

Comparison of Exchange Students' Views  
of the Drinking Culture at MIT and Cambridge

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## **Introduction**

The United States and the United Kingdom have extensive cultural differences despite sharing the same language. One of the most significant differences between the two countries is their drinking cultures. The legal drinking age in the United States is 18 years old while the age is 21 years old in the United Kingdom. The disparity in ages has the ability to create a distinct divide in the way children are raised to deal with and view alcohol. How do the drinking cultures in the U.S. and U.K. differ? Is one better than the other? This paper addresses these two questions in the context of two universities- Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the University of Cambridge.

MIT and Cambridge are linked by a strong exchange program called the Cambridge-MIT Exchange (CME) Program. About 40 to 60 students are exchanged between MIT and Cambridge through CME. In addition to adapting to new academic experiences, the exchange students are forced to adapt to a new culture, one which may seem alien to their own experiences. In order to answer the broader questions posed above, this paper studies the exchange students' perceptions of the drinking culture at Cambridge and at MIT. How do Cambridge students view the drinking culture at Cambridge, and how do their views compare with MIT students' views while abroad? Likewise, how do Cambridge students' views on the MIT drinking culture compare with those of MIT students? Analyzing a drinking culture from two different angles provides a better understanding of the overall structure of the life around alcohol.

## **Background of the CME Students**

The interviews were conducted in both individual and group settings, depending on the preference of the interviewee. While questions about education and responsibility, alcohol's involvement in social life, and drinking alone were presented, the interviewees were allowed to freely direct the conversation. Follow-up questions about their personal drinking habits were asked by e-mail for privacy reasons. The views and statistics in this paper were all self-reported data, making under-reporting or over-reporting potential problems. However, Wechsler claims that "a number of studies have confirmed the validity of self-reports of alcohol and substance... [because] if a self-report bias exists, it

is largely limited to the heaviest use group” (1676). Thus self-reporting is an adequate tool for studying the two alcohol cultures.

It is necessary to know about the background and drinking habits of the interviewed students to understand their views on drinking. Thirteen students were interviewed for the paper. Their names are Mark, Charles, Larry, Steve, Julie, Nina, Simon, Cindy, Mary, Jack, Mabel, George, and Albert. As shown in Table 1, four students were originally from MIT, and nine students were from Cambridge. Three of the nine Cambridge students did not have British backgrounds.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Home University</b>	<b>Background Country</b>
Mark	Cambridge	United Kingdom
Charles	Cambridge	United Kingdom
Larry	Cambridge	United Kingdom
Steve	Cambridge	India
Julie	Cambridge	Austria
Nina	Cambridge	Greece
Simon	Cambridge	Poland/U.S./U.K.
Cindy	MIT	United States
Mary	MIT	United States
Jack	MIT	United States
Mabel	MIT	United States
George	Cambridge	United Kingdom
Albert	Cambridge	United Kingdom

Table 1. Basic Information on CME Students

Of those interviewed, three students either abstained from drinking or drank very little, roughly twice a term. The drinking habits of the interviewed students are in Table 2.

<b>Name</b>	<b>MIT</b>		<b>Cambridge</b>	
	<b>How many times a week on average do you drink?</b>	<b>How many drinks on average do you typically consume in one setting?</b>	<b>How many times a week on average do you drink?</b>	<b>How many drinks on average do you typically consume in one setting?</b>
Mark	2 to 3	2 to 8	3 to 4	3 to 8
Charles	2 to 3	2	1 to 2	2 to 3
Larry	0.5	2	1	2
Steve	0.33	2	2	2
Julie	0	0	0	0
Nina	1	1	1	1
Simon	1	0 to 5	1	0 to 5
Cindy	0	0	0	0
Mary	2 to 3	2	1 to 2	2 to 3
Jack	0.5	2 to 3	1 to 2	3 to 4
Mabel	0	0	0	0
George	1	5 to 10	2 to 3	5 to 10
Albert	2	3	4	3

Table 2. Drinking Habits of CME Students Interviewed

The definition of a “drink” was self-defined. Cambridge students tended to define a “drink” as one pint of beer or one glass of wine. MIT students, however, did not specifically define “drink” and thought in terms of physical drinks, not volume or alcoholic percentages. When explicitly asked to provide a definition, MIT students cited a similar statistic with Cambridge students, that one drink equaled one glass of wine, one mixed drink, or one pint of beer.

