



# From Ideal to Reality

Cultural contradictions and  
young people's drinking

Joseph Borlagdan  
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**Flinders**  
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This report is part of a wider program of work undertaken by NCETA addressing the issue of young people and alcohol and the meaning that it has in their lives today. The first report in this series is titled "*Young People and Alcohol: the role of cultural influences*" (2007) by Ann Roche, Petra Bywood, Joseph Borlagdan, Belinda Lunnay, Toby Freeman, Lisa Lawton, Amanda Tovell and Roger Nicholas. Copies of that report can be obtained from NCETA or downloaded from the NCETA website [www.nceta.flinders.edu.au](http://www.nceta.flinders.edu.au)



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# Executive summary

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This report was produced by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) at Flinders University. It comprises the results from the second phase of a three year national project that aimed to examine the socio-cultural influences on young people's drinking. Phase one involved a comprehensive literature review that outlined existing research into the social and cultural factors that may impact upon the drinking and non-drinking behaviour of young Australians aged 14-24 years.

In this report, we detail the findings from Phase Two of the study that builds on the initial literature review. This component of the project entailed qualitative research that examined material from 12 ethnographic observations of leisure events, 20 focus groups with young people (involving a total of 100 young people), and in-depth interviews with 50 young people and 50 key stakeholders.

Sampling was nationwide and included a diverse spectrum of young people with different alcohol consumption levels, from both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, and from different life transition stages (e.g. work, high school, and university). Data collection was undertaken from November 2007 through to February 2009. For details of the method and the sample please refer to Chapter 2 Approach and Procedures.

The various data collection sources involved in the project were analysed together and findings synthesised into five key thematic chapters as follows:

1. Alcohol and Belonging (Chapter 3)
2. Autonomy and Control (Chapter 4)
3. Events, Marketing and Media (Chapter 5)
4. An 'Ideal' State of Intoxication? (Chapter 6)
5. 'Soft' Guys and 'Bad' Girls: Alcohol and Gender (Chapter 7).

The key implications and discussion points stemming from the study overall are detailed in Chapter 8.

In seeking to understand the socio-cultural context in which young Australians drink, we found a diverse, complex and constantly shifting range of factors that influence drinking and non-drinking behaviours. To guide the reader through the wide array of issues covered in this report, and to provide a comprehensive examination of the issues addressed in both Phase One and Phase Two of this project, we have provided the following condensed overview of the broader themes that run throughout this body of work.

## 1. Alcohol in contemporary consumer culture

Consumer culture is a driving force in western industrialised nations. Young people operate in this contemporary consumer culture in which alcohol is a highly commodified<sup>1</sup> product. The socio-cultural context in which alcohol is located involves highly ambiguous messages about alcohol that young people are required to interpret and manage. On the one hand, our cultural norms around alcohol endorse excess but, on the other hand, a set of expectations exist (sometimes explicit, but at other times implicit) that require restraint (in terms of performing as low risk drinkers). Overall, we found young people to be confronted with strongly conflicting cultural messages about alcohol.

## 2. Alcohol and the leisure lifestyle

Alcohol has become an integral part of contemporary leisure lifestyles. For young people, its principal role is no longer that of a symbolic transition marker of key life changes (e.g. from adolescence to adulthood). Rather, it forms a central part of everyday life and is embedded within essential social functioning. For young people today there is a greater emphasis on the realm of leisure lifestyle as the place where they form and express their identity rather than the realms of work or study. Hence, in this context alcohol plays a larger role than it might have done previously.

## 3. Alcohol and belonging

Alcohol use among young people takes place in social contexts. In this study, young people consistently highlighted that one did not drink alone or in isolation. The imperative for social contact, acceptance and being seen to be 'sociable' is strongly linked to alcohol. Many young people believed that alcohol provided them with confidence to interact with their peers. This was highly valued by young people as their social groups were fluid and continually changing. Consequently, many young people looked to alcohol as a key resource to achieve social competence, acceptance and belonging.

