



Exploring men's risky drinking cultures

Research highlights

While alcohol consumption in Australia is at its lowest since the 1960s, alcohol-related harms appear to be stable. This suggests that certain subgroups within the population are continuing to drink at risky levels, and whole-of-population public health responses may need to be complemented by targeted approaches to change drinking patterns and behaviours within these groups.

Risky drinking is defined by the National Health and Medical Research Council* as the consumption of more than two standard drinks per day (for lifetime risk of disease) and more than four standard drinks on a single occasion (for risk of injury). VicHealth defines 'very high risk' as consuming more than 11 standard drinks on a single occasion.

For some time, the relationship between men's drinking and masculine social norms has been hypothesised, supported by the fact that men outnumber women in virtually every drinking category used in research (e.g. prevalence of alcohol consumption, incidence of heavy and problem drinking). In Victoria, 40 per cent of men are at risk of short-term harm from alcohol each month, and 14.5 per cent are at very high risk.

About this summary

VicHealth commissioned research, undertaken by Monash University, to provide insights into factors influencing risky drinking behaviours among four male social worlds:

1. sports players (rural and urban)
2. rural sports supporters
3. hospitality workers
4. corporate workers.

This document summarises the key findings and implications of the research, to guide organisations applying for VicHealth funding to address risky drinking cultures in one or more of the identified social worlds.

Further information can be found in the [full research report](#), as well as VicHealth's [Alcohol Cultures Framework](#).

* NHMRC, 2009

An alcohol culture is the way a group of people drinks, including their shared understanding of formal rules, social norms, practices, values and beliefs around what is and what is not socially acceptable when they get together.

Contemporary understanding of alcohol or drinking 'cultures' recognises that they are part of a network of interacting factors (including gender and masculinity) that together influence drinking behaviour. This approach shifts the focus from the behaviours of individuals to the shared activities and practices of a group, which can be referred to as a **social world**.

40%
short term
harm

14.5%
Very high
risk of short
term harm



Methods

The main method of data collection was focus groups conducted with established friendship groups from each of the identified social worlds. Overall, 22 focus groups involved 101 Victorian men who reported consuming more than four standard drinks in one session at least once every six months.

Following the focus groups, individual interviews were held with 40 participants, mainly those who identified as 'regular' or 'sometimes' users of social media to organise, record or reflect on social drinking events. In these interviews, the 'scroll-back method' was used to explore the role of social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat) in alcohol cultures. This involved scrolling back to photos and posts participants had uploaded, or posts they were tagged in, that captured events or moments that involved the consumption of

alcohol products. This enabled participants to reflect on specific events (rather than broader, more abstract notions discussed in the focus groups) in relation to drinking culture.

Ethnographic observations (e.g. observing groups of men in the settings in which they drink, such as pubs and sports clubs) were also undertaken to complement the group and individual reflections.

These methods of data collection were supplemented by individual surveys that collected socio-demographic information and background information about drinking and social media practices.

Key findings

Meanings of 'risk' and 'risky drinking' vary

The research found that risky drinking was highly prevalent across the sample and in all the social worlds studied. Metropolitan-based hospitality workers reported themselves to have the highest proportion of risky drinkers, and indicated risky drinking activity on a more regular basis. This was due to a combination of occupational practices (including access to free drinks) and a perceived necessity for post-work 'wind down'.

Participants variously suggested that risk, for them, started at 10, 15, 20 or 30 standard drinks.

However, men did not routinely perceive their drinking to be 'risky'. Men's understanding of what constitutes risk and risky amounts of alcohol differed considerably from the national guidelines. Many participants suggested that risk for them started at 10, 15, 20, or 30 standard drinks. A minority of men from all social worlds suggested that there is no level of alcohol consumption that ought to be considered risky.

Participants also demonstrated a general distaste for 'government' definitions of risk and were cynical of paternalistic, government-funded health advice.

Alcohol is considered central to social interaction and connection

Alcohol consumption was considered a central element of most of the participants' social interactions with other men, with participants viewing alcohol as a way of facilitating and reinforcing connections. Alcohol was often described as an ice-breaker, and as a means of lowering men's inhibitions to help them 'open up'.

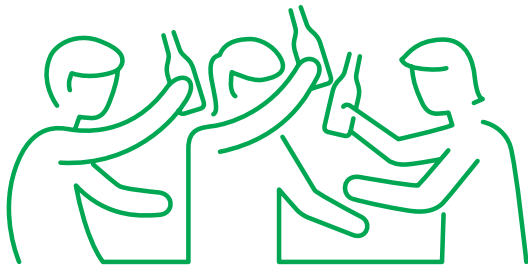
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“Blokes don't really open up and they need, sometimes, an excuse to. And beer is the sort of thing that brings them together and helps them to socialise a bit more.”



VS

NHMRC definition of risky drinking: more than two standard drinks per day (for lifetime risk) or more than four standard drinks on a single occasion.



Alcohol is seen as a social lubricant

Although the type, volume and pace of drinking varied across settings, all participants viewed drinking as the default social activity for men, describing it as embedded in Australian culture. This research suggests that drinking behaviours have become 'routinised' through regular re-enactments of drinking practices on social occasions.

“

I actually find it hard to hang out with my friends and not drink beers.”

“

If you didn't have a beer in your hand, you kind of didn't fit in with the group.”

Autonomy is a key value in men's drinking cultures

A key characteristic of men's drinking cultures in this research was a commitment to personal autonomy, and participants viewed their drinking behaviours as self-determined. Maintaining autonomy involved men understanding their own limits when it comes to alcohol, and monitoring and moderating their own drinking levels.