## **Education and Responsibility**

All students interviewed agreed the concept of alcohol is different between the U.S. and the U.K. Julie, for example, states that alcohol is a “luxury with good food” in Europe and is a method of “getting yourself drunk off cheap alcohol” in the U.S. The drinking age of 21 also places a mysterious quality on alcohol in the U.S. whereas no such stigma or power exists for liquor in the U.K. The differing cultures at the two universities, MIT and Cambridge, are reflective of the alcohol policies of their respective countries. In the U.K., buying alcohol under the age of 18 is illegal but drinking alcohol is not. Thus parents could allow their children to have a glass of wine at family dinners without any thought or consequences. Going to pub with a parent to have a drink, for example, was a treat that Mark cherished as a young kid. On the other hand, in the U.S., a stigma exists on alcohol. Children are warned against alcohol in elementary schools, and parents feel wrong for allowing their children any alcohol.

Simon, who has lived in both the U.S. and the U.K. for four years each, believes the drinking culture in the United States is more “childish and erratic” because it prevents American students from developing responsible drinking habits. In general, other CME students share Simon’s view in that students are more likely to binge drink when they reach college because suddenly they have somewhat unfettered access to alcohol and very little experience with it. However, Cindy, an American, notes that the lower legal drinking age means British children start to drink at an earlier age between 11 and 15 years old. Even though this allows British children to gain experience with alcohol, she believes that “childhood should not be impaired by culture.”

Are students from Cambridge more educated about alcohol than students from MIT because they have more experience? George believes so. He states that with less

experience, MIT students do not know when their drunken friend is actually in danger or not. He feels that both MIT and Cambridge students care equally about their friends, but MIT students seem to be more ignorant of the dangers of alcohol. For example, George always checks to make sure none of his inebriated friends are sleeping on their backs to prevent their choking on vomit. He cannot recall anyone in the fraternity he lives in now checking on him.

Most of the CME students interviewed agree with George in his assertion that Cambridge students are more educated about alcohol through experience. However, Julie has also observed that MIT places more emphasis on alcohol education by bombarding students with information about the dangers of alcohol. Less education occurs at Cambridge, Charles argues, because alcohol is a normal part of their culture.

If Cambridge students seem to be more educated about alcohol, are they more responsible? No one interviewed thought being more education created more responsibility with alcohol, and the exchange students interviewed had difficulty deciding who was more responsible. While Cambridge students were aware of their limits and tolerance, Cambridge students tend to drink more. Steve believes this leads to a tendency for addiction and believes there are “far more alcoholics in Cambridge undoubtedly” than at MIT.

Simon opposes Steve’s view. He feels that MIT students feel obliged to “drink ‘til you drop” after they turn 21 years old. An abundance of alcohol is needed to have a good time, and thus drinking becomes a necessary game instead of a relaxing, social event. Cindy, who abstains from drinking, also believes Cambridge students are more responsible because they can drink socially whereas MIT students will “take ten shots and be unable to go home” by themselves. However, she does not know if this is because Cambridge students go through their binge drinking, rebellious phrase at a younger age so that alcohol loses its novelty by the time they enter college or because those who binge drink frequently are less likely to be accepted by the University of Cambridge. Mabel, another abstainer, notes that she encounters less students screaming random obscenities and urinating in the streets at MIT. However, she does not know if this is because MIT students have less freedom or are more responsible. Nina, Julie, and Steve, Cambridge students with non-British backgrounds, stated in their individual interviews that they

believed MIT and Cambridge students drink the same amount per setting and that MIT and Cambridge students are equally responsible and irresponsible.

Examples that support their views are the two formal dinners held this year by Cambridge students at MIT. According to Albert, Cambridge students introduced the non-exchange MIT students to pennyning at their first formal dinner at MIT. Pennyning, a common drinking game at Cambridge, occurs when one places a penny into another's wine glass, forcing the person to down their entire glass of wine. Cambridge students, as well as MIT students, found themselves unexpectedly drunk later in the evening. The aftermath of the event was a mess, and a number of people had to be carried home. A similar account of the second formal dinner is told by George and Mark. Bathrooms on the first floor were filled with vomit with numerous people passed out from drinking too much alcohol. According to Mark, the formals at MIT were "carnage because the last time anyone [Cambridge] got drunk was a long time ago."

Both the Cambridge and MIT students interviewed agreed that in general, more drinking sessions with less drinking occur at Cambridge while fewer drinking sessions with more drinking "to make up for it" occur at MIT. Responsibility then becomes a function of frequency. The more frequently one drinks, the more likely he will remember the drunkenness of previous nights and then drink in smaller quantities. However, if one drank less, the student is not aware of his limits or what he regretted last time he became inebriated.