Alcohol is located within a broader range of cultural ideals based on hedonism and pleasure that must be fulfilled to uphold the normative party leisure lifestyle. Group inclusion and belonging was often achieved through a phenomenon we called the 'commitment to the party.' Young people demonstrate this commitment through drinking, as well as dancing and socialising, in ways that were commensurate with the behaviour of their peers. In relation to drinking, this was sometimes referred to by young people as 'drinking in sync' with their peers.

Alcohol, therefore, has symbolic power in that it marked the boundaries of inclusion and group membership. The role of alcohol in achieving a sense of belonging meant that young people who did not drink faced exclusion and negative social sanctions. Exclusion extended beyond the drinking occasion, as there are multiple phases of sociality related to drinking:

1. as a central part of the planning process for an occasion and may include 'pre-drinking'
2. during the event in groups

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1 'Commodified' in this context refers to the way that cultural and symbolic associations are attributed to an object.

3. young people discuss alcohol-related activities after the event in order to create further social opportunities out of the one experience, and also re-write the experience to align it with the ideal of the fun, carefree, party lifestyle.

#### **4. The challenge of constructing alternative (non) drinking identities**

Drinking alcohol was found to be almost mandatory for young people to establish a 'legitimate' social identity. The dominant norm of drinking was most commonly contrasted with the dichotomous role of being a non-drinker. Non-drinkers, infrequent or light drinkers deviated from an established, heavily enforced drinking norm. The limited options available to these young people included: rejecting determined drinking, alternative leisure choices, passing as a drinker, following cultural or religious norms, or acting as a care giver to intoxicated peers. However, these roles were not universally regarded as legitimate or viable. More than one alternative identity was often needed to counter the dominance of the drinking identity in order for the non-drinking person's status in a group to be legitimated.

#### **5. A double-edge sword: Alcohol offers control, but can also take control**

Many young people also used alcohol as a way of establishing and controlling their position within a group. These young people looked to alcohol to break free from prescribed roles and explore their own identity. However, alcohol also took control from (and over) young people. The promise of pleasure and liberation was often found to result in behaviours that excluded young people from the very situations, experiences and social interactions that they were ideally seeking. Rather than offering young people new social opportunities, alcohol was found to limit and constrain young people's ability to control their social relationships.

#### **6. The quest for an 'ideal' state of intoxication and liberation**

Alcohol was widely used by young people to try and achieve an 'ideal' state of intoxication and liberation. Many young people used alcohol to facilitate an ideal state of intoxication or 'other worldliness' that contrasted with the sober state that typified everyday life. This is encouraged in a consumerist culture that engenders a constant quest for novelty, pleasure and hedonism. However, we found that rather than facilitating pleasure and a sense of freedom, intoxication often marked the point at which young people were excluded from participating in groups.

Whilst many young people endeavoured to attain an ideal state of intoxication, it was only ever a temporary experience marked by fuzzy boundaries that were difficult to maintain. The desired state of intoxication was therefore transient and fleeting. The pleasure derived from intoxication was limited by the extent to which it allowed them to participate with the rest of their group.

#### **7. Alcohol was used to transform 'occasions' into 'events'**

Alcohol impacted upon young people's expectations and planning of social activities in two main ways. Firstly, alcohol extended the definition of what constituted an 'event' to include pre-event drinking and post-event discussion. Secondly, the use of alcohol amplified the importance of an 'event', marking drinking occasions as key components of young people's leisure lifestyle. The expectations of small ritualistic celebrations such as birthdays and impromptu get-togethers were also amplified

through the use of alcohol. In these instances, alcohol elevated the significance of an 'occasion' into an 'event' worth celebrating.

We found that as the symbolic 'size' of an event was made larger, so too did the reported level of alcohol consumed increase. This was culturally reinforced by the popularity of large-scale sporting, musical and cultural events that capitalised on alcohol's capacity to create and define the events in which young people wanted to participate. These events normalised the consumption of alcohol, in large part by rarely providing activities where alcohol was *not* a prerequisite.

