

Drinking-related lifestyles: exploring the role of alcohol in Victorians' lives

Research summary

Preventing harm from alcohol



Introduction

Alcohol is an intrinsic part of Australian culture and it plays a central role in most people's social lives. Heavy drinking is seen as acceptable in almost all social situations, from weddings to sports matches, and even at funerals or baby showers. There are very few occasions where drinking alcohol is not encouraged.

Excessive alcohol consumption creates multiple social and health problems for individuals and society, and is one of the top 10 avoidable causes of disease and death in Victoria¹.

- It is linked to more than 60 chronic illness conditions².
- The social cost of alcohol-related harm in 2007–08 in Victoria was \$4.3 billion. This includes direct costs associated with, for example, road accidents, health care, crime and violence, and indirect costs such as loss of workforce labour and for education and research resources³.

While most of us (87% of Victorians) agree that alcohol is a problem, only a minority (between 14% and 18%) of drinkers acknowledge that their present pattern of consumption is harmful in some way⁴.

This means that people readily recognise the risks of heavy drinking, but they are *unwilling to accept* that alcohol could be affecting them personally.

This document summarises the latest research. The full reports by Associate Professor Mike Reid (RMIT University) and colleagues can be accessed at www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/drinking-lifestyles.

Understanding what drives binge drinking is important, but arguably just as crucial is understanding the deeper relationship Victorians have with alcohol. The public discussion about alcohol needs to be inclusive, realistic, empathetic and relevant to a broad audience.

This research puts Victoria's alcohol culture under the microscope to examine, in a non-judgemental way, why alcohol is such a central part of our lives. It aims to inform a new conversation about alcohol, one that moves beyond blaming the individual. This project lays the foundation stone for the long road ahead to change our attitudes towards harmful drinking and ultimately improve the health of all Victorians.

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Background

With funding from VicHealth's Innovation Grants program, RMIT University undertook research to support VicHealth's strategic priority of reducing harm from alcohol.

The research was split into two parts. In the qualitative phase, two private online research communities of 187 people were established and remained active from 26 October 2010 to 4 February 2011. During the quantitative phase, 2500 Victorian adult drinkers completed an online survey (between April and May 2012), providing data related to their personal values, motivations to drink and alcohol consumption.

The main objectives of the qualitative research phase were to:

- gain rich insight into the nature of drinking alcohol and how it fits into the lifestyle of Victorian adults
- identify key groups of drinkers by their values, attitudes, motivations, when they use alcohol, how much, and why
- explore the impact of exposure to media and messages about alcohol.

The main objectives of the quantitative research phase were to:

- profile drinker types by their values, lifestyle and behaviour
- look at similarities in values and lifestyles of various 'drinking types' to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that might drive a person to drink excessively, or to drink responsibly
- collect data on how people communicate about alcohol, for example in face-to-face conversations, or online or via social media, to provide insight into the best way to reach drinkers with information/messages that challenge social norms around alcohol.

What did the research find?

This research confirms that drinking alcohol truly is entrenched in almost every facet of our lives. Drinking is seen as a way to relax, a way to connect with people, a way to celebrate our achievements, and a way to enjoy life.

Last Saturday night I had dinner and we shared a few nice bottles of white wine with friends that I have just recently caught up with after about 20 years. It was a relaxing, enjoyable night.

Michele, 43

When considering our day-to-day lives, many Victorians use alcohol as a way to unwind at the end of the working day and to mark a switch from 'work time' to 'rest time'. With the arrival of the weekend, many look forward to the opportunity to relax and catch up with friends and family in a social environment. In these situations, alcohol functions as a social lubricant. It softens our inhibitions and is seen to help stimulate easy conversation.

Drinking, however, is not restricted to our personal time; it regularly occurs in the workplace. Whether it's part of a 'boozy lunch', Friday night drinks with the team, a work function or an office celebration, drinking is seen to provide an opportunity to socialise and connect with work colleagues on a variety of different levels.

I just started a new job and the office went out for Friday night drinks. The manager put his credit card behind the bar and started buying rounds. Now I don't mind the odd drink but because I'm still getting to know the people in the office I didn't want to be the grump who didn't want to have fun.