## **Alcohol and Socializing**

Alcohol is institute endorsed at Cambridge and a visible aspect of academic and social life. Nearly everything revolves around alcohol in Cambridge, whether they are university-sponsored events or having a drink in a friend's room. Drinks with academic advisors, or directors of studies, are frequent as are formal dinners complemented by copious amounts of wine. To drink is the norm, and everyone is assumed to be a drinker on some level.

In contrast, alcohol at MIT is more underground and virtually nonexistent on a visible level. Cindy uses "clandestine" to describe the drinking culture at MIT. College bars do not exist at MIT, and drinks with professors or other faculty members are very

rare. Holding official events with alcohol requires a certain amount of paperwork, signatures, and justifications for the alcohol. Thus most of the drinking is hidden, occurring in dorms and fraternities where underage drinking can also flourish.

Although comparisons cannot be drawn between academically-sponsored wet events between MIT and Cambridge, social drinking outside academic settings at Cambridge and MIT can be studied. Pubs are one example of a regularly frequented place at Cambridge. British pubs are not equivalent to American bars, and the CME students interviewed place a strong distinction between the two establishments. Cindy, for example, cites that pubs are a place to socialize with friend and family while eating dinner or having a few drinks. Bars, on the other hand, are places one goes to become intoxicated. Pubs have been culturally ingrained as a meeting place in Cambridge. Jack was surprised when his interviewer for a summer job wanted to interview him at a pub. Mabel has also been asked, “What pub is closest to you?” several times when trying to meet someone in Cambridge.

Jack does not believe social reasons are why Cambridge students drink in pubs. He feels going to pubs is simply an expected place to go. However, Simon, like his Cambridge peers, describes going to the pub as “going out with my friends and talking over beer, sipping away.” Thus alcohol becomes more of a “relaxant and de-stressor than a necessity.” Both Julie and Simon believe that MIT students think copious amounts of alcohol are necessary for a good time whereas Cambridge students are content in having only one drink.

While most CME students feel MIT is more anti-social compared to Cambridge, the majority feels that alcohol would not help loosen the socially awkward MIT students. Most CME students have argued that those who go out drinking now are already the more social students at MIT. Those who tend to stay in their rooms will most likely still stay in their rooms despite the prevalence of alcohol.

## **Drinking Alone**

While both Cambridge and MIT students would agree that having a coffee at MIT is socially equivalent to having a pint at a local pub in Cambridge, MIT students tend to view the “one pint” as an alcoholic beverage whereas Cambridge students do not. This

disparity is best demonstrated through their views on drinking alone. The majority of Cambridge and MIT students agree that drinking a beer in front of the television is acceptable. However, more Cambridge students than MIT students approve of having a glass of wine for inspiration and relaxation before writing a paper.

Most Cambridge students interviewed have had a drink alone and have not felt strange or guilty about it. The drink they consume is usually one beer, and they cite relaxation as the reason for consuming it. To most Cambridge students, the one drink becomes a nonalcoholic drink, like “diet coke” says Nina. Charles states that his one beer “ceases to be alcohol” and becomes a normal drink because he would not consume alcohol before completing important tasks, such as homework. Mark echoes Charles by maintaining, “Having one drink to relax is like drinking coffee; you never have more than one if you are just relaxing and going back to work soon.” For Cambridge students, the key to acceptability is the quantity of drinks. Having one, maybe two, beers alone is socially acceptable and drinking more is not. Two exceptions are Steve and Larry. Steve still views the beer as an alcoholic beverage while Larry cites that an occasion is needed for the drink.

All CME students agree that frequent solo drinking is unhealthy, but MIT students are more prone to believe that drinking alone is a sign of alcoholism. Cambridge students feel that “just because you want a beer now and nobody is around, that doesn't mean that you are an alcoholic” (Simon). To Cambridge students, drinking alone as a sign of alcoholism is simply a stereotype people have because alcoholics tend to drink alone.

### **Abstaining from Alcohol**

There exists “residual pressure,” according to Julie, to drink at Cambridge because nearly everyone drinks there. At MIT, she argues, it is easier to form friendships with people who do not drink and to never be around people who drink. Thus she feels more pressure to drink at Cambridge than at MIT. However, Mabel and Cindy believe there is less pressure to drink at Cambridge because Cambridge students are more concerned with having a good time than getting wasted. Thus they do not notice if someone's cup contains no alcohol. Mabel feels Cambridge students are sympathetic

towards non-drinkers, and they “do not know what to do with you since they can’t buy you a beer.” However, no Cambridge student has ever reproached her for not drinking alcohol. Cindy agrees with Mabel, noting that Cambridge students took her non-drinking stance at face value whereas she was repeatedly offered alcohol at MIT instead of being left alone.