## **8. Conflicting cultural norms around alcohol and gender**

The conflicting cultural norms of freedom and control was a constant theme throughout this body of work. It was particularly evident in relation to gender issues and alcohol. Alcohol was often used as a means for young women to transgress social norms associated with gender. However, rather than attaining a sense of freedom and autonomy, young women that engaged in traditionally masculine drinking behaviours faced negative social sanctioning. On the one hand, they were encouraged to engage in similar freedoms and behaviours as males but were often heavily sanctioned if they acted on these, particularly in relation to sexual assertiveness.

Most young people associated the occurrence of sexual assault with alcohol consumption. In particular, young women were often described as having been 'taken advantage of' whilst intoxicated. In such instances, young women were viewed as victims of their own inability to monitor their intoxication, while those who perpetrated sexual assault were made invisible and exonerated from any wrong doing, thus removing responsibility from young men. The behaviour of males was granted a level of acceptability because alcohol was regarded as the acting agent. Young women, however, did not attract the same kind of understanding and leniency when it came to behaviour undertaken whilst intoxicated. In this instance their behaviour was more likely to be attributed to their lack of self-control and admonished accordingly.

## **9. Young people and harm reduction**

Throughout this body of work various strategies were reported by young people that were used to reduce potential harms from alcohol. Young women, for example, employed a strict 'duty of care' responsibility toward other young women in their friendship groups. Young men, however, were less likely to engage in such strictly enforced caring behaviours when their fellow male friends were intoxicated. The former, was in part a reflection of their acute awareness of the possibility of sexual assault in drinking settings.

It was common for groups of young people to discuss and decide prior to an event how much they would collectively drink and, having determined this, if it would be a 'big' night. For example, part of their planning included selecting a designated driver or making other transport arrangements in order to avoid 'drink-driving'. One of the greatest challenges, however, appeared to be in not conforming to group norms and decisions where alcohol was involved (e.g. when individuals decided not to drink or not to get drunk). As alcohol is so central to young people's social lives and leisure lifestyle today, strategies are required to elevate the status and viability of non-drinking and moderate drinking options.

# 1 Introduction

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There has been growing concern and debate in Australia around young people and drinking. Recent data indicates that young people are starting to drink at a younger age (Roche, Bywood, Borlagdan et al., 2007) and rates of risky drinking among young people have increased in the past two decades (White & Hayman, 2006). By the age of 14, 86% of young people have tried alcohol. Almost one in four young people aged 14-19 report consuming alcohol at risky levels for short term harm on a monthly or weekly basis, as defined by the 2001 NHMRC guidelines<sup>2</sup> (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008).

The large majority of Australian research on young people and alcohol, and indeed on alcohol generally, employs quantitative, epidemiological methodologies. Much of the currently available research is also undertaken from a medical or clinical framework that tends to pathologise the 'risky' drinker and seeks to identify modifiable predictors for risky drinking and alcohol-related harm. Such research is immensely valuable in mapping the degree and scope of alcohol-related problems, and identifying factors that may be amenable to intervention. However, one shortcoming of this style of research is that it does little to acknowledge young people's active decision making capabilities or to illuminate the impact of cultural influences on young people's behaviours such as alcohol use.

Research undertaken from a socio-cultural perspective is concerned with "describing a particular group's drinking behaviour while placing it within the context of values and norms which direct the group and give its actions meaning" (Johnson, 1993, p. 28). To-date, there has only been limited research undertaken from a socio-cultural perspective in relation to alcohol. What is needed then is a better understanding of the complex, dynamic and fluid cultural context in which alcohol use by young people occurs.

There is a small but growing body of international literature applying socio-cultural perspectives to the examination of young people's drinking culture, particularly from the UK and Nordic countries. Researchers have explored concepts related to young people's drinking such as controlled loss of control, bounded hedonism, and the new culture of intoxication (Brain, 2000; Brain, Parker, & Carnwath, 2000; Griffin & Szmigin, 2008; Jarvinen, 2003; Jarvinen & Gundelach, 2007; Jorgensen, Curtis, Christensen, & Gronbaek, 2006; Measham, 2004, 2006; Measham & Brain, 2005; Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1998; Parker & Egginton, 2002; Törrönen & Maunu, 2007)

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2 New Australian alcohol guidelines were released in March 2009 ([www.alcohol.gov.au](http://www.alcohol.gov.au)); however, existing available research is based on the definitions in the 2001 guidelines.