Chris, 23

During special occasions, whether we go out or host a party at home, alcohol is generally one of the first considerations. Drinking is seen to enhance these special events and, for some, offers an opportunity to over-indulge and drink more than on a typical day. In many cases, there is a feeling that a special occasion wouldn't be as 'special' without the presence and (often heavy) consumption of alcohol.

The best event for me was NYE. We hired an apartment in the city with another couple, got the kids babysat and had a ball. It took two days to recover but was worth every minute of headache.

Sharon, 34

Alcohol is an important part of many occasions, but it can also be a reason for an event. Drinking for the sake of drinking is widely accepted and practised, especially among young adults. In these instances, drinking may be the only activity planned for the day/night; getting drunk is the intention rather than an unexpected outcome.

Within my peer group at age 25, it still is very acceptable to go out and get drunk. My friends will often discuss before we head out what they want to drink that night, what will get them the most drunk without getting sick.

Laura, 25

Social acceptability of drinking

The research clearly illustrates the pervasiveness of drinking in our society and that drinking may well be more culturally embedded than previously acknowledged. Whether we're celebrating, socialising, networking, relaxing, commiserating or rewarding ourselves, alcohol plays an integral role. Drinking is expected to be part of almost all social events, but more concerning is the acceptance of *excessive* drinking at many of these occasions.

As Australians, we are renowned for being a nation of drinkers. Regular consumption of alcohol is deeply ingrained in our national

identity. For most Victorian adults, the perception of 'acceptable drinking' varies (Figure 1); it can be anything from a few drinks all the way through to getting drunk. To the Victorian drinker, abstinence and binge drinking are considered outside of the norm.

The list of social situations where drinking is accepted in Australia is a long one. Conversations from the survey of online community members reveal that in very few situations is drinking alcohol considered unacceptable. Of 26 events (Figure 2), more than half of those surveyed suggested almost all were acceptable drinking occasions. Children's parties, study groups and at church were the only occasions where members felt alcohol would not be tolerated.



Figure 1. Spectrum of drinking behaviours, based on reported norms/cultural perceptions.



Figure 2. Occasions where drinking is considered acceptable, based on reported norms/cultural perceptions.

Drinking deterrents and incentives to drink less

Members of the online community readily identified risks and negatives associated with heavy drinking, including:

- physical illness (vomiting, hangovers, dehydration)
- psychological impact (anxiety, regret, memory loss)
- danger (violence, unsafe sex, accidents)
- financial strain (over-spending)
- relationship strain (fighting with loved ones and friends).

Despite clear evidence that most have experienced negative consequences as a result of drinking too much, few were willing to say that their drinking behaviour, or that of others, was overly problematic. Many found they were able to excuse or accept these negative consequences by convincing themselves that 'it won't happen again' and that 'next time will be different'. Overall, it is clear that Australians display a persistent willingness to downplay bad or dangerous drunken behaviour.

Our society's inherent and deeply embedded drinking culture makes most people feel they need a specific reason *not* to drink, rather than a reason to drink.

While in some instances being drunk can be seen as unattractive and undesirable, in most cases negative consequences and bad behaviour are quickly forgotten, dismissed, excused or ignored by both the individual and society in general. There is a 'price to pay' for drinking to excess, but the consequences generally don't act as a deterrent.

Within the present cultural context, drinking less appears to be difficult for most people to do. There are very few effective incentives for individuals to opt for a more moderate approach toward alcohol. Rationally, many are able to see the benefits of drinking less, such as improved health, more money and greater productivity at work. Yet the promise of these benefits does little to reduce drinking. A key factor undermining the power of these incentives to drink less is the lack of socially acceptable 'excuses' to drink less.

Our society's inherent and deeply embedded drinking culture makes most people feel they need a specific reason *not* to drink, rather than a reason to drink. People need to be armed with a specific reason for not drinking, or for drinking less, when out with friends. Unfortunately, only a few reasons, such as a medical condition, pregnancy or driving, are socially accepted.

