

Young people are drinking less—here's an alternative to try on your next night out

January 30 2023, by Alexandra Kviat



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A new leisure trend is providing an alternative to pubs and bars for young people whose alcohol consumption [has been declining](#) for years.

Competitive socializing takes the centuries-old idea of mixing food with games (think [medieval banquets](#)) and amplifies it. Options range from reinvented versions of [bowling](#), [board games](#), [darts](#), [ping pong](#), [shuffleboard](#), [table football](#), [mini golf](#), [cricket](#), to [ax-throwing](#), [escape rooms](#) and [virtual reality bars](#). The common denominator is fun, immersive social experiences served with high quality food and drinks in eye-catching, Instagrammable interiors.

According to market research analysts from [Intel UK](#), a quarter of people surveyed about their [leisure activities](#) in autumn 2022 said they recently played a social entertainment game. And analysts predict that competitive socializing will remain popular despite ongoing economic uncertainty.

Millennials and Generation Z are [driving the trend](#). Not only are they drinking less, they are spending [less on commodities and more on experiences](#).

Competitive socializing venues [have the potential](#) to fill empty stores and drive footfall back to the high street. My soon-to-be-published study of the UK's social board gaming scene revealed just how much this sector contributes to [local communities](#).

Unique leisure experiences do not just create personal memories, they are also the [social currency](#) of digital capitalism. [Research has shown](#) that being able to impress others with our nights out, holiday trips and festival visits is just as important as the actual quality of these activities.

After months of COVID-19 lockdowns, [being offline is the new luxury](#). The thirst for multisensory fun and in-person social interaction makes competitive socializing [increasingly appealing](#) not only to young professionals but also to families and corporate clients looking for fresh team-building ideas.

Reviving local business scenes

Between June 2021 and September 2022, I visited 24 social board gaming venues in six regions of England and interviewed 50 people who own, organize and attend them. I was initially trying to find out what draws people to analog games in a digital age and why they choose to play them outside the home.

The most popular answers were getting away from the screen, having a tactile experience and being able to socialize without drinking too much. For those who moved towns during the pandemic, visiting a board game social became the easiest and safest way to find new friends. Many people said that [board games](#) "add structure to socializing", which is especially important for [neurodiverse people](#) and those dealing with [post-pandemic social anxiety](#).

But as I dug deeper, I realized that social board gaming does even more than that—it also supports local independent business [scenes](#).

Most board game cafes partner with local bakeries, coffee roasters and other food suppliers. Some businesses, like [Dice Board Game Lounge](#) in Portsmouth or [Dice Saloon](#) in Brighton, contribute to urban regeneration by breathing new life into underused buildings.

As the UK's pubs were closing down at alarming rates in 2022, I saw publicans trying to attract customers by reaching out to local game enthusiasts. Some avid hobbyists host pub [game](#) nights in their free time, others have launched [small event companies](#), running socials in independent venues. Mintel's recent [UK pub market report](#) says 20% of their Gen Z respondents "don't visit pubs often or at all"—but competitive socializing can be the hook that will drag them in.

The cost of socializing

In a world where [leisure time](#) and budgets are constantly shrinking, mixing dining with memorable entertainment offers good value for money. But 2023 will bring economic challenges for everyone, and competitive socializing venues and their patrons are no exception.

Mintel analysts [suggest](#) that while nights out are likely to become less frequent, they also become more of a special occasion, which means consumers will prioritize quality over quantity. And as Nick Frow, the owner of a cocktails and crazy golf experience in London, [put it](#): "Throughout any period, especially those that require some distraction, people need bread and circuses."

But smaller-scale, more community-oriented businesses based in less affluent areas are [not as optimistic](#). The [fall in consumer confidence](#) is part of the problem. And because leisure operators use a lot of energy for lighting, cooking, heating and cooling, they are particularly exposed to uplifts in energy prices.

If you want to support your local competitive socializing venue this winter, pay them a visit or follow them on social media. But there is a cheaper way to stay on top of this trend. Perhaps throwing an ax in your backyard isn't the best idea, but you can always organize a [game night at home](#).

There probably won't be any neon lights, banging beats or a selfie wall, but home parties [create a sense of community and relaxation](#) like no other environment. Invite a few friends, cook together, chip in for a takeaway or [do potluck](#). Pick some titles from [this list](#) or play party games that require [nothing but pen and paper](#)—and have fun.

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