This socio-cultural approach is also sparse in Australian research on young people and alcohol. Some exceptions include Lindsay's (2003; 2005; 2006) examination of young people's social drinking at pubs and clubs, Duff and colleagues' (Duff, Scealy, & Rowland, 2005) examination of drinking in sporting clubs, and Grace and colleagues' (Grace, Moore, & Northcote, 2009) participant observation of networks of young people drinking in Perth. The project presented here extends the small body of alcohol-related socio-cultural research undertaken in Australia.

This report represents findings from the second phase of a larger project undertaken over three years by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction that examined cultural influences on the drinking behaviour of young Australians aged 14-24 years. The first phase comprised a literature review that explored both qualitative and quantitative research on the cultural influences on young people's alcohol use. The Phase One report, "Young people and alcohol: The role of cultural influences", is available at the NCETA website ([www.nceta.flinders.edu.au](http://www.nceta.flinders.edu.au)) and provides useful background reading to the current report. The literature review highlighted the need to take a contextual approach to gain a more complete understanding of young people's drinking. This approach moves beyond traditional biomedical approaches that tend to individualise and/or pathologise young people's drinking behaviours.

The Phase One report argued that culture is not static, rather it is in a constant state of flux and as such it is continually negotiated by members of that culture. The Phase One report also highlighted the commodification of youth culture and the alignment of alcohol products with idealised notions of youth; strategic branding and sponsorship of events; and more generally, the impact of consumerism on youth culture.

In addition to these two areas, the Phase One report<sup>3</sup> also identified the need for more research that:

- used a broader definition of culture as a set of meaning-making processes that people use to make sense of their social world
- allowed for the multiplicity of youth cultures
- examined the leisure spaces of young people
- investigated how the cultural context frames young people's understandings and social meanings of alcohol
- recognised the agency of young people and their ability to shape and transform culture
- examined how alcohol was used by young people as an identity resource
- investigated how alcohol was used in processes of inclusion and exclusion.

The Phase One report hypothesised that young people may create lifestyles and identities around drinking choices, and may use drinking to symbolise social identification. However, there was little available research that examined young people's drinking in the context of 'leisure lifestyles.' Phase Two of this research looked to build on the more complex workings of culture and context to explain young people's drinking and non-drinking. The aim of Phase Two was to gain a

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3 See "Future Directions", p.179 in Phase One report, "Young people and alcohol: The role of cultural influences", available at the NCETA website ([www.nceta.flinders.edu.au](http://www.nceta.flinders.edu.au))



better understanding of the cultural context of young people's drinking and non-drinking. To do this, the research sought to capture the meanings and values that alcohol holds for young people. This required an approach that locates young people's drinking and non-drinking in a culture that emphasises the construction of identity in line with heavily commodified 'leisure lifestyles.' To achieve this understanding, it is imperative that these issues are examined from the perspectives of young people themselves.

This report presents the findings from an analysis of nationwide interviews and focus groups with young people, observations of events such as music concerts and sporting events, and interviews with key stakeholders such as teachers, marketers, parents, youth health workers, police, taxi drivers, employers of young people, bar tenders, and first aid officers and other health professionals who come in contact with drinking youth. The report aimed to move beyond our current understanding of cultural influences on young people's drinking to explain how young people engage with social and cultural forces in an Australian context. Specifically, the aim of the research was to build on the Phase One literature review and contribute to a more in-depth and contextual understanding of young people's drinking in Australia.

The following chapter provides detailed description of the project methodology. The synthesised findings from this second Phase of this program of research are then presented in the following five chapters, each addressing a different major theme. The final two chapters provide a summary of these findings and their implications for future research.