Presently, little or no positive reinforcement (or culturally accepted alternative to alcohol) exists for those who decide not to drink or want to drink less. Modifying drinking behaviour is hard because our society and culture provide individuals with very few 'tools' and strategies to enable this behavioural change. Fundraising events such as Febfast, Dry July and Ocsober, and innovations such as Hello Sunday Morning and Say When, encourage people to learn more about their drinking, and they support changes to drinking behaviours. The research suggests an opportunity to promote and build on these, and to develop alternatives to drinking that are relevant, realistic and acknowledge the present culture of drinking in Victoria.

Why do people drink?

Consumer segmentation is increasingly being used as a technique in public health campaigns. Typically segmentation has been based upon demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, race and ethnicity) or health status (e.g. disease diagnosis, behaviour). However, recent research suggests that consumer segments (or groups/identities) defined by behaviour, attitudes, knowledge opinions or lifestyles are more helpful to health communication and intervention planning^{5,6}. On this basis, the research considered personal values, motives and the drinking-lifestyle factors most associated with the frequency of alcohol consumption and a person's propensity to drink at higher levels.

Higher levels of alcohol consumption are associated with young men and older men. Drinking at home is more likely to be associated with older men, whereas drinking at a party, bar or pub is the preference of young men.

The personal values of hedonism, which include characteristics such as self-indulgence, self-direction and pleasure-seeking, are particularly strong drivers of alcohol consumption and problems experienced as a result of alcohol. The values of benevolence and conformity are more likely to be associated with lower levels of drinking.

For many, drinking is a method, albeit unhealthy, of coping with depression and/or anxiety. The desire to improve one's image, meeting social expectations and building confidence were shown to be other drivers of increased alcohol consumption.

Interestingly, many heavy drinkers appear to be the type of people who think of themselves as a great source of information about alcohol, and enjoy offering advice about the 'best' products, brands or bars. Other factors that influence how much a person will drink include a person's willingness to spend money on alcohol, their brand loyalty and the ease of access to alcohol at pubs, clubs, restaurants and bottle shops.

While it is important to understand the behaviour of specific groups such as risk-taking youth, understanding the broader population and their relationship with alcohol is also necessary.



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Types of drinkers

Throughout this research it became increasingly apparent that alcohol plays a significant role in the way Victorians define their individual identities, as well as the identities of others. Drinking is so culturally entrenched that we regularly use it as a way of expressing our values and beliefs.

Four key 'drinking identities' (Figure 3) emerged from the research, defined according to their acceptance of the prevalence of alcohol across society and to influences on their drinking behaviour. A person will usually belong to one segment, and will often demonstrate consistent, deep-seated attitudes and behaviour when it comes to drinking. However, an individual can transition between these identities depending on the occasion and their circumstances.



Figure 3. Drinking identities
Note: Percentages are based on a sample of 2500 Victorian adults.

The **initiator** has the most entrenched drinking behaviour; from a sample of 2500 Victorian adults, 40% belonged to this group. They have a high social acceptance for and drink large amounts of alcohol. The initiator's decision when to drink and how much to drink is mostly independent and internally driven.

For the initiator, nearly every social event will involve alcohol. They believe (often falsely) that they are in control of their drinking. The Australian culture of drinking supports the initiator's drinking lifestyle, so initiators will view their own drinking as perfectly acceptable. They will rarely question their relationship with alcohol, and as such this relationship becomes increasingly fixed as time progresses.

Initiators do not appear to be affected by negative consequences of their excessive drinking, but instead laugh it off as 'a great night' and use it as an opportunity to tell others 'a great drinking story' or 'drinking tradition', which they recall with pride. While not impossible, the very entrenched, internally controlled nature of the initiator's drinking will be difficult to change.

The other groups have particular views of the initiator. Followers hold initiators in high regard, viewing them as people who know how to have a good time. This is something they wish to emulate. The moderator sees initiators as the life of the party, but can find their behaviour extreme at times and remove themselves if an initiator is dominating the scene. The protector considers the initiator's drinking behaviour as out of control, excessive and highly damaging.

The **follower** generally looks to others to direct their drinking behaviour; from a survey sample of 2500, 13% identified with this group. They have a high tolerance for and generally drink large amounts of alcohol. Their alcohol consumption is strongly influenced by social and cultural pressure to drink, and they tend to drink to fit in. As a result, this group is strongly influenced by others (particularly initiators) and wider cultural expectations about alcohol.