## **Comparisons with Other Studies**

The views of the Cambridge and MIT students were not directly compared with other studies of university drinking cultures because Cambridge and MIT are not representative colleges in their respective countries. Both are highly competitive universities and thus tend to select students with a certain level of educational background. State schools, with a better combination of students with different backgrounds and cultures, are more representative of a typical college drinking culture. In terms of drinking, statistics have also shown that the best universities have the worst drinking behavior, another reason why national statistics cannot be compared with this paper (Seaman 226).

Despite these facts, CME students’ views on drinking in Cambridge are aligned with drinking at other British universities on three accounts. First, several studies have shown that the main reason students drink is for “pleasure...or ‘enjoying the taste’ and ‘being sociable’” (Gill 114). These same reasons are cited by CME Cambridge students for their drinking habits, and MIT students agreed with Cambridge students on the social drinking view of Cambridge. Second, alcohol studies have revealed that “binge drinking for many [young adults] may be viewed as a normal pattern of alcohol consumption” (Gill 119). Cambridge, with its formal dinners, pub crawls, and other social events, revolves around alcohol, and MIT students had to adjust to this new level of alcohol visibility in Cambridge. In addition, Cambridge students at MIT suddenly had to limit their alcohol usage to certain occasions and locations that were apart from academic life.

A third observation is that “the most egregious misuse [of alcohol while abroad] was by visiting Americans who went nuts at the prospect of unfettered access to alcohol” (Seaman 234). While none of the CME students explicitly stated having similar experiences, they do believe that the American taboo on drinking empowers alcohol and

increases the likelihood of binge drinking to account for the infrequency of drinking events.

## **Conclusion**

Research has shown that CME students have similar general views on the drinking culture at Cambridge and MIT. While anthropologist Dwight Heath argues, “In a ‘wet culture’ where young people are early socialized to drinking, they simultaneously learn how to drink moderately, how and why to avoid drunkenness, not to expect magical transformations from drink, and to view excesses as inappropriate and illustrative of weakness,” CME students understand that this is not necessarily the case (Seaman 237). Based on their own experiences, CME students believe that experience does not necessarily entail more responsibility or education. While students at Cambridge have more drinking sessions with less drinking, MIT students have fewer drinking sessions but drink more. However, a Cambridge student at MIT may unexpectedly drink more than he intended, instead of carrying over his experiences in Cambridge.

Two surprising results are the conflicting opinions between drinkers and abstainers and between the U.K. and U.S. against other European countries. Abstainers tend to have more conservative views on alcohol, whether they are from Cambridge or MIT. They judged drinking alone more harshly and also consciously set themselves away from the drinking culture at MIT. The three students of a non-British background perceived the MIT and Cambridge drinking cultures to be relatively similar in terms of quantity of alcohol consumed whereas British Cambridge students and MIT students felt more differences existed between their two cultures.

The drinking culture at MIT is distinct from the culture at Cambridge, and national politics and history have a heavy role in defining these differences. However, CME students could not determine which one was better. Both cultures have their own promises of encouraging safe drinking habits, and both have their own flaws of unintentionally promoting binge drinking.

## Resources

Gill, Jan S. "Reported Levels of Alcohol Consumption and Binge Drinking Within the U.K. Undergraduate Student Population Over the Last 25 Years." *Alcohol and Alcoholism*. 37(2):109-120 (2002).

Seaman, Barrett. *Binge: Campus Life in an Age of Disconnection and Excess*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2005.

Wechsler, Henry. "Health and Behavioral Consequences of Binge Drinking in College." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 272(21):1672-1676 (1994).

## **Appendix**

### **Questions asked in all interviews:**

- 1) What do you think of the drinking culture at MIT? At Cambridge?
- 2) What do you think of the drinking age of 18 versus 21?
- 3) Do you think Cambridge or MIT students are better educated about alcohol?
- 4) Do you think Cambridge or MIT students are more responsible with alcohol?
- 5) Would you still have respect for a professor who became drunk with you at a formal dinner (with wine)?
- 6) If you were to drink only one can of beer in front of a television, for example, would you consider that drink equivalent to a can of soda or would you view yourself as drinking alcohol?
- 7) Name drinking games you frequently take part in as well as the type of alcohol it involves.
- 8) What do you think about drinking alone?

### **Follow up questions:**

- 1) How many times a week on average did you drink at Cambridge? At MIT?
- 2) How many drinks do you typically consume in one setting at Cambridge? At MIT?
- 3) When did you first start drinking?
- 4) What was your first drink (beer, spirits, cider, alcopops, etc.)?
- 5) Where were you when you had your first drink and who gave it to you?