to me that this is quite a lot of bottles going into the recycling bin and kind of like, gosh, really did get through a lot this weekend."*

**SSI#12**

Unlike the empty drink glasses cleared away in pub/bar spaces, evidence of alcohol consumption at home was inescapable and could cue reflection on drinking practices ('it's just more obvious'). Once again, physical bottles—this time ones that are already empty—take on an active role beyond that of mere 'container' of alcohol, that may serve as a symbolic indicator of excess (the trail or aftermath of consumption) and visually confront participants with evidence of their drinking in a way that would not occur in licensed venues. The routine or act of disposing of these bottles is also bound up with space (as Rachel illustrates above) in ways that are significant in a domestic context.

#### *Valuing separateness between home and drinking spaces.*

The pandemic had also forced our participants (all regular drinkers) to consider whether alcohol consumption in home spaces was an acceptable or attractive proposition both during and post-pandemic. Some questioned the desirability of drinking at home at all, and even those who had incorporated home-based drinking into lockdown life spoke of valuing spaces beyond the home for drinking. For these participants, pub spaces offered a crucial 'change of scene':

Kriss: *"Before [the pandemic] if I ever fancied a drink on a Saturday or Sunday midday... I'll just walk to the pub... and not necessarily a pub that my friends would be in... I'd just get myself out cos I'd rather socialize outside than be indoors... I'd say my everyday life doesn't seem so important now I'm drinking every day... because I'm not in a social environment where other people are drinking... I suppose I just want it to go back to where it was before cos I'd rather not drink at home and have just the work, home and then somewhere else to... socialise, chat, have a bolt hole so to speak."* **SSI#9**

After 115 days of lockdown, Kriss clearly missed 'third spaces' (like pubs) beyond work/home as an outlet of escape to buffer against life's demands. Part of this seemed to involve nostalgia for pre-pandemic separation between home and drinking spaces: daily

home-based experience felt strangely flat (“everyday life doesn’t seem so important now”) despite now “drinking every day”. The pub is literally represented as an important third space, while the term “bolt hole” denotes a safe space to escape or retreat to when needed.

Other participants valued separateness between home and drinking spaces on the basis that alcohol’s presence in the home was experienced as unnecessary, inappropriate or troubling, reflecting on historical personal relationships with alcohol and offering careful deliberation around alcohol’s role in lockdown life:

Indra: *"My partner has a beer whilst he's cooking and I'm just never tempted... home is a safe space for me... I lived for one year during uni in a place where I really didn't feel comfortable so something there around my home and where I live being very important for me... because of my personal experiences... the sort of safety... sort of a safe space is very important to me [...] Five years ago there would be instances where I'd get very drunk sort of blackout drunk I'm still functioning still moving around but the next day I don't remember stuff... and that concerned my partner a lot... so [now] he finds it concerning when I consume a lot of alcohol and [the idea of] being at home drinking with him during lockdown I thought well I don't really want to get blackout drunk."* **SSI#11**

As lockdown began, Indra anticipated potential dangers linked to home-based alcohol consumption arising from, in part, her historical relationship with alcohol and its previous strains on important relationships (with her partner). For Indra, the securities of home space would be undermined by the risk of introducing historic drinking practices (‘blackout drunk’) into domestic space, threatening key relationships and her own mental and physical health. Indra managed these tensions *not* through attempting to drink alcohol at home in moderation but through consciously avoiding home consumption entirely and maintaining clear demarcations between home spaces and spaces where alcohol might be legitimately consumed. Material here concerning external spaces for alcohol consumption recalled Jess and Lucie’s re-imagined shed section discussed above. Once again, this could be read as an attempt to keep particular—even ‘risky’—drinking practices away from domestic space; for example, ‘heavy-ish’ nights and consumption of shots of tequila is confined to a space outside of the home here in ways that once again may help to maintain a distinction between home space (as secure and familiar) and external drinking spaces. Taken together, this material speaks to the multi-directional impact of the closure of third space options on individuals’ drinking

practices. Material also highlights how alcohol use (and non-use) could be involved in establishing boundaries around reconfigured life spaces and could inform and steer the possibilities for practices within domestic spaces.

## Discussion

The pandemic has presented opportunities to understand home drinking as an under-researched but widespread phenomenon, highlighting environmental and contextual factors that might encourage or discourage alcohol consumption in domestic spaces. This paper draws attention to the significance of home spaces, objects and human and non-human actors in enabling and constraining domestic drinking. In particular, objects such as ‘beers in the fridge’ or open/empty wine bottles may play an active and integral role in the co-construction of drinking occasions, facilitating both consumption without reflection (subconsciously grabbing beer from the fridge) but also reflection upon consumption (empty bottles after a drink occasion). Different types of alcohol may also help to co-create new drinking spaces or atmospheres (the feeling of being on holiday), while, simultaneously, new drinking spaces may enable novel or different types of alcohol to be consumed (shots in a shed). As Wilkinson argues, home spaces grant drinkers a degree of freedom to craft particular ‘drinkscape’ (through for example the use of music and lighting) in ways that are not possible in public drinking space [17]. It is worth noting that before the pandemic, this kind of crafting might be undertaken to facilitate ‘pre-drinking’ (i.e. domestic consumption prior to participation in the night-time economy), a process likely associated with anticipation and excitement. However, for our participants, these particular modes of consumption were not possible, with domestic drinking becoming an end in itself. In this sense, drinking settings such as the ‘shed’ bar may have taken on a particular significance in representing a space to drink alcohol linked to but outside of the immediate home environment.