For the follower, alcohol is essentially a means of connecting with others. The follower is less likely to initiate a night out or pub session; they will look to others for the cue to drink.

A follower will feel most comfortable when conforming to the cultural norms of our society, which means to socialise is to have a drink. They believe that 'if everyone else is doing it, it must be OK', an attitude consistently reinforced and legitimised by Australian society. At times, followers may be concerned by their level of drinking, yet they will tend to rationalise it as 'others overdo it too'. They cannot see any socially acceptable reason to drink less, and without alcohol they are unsure how to form a connection with their social group. These types of drinker are an excellent group to target with public health campaigns because

behavioural change is possible by offering a culturally realistic and sanctioned alternative to drinking.

The other groups have particular views of the follower. The initiator considers a follower as a great person to be around and someone who validates their own drinking lifestyle. The moderator enjoys the company of followers, though may feel uncomfortable if the follower over indulges in their drinking behaviour. The protector however sees followers as people with limited self-control and is concerned with their excessive drinking.

The **moderator** has the most balanced drinking lifestyle and is moderate in the frequency and volume of alcohol consumption. In the survey sample, 26% identified with this type. Alcohol does not play a significant role in their lives, and views are formed by internal consideration and independent direction. Moderators are generally happy to have a few drinks but definitely know when to say 'no' and stop. The moderator is comfortable with their choices and does not feel the need to over-indulge in alcohol to have a good time.

The moderator understands the benefits of drinking less. Unlike a follower or an initiator, the moderator does not feel they are 'missing out' if they choose to drink less. Rather, drinking less allows them to enjoy themselves, without experiencing any of the negative outcomes that come with getting carried away.

Because of cultural expectations to drink, and often to drink heavily, the moderator experiences pressure from others to participate and 'let loose' in social situations. However, the moderator is largely able to dismiss this pressure and ensure they do not drink more than they originally intended.

Both the initiator and follower consider the moderator to be non-judgemental towards their drinking behaviours. However, an initiator is more likely to consider the moderator to be boring and not much fun to be around, whereas the follower may interact and socialise with the moderator and often restrain their alcohol consumption to fit in with the moderator. The protector sees the moderator as a sensible person who practises an appropriate drinking lifestyle and is not influenced by the Australian drinking culture.

The **protector** has the most restrictive attitude towards drinking, making up 21% of the survey respondents. The protector's attitude towards alcohol is strongly influenced by their personal beliefs and current Australian culture. Unlike the follower, the protector is not encouraged by Australian culture to drink. Observing the 'out-of-control' drinking culture in Australia fuels their belief that the government needs to intervene to protect society from this excessive drinking lifestyle.

The protector has a number of well-established patterns of thinking and behaving that form the basis of their views about alcohol. Chiefly, the protector looks to others to correct the present situation. They believe that the way to manage the problem of excessive drinking is through regulation and control. They assume that by managing and/or removing the temptation of alcohol, the problem will cease to exist.

The protector believes that restriction and control are effective. They endorse messages that 'wag the finger' and tell people not to drink. The problem with this attitude is that it prevents people from forming their own balanced attitude toward alcohol. This group needs to acknowledge that drinking alcohol is deeply entrenched in culture and addressing this requires a more balanced approach, which encourages people to scale back their alcohol and drink responsibly, rather than insisting they quit altogether.

Initiators completely dismiss the protector's position towards alcohol and are likely to ignore or challenge them in social situations. Even though the follower is able to acknowledge that the present drinking culture does encourage excessive drinking, they see the protector as judgemental and controlling. The moderator considers the protector to be responsible when it comes to drinking alcohol but disagrees with their belief that society is to blame for an excessive drinking culture.

Recommendations

Followers and initiators are both critical audiences

To shift attitudes about drinking and ultimately impact the prevailing drinking culture in Victoria, messages need to consider each of the drinking identities. This will enable some groups to influence each other. The followers and initiators should be the focus of our efforts.