# 2 Approach and Procedures

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## 2.1 Research design

Preceding this research, an initial large scale literature review was undertaken that involved a comprehensive search of relevant literature to determine the scope, type and quality of studies surrounding young people and alcohol (Roche et al., 2007). The literature review was published in a book titled "Young people and alcohol: The role of cultural influences". The initial review identified an extensive literature that detailed the patterns and prevalence of drinking among young Australians along with national data that examined changing social trends which shape the Australian 'way of life'. The literature review also indicated that whilst quantitative approaches can detail the incidence and prevalence of youth drinking, they are limited in their ability to address questions related to 'why' young Australians drink.

To uncover and understand meaning within the broader cultural context of young Australians' drinking necessitates the application of appropriate qualitative research methods. By definition, qualitative research:

*"... draws on an interpretive orientation that focuses on the complex and nuanced process of the creation and maintenance of meaning...[it] aims to generate analyses that are detailed, "thick" and integrative (in the sense of relating individual events and interpretations to larger meaning systems and patterns)" (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p.2).*

Qualitative research explicitly aims to capture the lived experiences of people within a social world and the meanings people give to their experiences from their own perspectives. In undertaking qualitative research on young people's drinking-related behaviours, views and perceptions, the aim was to see the world from the view of the young person and to understand the meaning of their actions from their viewpoint. This approach privileges young people as the experts and strengthens the validity of our findings (Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998). It also acknowledges that the socio-cultural aspects of young people's lives are significant in shaping their drinking-related interpretations and experiences (Carter & Little, 2007).

A mixed-method qualitative research design was developed comprising:

- Observations of young people socialising in leisure settings
- Semi-structured individual interviews with key adult stakeholders
- Focus groups with young people (14-24 years)
- In-depth individual interviews with young people (14-24 years).

The research aim was to build on existing knowledge concerning the role of culture and social structures in determining the alcohol-related behaviours of young Australians aged 14-24 years. This involved identifying and explaining the cultural factors that influence young Australians' drinking-related decisions and behaviours. A close examination of the key issues that emerged from a large-scale literature review that preceded the research phase (Roche et al., 2007) was also undertaken as part of this project. The goal was to engage with a variety of young people with mixed drinking experiences and to seek their perspectives and subjective meanings through different mediums and various levels of interaction – from in-depth interviews to speaking with young people in group situations, and gaining insight into the cultural context of their drinking through undertaking observations in event leisure settings. In conjunction with piloting young people interviews, we also interviewed stakeholders who had contact with young people to identify broader issues around young people and alcohol.

Data collection commenced in November 2007 and concluded in March 2009. Four phases of data collection were undertaken sequentially in overlapping stages:

1. Observations
2. Stakeholder interviews
3. Focus groups
4. Individual interviews.

This was a purposeful strategy to allow emergent findings from the preceding data collection phase to inform the development of the research protocol and interview schedule for the next phase. This process is depicted in Figure 2.1 below.

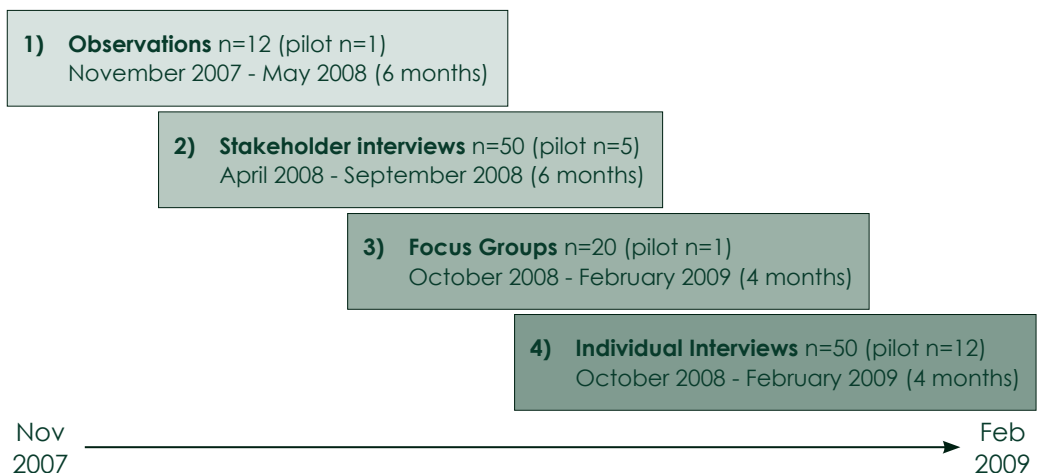


Figure 2.1 Data collection phases

Each of these data collection phases is detailed in turn below.