Decisions about drinking

Autonomy and self-determination were central to the masculine norms that emerged around drinking.

Participants described their decisions about drinking as self-driven or dictated by practicalities (such as price, convenience or efficiency), as well as (considerable) influence from men's social worlds, including peer pressure and gendered expectations.

Responsibility and care

In line with the key value of autonomy, participants reported they do not monitor one another's drinking, and would not intervene in a male friend's drinking until he was incapable of taking care of himself. However, some suggested they might perform more discreet forms of care (e.g. using subtle hints, slowing the group's drinking rate, bringing a bottle of water to the table), balancing their friend's sense of autonomy, their own safety, and their desire to look after their mates. This 'care', however, was nuanced by universal engagement in 'gendered banter' that may influence drinking behaviour in both subtle and explicit ways. It can act as a carrier of social norms but also as a mode of social control, enforcing and promoting particular (heavy) drinking practices.

“

It's not like 'I don't want you to stop drinking', it's just like 'I don't want you to go home'. I feel like they love me.”

“

I said 'I'm going to bed' and he said 'no, you've got to have another one'. So I had another one.”

Drink-driving was the one circumstance in which participants felt confident in their ability to intervene in a friend's drinking behaviours. On the basis of the potential risk to others (rather than the individual in question), participants could justify impinging on another man's autonomy by intervening in this situation. Though they pointed out the difficulty of ascertaining another's blood alcohol level, most were confident that they would, if necessary, confiscate a friend's car keys.

Social media

Social media play an increasingly important role in organising, recording and reflecting on the consumption of alcohol and, in this research, its use was found to be common (although not universal).

While most participants reported using social media daily, many did not actively post images of themselves or others on social drinking occasions, relying on others (often women) to do so.

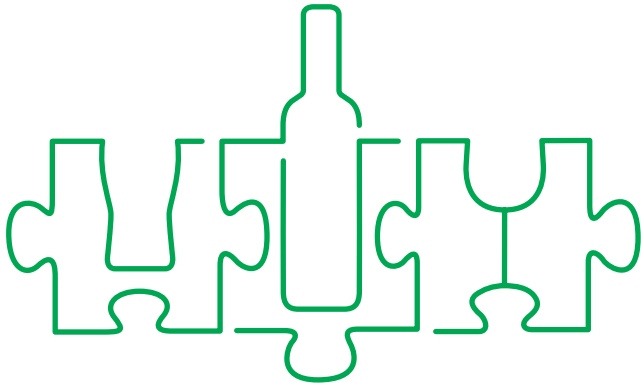
In some cases, men were cautious about the potential effects of social media posts on their reputation or relationships. However, the research found that discourse between men on social media often aligned with and extended the 'gendered banter' described above.

In individual interviews, some participants reflected fondly on memories of risky drinking occasions and viewed them as part of their 'growing up stories'. However, for others, discussing their own images on social media gave participants pause for critical self-reflection.

Implications

Findings from this research about the general lack of engagement with public health messages and campaigns underscores the need for novel approaches that reflect the desires and realities of target populations. These groups should be active participants in the design of public health interventions and campaigns that seek to target them.

Efforts to change men's drinking practices and cultures might focus on addressing the three main themes of risk, connection, and autonomy described in this research. Potential social media approaches are also highlighted below.



Risk

Health education and health promotion practitioners should think innovatively about men's perceptions of risk and how these can be changed. For public health messaging about risky drinking to have greater relevance to men, it needs to engage with the realities and pleasures of men's drinking and contextualised understandings of risk.

While risky drinking was prevalent across all social worlds studied, the case of hospitality workers warrants particular attention. The 'built in' nature of regular and/or risky drinking in this group appears to be an occupational hazard that requires careful and targeted intervention strategies.

Connection

The perceived importance of alcohol consumption to social connection between men poses a particular challenge to campaigns that promote individual abstinence or low consumption. This perception persists despite research findings that suggest men who abstain or drink at lower levels are not excluded from the social worlds studied.

Opportunities to promote social connection between men outside collective drinking activities could be considered as potential interventions.

Autonomy

Autonomy was found to be a crucial aspect of masculine identities and practices. Therefore, paternalistic approaches and messages targeting peer pressure may not have traction with men in the social worlds studied, as these notions of autonomy may blind men to the extent to which they are influenced by a desire to keep up with, or impress, their friends.

Given the importance of autonomy and individual choice in demonstrating masculinity within the groups studied, a focus on risk to others in public health campaigns may be more fruitful than an exclusive focus on individual consumption levels.

While amplifying men's caring practices may represent a promising approach, the emphasis on autonomy may act as a barrier. In addition, this approach is not without complication as 'caring', or demonstrating affection for mates, may be understood as insisting they drink more.

Social media interventions

The reflective nature of the social media scroll-back method offers scope to be incorporated as part of an education intervention addressing risky drinking cultures. For example, men might be invited to review and reflect on the gendered nature of their drinking practices and the influence of their social worlds, and to consider how these might be altered or disrupted.

For more information...

[Full Report](#)

[VicHealth Alcohol Cultures Framework](#)



Victorian Health Promotion Foundation
PO Box 154 Carlton South
Victoria 3053 Australia
T +61 3 9667 1333 F +61 3 9667 1375

vichealth@vichealth.vic.gov.au
vichealth.vic.gov.au
twitter.com/vichealth
facebook.com/vichealth

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