Followers are the most critical audience: these people are most likely to succumb to social pressure. The best way to get followers to change is to change the attitudes and behaviour of the initiators who influence them. However, this is likely to be a challenge and take time. Until then, followers need to be given tools and techniques for drinking less in the face of social pressure.

Targeting followers with messages that they can drink less and still be socially accepted would be beneficial. Followers would be open to messages that excessive drinking is socially unacceptable.

Initiators are another critical audience of communications because they are the major proponents of Australia's drinking culture. However, this is the group that is hardest to reach and likely to take the longest to change. Messages targeting initiators will need to be more subtle and slowly erode the current attitudes that excessive drinking is socially and culturally acceptable. Because initiators 'self-manage' their drinking, messages should encourage and promote responsible, healthy and culturally expected ways of doing this. Unlike current campaigns that focus on negative consequences, which initiators are likely to dismiss, the approach should be more educational and avoid scare tactics and 'finger wagging'.

Although motivated internally, initiators will eventually be affected by social pressure to change their drinking habits when that pressure reaches critical mass. Holding a mirror up to the initiator's behaviour (reminding them of what others might think), particularly their pressuring of others to drink, would target initiators and assist followers. Questioning 'why' initiators need others to drink with them to validate their behaviour directly challenges this behaviour and gives the follower an 'out' – the focus moves from the follower's actions to the peer pressure from the initiator.

Moderators represent the most reasonable and acceptable drinker of the four types identified in this study. This group's drinking attitudes needs to be encouraged and supported as the ideal drinking lifestyle. Unfortunately, in modern Victorian society, the moderator's drinking behaviour is undermined and belittled. Communications need to empower these people, who are happy to say no to excessive alcohol consumption. This can be achieved by challenging society's negative image of moderate drinking and empowering people to abstain or drink less. Importantly, communications must challenge society's perceptions that people need to drink to have a 'good time' and to 'fit in'. Showcasing how individuals can have fun without (excessive) alcohol will help to modify our perceptions of the relationship between drinking and socialising.

Protectors are not a significant audience for a communications strategy; however, some of their positions may be appropriate for alternative government strategies to reduce alcohol-related harm.

Conclusions

This study has generated a number of ideas about the way to tackle Australia's drinking problem:

- Recognise the many manifestations of our drinking culture (e.g. assumptions, language, rituals, social norms).
- Challenge social acceptability of drinking to excess (e.g. 'No one likes you when you're messy').
- Question why we as a society revere drunkenness (e.g. 'Is that really something to be proud of?').
- Undermine the hero status of getting drunk and drinking to excess (e.g. 'What an idiot').
- Remove the excusing of drunkenness and related bad behaviour (e.g. 'That's no excuse').
- Strengthen social acceptability of not drinking, not getting drunk and drinking in moderation (e.g. 'Why do you need to drink to excess to have a good time?').
- Challenge social pressure that makes others drink ('Why do *you* need *me* to have a drink?').
- Focus on the cultural positives of moderate drinking (e.g. enjoying every moment) rather than the negative (e.g. missing out).
- Showcase celebrities/ambassadors who don't drink or who drink responsibly while retaining their social appeal.

While this list is not exhaustive, the recurring attitudes mentioned, which underpin our current culture of drinking in Australia, would provide a meaningful focus for future public health campaigns.

The research indicates that messages focusing on negative consequences as a deterrent will have little impact on behaviour of the 'at-risk' groups: followers and initiators disconnect and distance themselves from these messages. Rather than blaming people we should empower responsible drinking, and in doing so enable individuals to still be part of the social group, maintain credibility in the tribe, while drinking moderately. Given the highly positive, habitual and social nature of our attitudes towards drinking, influencing these behaviours will be particularly challenging.

The social acceptability of drinking to excess needs to be challenged at both individual and cultural levels.

The need for a multi-pronged approach to addressing the social role of alcohol is critical. The social acceptability of drinking to excess needs to be challenged at both individual and cultural levels. Furthermore, drinkers need to be provided with tools and resources to empower them to drink responsibly with a reassurance that they will be socially accepted. Effective change requires people to have socially permissible ways to participate in our culture without drinking to excess.

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