### 2.1.1 Observations (n=12)

The focus of the observation research was on large-scale events (e.g. youth and music festivals, national celebrations, sporting events) as a specific type of leisure setting in which young people socialise and drink. A body of literature exploring

the night time economy and young people's drinking in pub and club settings already exists. However, there is comparatively limited insight into young people's behaviours in event settings where participation is more voluntary, involves considerable planning and access is limited by ticket availability, time and transport to attend, and financial ability to purchase a ticket (ticket prices for large festival events are often in excess of AU\$100). Large-scale, highly commodified leisure settings provide a dynamic, multilayered social context that is non-routine and readily distinguishable from more commonplace leisure experiences (e.g. pubs and clubs) in which young people might ordinarily socialise and consume alcohol.

#### 2.1.1.1 *Sampling*

The selection criteria for leisure settings included:

- The availability of alcohol and the likelihood that it would be sold and/or consumed
- Large numbers or proportions of young people in attendance
- The relationship between young people and alcohol was believed to be culturally and socially significant
- The event was highly organised and widely marketed
- Attendance at the event may be considered a 'rite of passage' for young people.

Selection of the observation sites was pragmatic and largely reliant on event timing and the availability of the research team to attend the event. The number of observations undertaken was determined by thematic saturation, namely when the researchers had gained sufficient insights to inform the interview and focus group schedules, but also by the project's resources (observations took place at events in South Australia and Victoria only).

Most national large-scale events are held in the warmer summer months from November through to March, epitomising the stereotypical outdoor-oriented Australian lifestyle. A total of twelve observations were undertaken. One observation setting at a metropolitan beachside bar did not meet the 'event' criteria but was undertaken to enable comparison of large scale events with more routine leisure settings. Observations at the selected events were mostly undertaken in the summer of 2007-2008 and involved settings where large numbers of people gathered for celebratory occasions (e.g. national holidays) held on a limited or annual basis. Such events are infrequent yet held on a regular basis and are unique leisure settings in that they are regarded as 'special events' with ritualistic elements and their own established yet often unspoken 'festival norms' (e.g. festival fashion such as branded or homemade team t-shirts and social behaviours that are more liberal than those expressed in mainstream social environments). Observations occurred over a period of eight months and took place in a mix of urban/city, metropolitan/suburban, regional/rural and beachside settings. These were typically at events held in outdoor settings. Event organisers typically appropriated communal public spaces to hold their event (e.g. parklands, beach foreshore) which are ordinarily 'dry zones' where alcohol possession and/or consumption are not permitted. Most observations took place during the daytime and continued into the evening. Numbers attending the events ranged from <100 to 10,000+. The leisure settings that comprised the observation sample are described in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Event types and observation settings