While domestic spaces might facilitate stimulation and excitement, different dynamics of domestic space also deterred domestic consumption, for example, among those conscious of keeping home environments as ‘safe spaces’. This accords with previous discussion of how experiences of embodied drunkenness may carry unpredictability and threat (even danger) that are unwelcome in the familiar environment of the home [1,16]. Feeling ‘safe’ is a highly spatialised process and ‘safety’ is a relational and embodied concept associated with feeling ‘comfortable, warm and relaxed’ [22:

p. 77] in a particular environment. This was certainly the case for some of our participants, where it is possible that the unpredictability associated with drunkenness threatened the safety of domestic space, with some participants abstaining from domestic consumption and others keen to remove heavy drinking from the immediate confines of the home (e.g. displacing it to gardens or sheds). This *incompatibility* of home spaces with the unpredictability of drunkenness might be capitalised on in public health policy campaigns. Yet, at the same time, it is worth noting that such unpredictability, escape and perhaps even challenge to the comfort and familiarity of domestic space may be something drinkers deliberately seek.

The loss of public drinking spaces as ‘third spaces’ beyond home and work was keenly felt by some participants. The pandemic has likely accelerated the closure of some UK pubs and other third spaces; a development with diverse community, social and political implications [23,24]. Third spaces were also valued as spaces that kept alcohol removed from home environments. Pub spaces are conventionally understood as ‘enablers’ of consumption (evident in, for example, drink promotions) [25] but our data suggested that they may also place distinctive normative or social *constraints* on alcohol consumption. The absence of these constraints may help explain why individuals who typically drink at home tend to consume more than those who predominantly drink in pubs [11]. Participants also remarked on the ease with which they could purchase alcohol for home consumption, highlighting the role that alcohol delivery services might play in facilitating the increased availability of alcohol during a pandemic and more widely [26]. Similarly, requirements such as matching peer consumption levels (e.g. buying rounds) may serve to constrain personal consumption levels in pub spaces, as could needing to physically go to the bar to purchase alcohol. We note here that any constraining influence of social norms on alcohol consumption in pub/bar spaces runs in contradiction to traditional debates that emphasise the dangers and risks of ‘disorderly’ public consumption. A cautious tone is important—clearly peer influence in pubs can serve to magnify consumption styles and intoxication levels. However, findings here accord with appeals for more nuanced, granular and potentially reciprocal relationships in accounts of links between drinking practices, socialising and urban drinking spaces, where the presence of others may at times act as a constraining or moderating influence on consumption [27]. Third spaces may also offer a valued sense of community (in the form of a local pub) or escape and release (for example through clubbing) with implications for mental health and wellbeing. In contrast, home consumption may be experienced as

something habitual or subconscious, as illustrated by the accessibility of drinks, ‘topping up’ or by imagined imperatives to finish bottles. This has relevance from an alcohol guidelines adherence perspective, as regular topping up, losing track of consumption levels or drinking non-standard measures may render public health guidelines around ‘moderation’ and recommended units less visible and meaningful for consumers in domestic spaces. At the same time, however, other drinkers may become *more* aware of their consumption levels in private space. For example, empty glass bottles may serve as a visual indicator of consumption levels and force drinkers to reflect upon their consumption in a way that would not be possible in a licensed venue.

The use of online research methods (necessitated by the pandemic) may have impacted upon the ways in which participants engaged with the project, with face-to-face methods potentially offering more opportunity to build rapport. However, participants’ readiness to openly discuss their drinking practices suggests that it was possible to build a connection online. The ability to interview people online expanded the geographical reach of the project and there may have been some advantage in talking to people about home-based practices while they were ‘in situ’ at home.

Links between alcohol use, distress and wide-ranging mental health issues and behaviours—and the ways in which this may be gendered—have been addressed in an emerging body of empirical work on drinking and lockdown [28–30]. For those we spoke to, the life circumstances produced by the COVID-19 pandemic and societal lockdown had implications for how alcohol may have been used (some participants linked consumption to stress, uncertainty, boredom or the difficulties of parenting during a pandemic). However, a more detailed discussion of the links between lockdown, mental health and coping is beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, our small sample of participants were mainly identifiable as middle-class, white and in relatively stable living situations, so had not been as adversely affected by the pandemic as—for example—those losing employment, taking on significant new caring responsibilities or without access to stable housing [e.g. 31].

## Conclusions

Findings presented here highlight ways in which alcohol consumption might be constrained and/or enabled in domestic space during a significant period of social change. Such observations are relevant beyond the immediate pandemic with increasing shifts to domestic consumption more generally in recent years (a shift



perhaps further accelerated by the COVID-19 lockdowns). Greater consideration of the contextual and spatial affordances of the home—as well as the value and meaning of ‘home’ and of drinking spaces beyond the home—may inform both future research and alcohol-related health promotion messages, particularly if the pandemic encourages home drinking as ‘a new normal’ for individuals previously reluctant to drink at home. Recognition of the agentic forces of spaces, objects and actants can help us to further understand the contexts in which substance use occurs [15] in a more holistic way that can feed into health policy recommendations. For example, guidance and advice promoting drinking in moderation might benefit from considering how real or imagined pressures might lead to consumers drinking more at home in order to ‘finish’ open bottles of alcohol and avoid ‘wasting’ the leftovers from a drinking occasion. Future research might also consider the ways in which these different push and pull factors—including the agentic properties of non-human actors such as bottles of alcohol—might affect drinkers differently in regards to factors such as life stage, gender and social class, with a view to producing tailored public health guidance and messaging.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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