Event Type	Observation settings (n=12)	Details of event	Alcohol availability <sup>4</sup>
<b>Music events</b> <b>Good Vibrations</b> (Sidney Myer Music Bowl, Melbourne) <b>Big Day Out</b> (Wayville Showgrounds, Adelaide) <b>Battle of the Bands</b> (Balaklava Town Hall, Rural South Australia) <b>Off The Couch</b> (all-ages music event) (Bar, Adelaide CBD)	National music festivals (n=2) All-ages youth music events (n=2)	Urban/city locations; high security/surveillance; extensively planned; all day and night event; high visibility of advertising and branding  Urban/city regional/rural locations: high security/surveillance	Pre-mixed (RTDs, energy drink + alcohol); mixed drinks / cocktails; specific beer brands  Pre-mixed RTDs; beer and wine
<b>Cultural/social events</b> <b>Schutzfest</b> (Bonython Park, Adelaide CBD) <b>Australia Day events</b> (foreshore Somerton Park, Adelaide) <b>Glennelg bar</b> (Glennelg, Adelaide) <sup>5</sup>	International cultural/beer festival (n=1) Australia Day events (n=1)	Urban/city locations (e.g. city fringe parklands); extensively planned; all day and night event; high visibility of advertising and branding  Metropolitan/suburban/beachside locations (e.g. parks); day event	Beer, alcoholic cider, pre-mixed RTDs  Beer and wine
<b>School leaver celebrations</b> <b>Schoolies Week</b> (foreshore, Victor Harbour, coastal regional South Australia)	School leaver "Schoolies" festival (n=1)	Coastal / regional location; High security/surveillance; extensively planned; all day and night event	*No alcohol permitted in structured event yet pre-drinking of pre-mixed RTDs and beer in surrounding locations (e.g. school leavers' accommodation such as caravan parks)
<b>Sporting events</b> <b>One-day international cricket</b> (Adelaide Oval, Adelaide CBD) <b>AFL football</b> (AAMI Stadium, West Lakes) <b>Clipsal 500</b> (motorsport) (Victoria Park Racecourse, parklands Adelaide CBD) <b>SLAM festival volleyball</b> (foreshore, Glennelg, South Australia)	One-day international cricket (n=1) Motorsport championship event/music festival (n=1) Beach volleyball/youth festival (n=1)	Urban/city location; high security/surveillance; all day and night event; high visibility of advertising and branding  Urban/city location; high security/surveillance; all day and night event; high visibility of advertising and branding  Urban/beachside location; day event; high security/surveillance; high visibility of advertising and branding	Beer and wine Pre-mixed RTDs, beer and wine Pre-mixed RTDs and beer

4 RTD = ready-to-drink alcohol.

5 Observations were undertaken at a metropolitan beachside bar to enable comparison of large scale events with more routine leisure settings

### 2.1.1.2 *Data collection*

The purpose of the observations was to gain an understanding of the contextual factors within leisure event settings that shape young people's drinking. Our observation research protocol was based on themes that emerged from a comprehensive literature review (Roche et al., 2008), and these guided initial data collection. The observation protocol is included in Appendix D.

The type of information collected through observations concerned:

- Alcohol-related behaviours young people engage in when attending leisure events including their consumption behaviours (e.g. popular beverage types and brands consumed) and drinking rituals and practices
- How young people represent themselves aesthetically (physical appearance, group behaviours, interactions with peers)
- Structural aspects of commercialised event settings (e.g. presence of alcohol sponsorship or promotional materials, alcohol advertising targeting youth lifestyles and the nature of regulations in place in relation to alcohol products).

Research observations involved a minimum of two, and occasionally three, researchers, usually consisting of one male and one female researcher attending the event and noting the above mentioned lifestyle and drinking-related aspects of the leisure environment. Researchers were also trained in observation techniques and followed a safety protocol (see section on Ethics and safety below).

### 2.1.1.3 *Linking observations to lived experiences*

The observations provided an interpretative platform for connecting what researchers saw with the 'other realities' of young people ascertained through interviews and focus groups. Naturally, observers' analytical orientation influenced how field notes were written. To remain as valid as possible, a 'bracketing' technique was employed where observers aimed to put aside subjectivities and enhance sensitivity to anomalies or observations made within the leisure setting that challenged preconceived understandings. Bracketing or separating helps the "researcher in recognizing and acknowledging one's own assumptions that might influence the data" (Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2004). Although this separation of the more objective versus subjective elements of observation is artificial, it provided the opportunity for the researchers to be more reflexive and question the meaning of why things occurred rather than attributing commonsense ideas of young people's motives. It also indicated where the field note descriptions may have been interpretive rather than descriptive.

### 2.1.1.4 *Adopting 'field roles'*

Observers were selected who could readily fit into the event or leisure setting, or at least create minimal disruption to the natural leisure settings and limit the influence of their presence on youth behaviour. The latter was particularly salient at underage events. Researchers adopted 'field roles' in the research observation setting (Marvasti, 2004, p. 50). In the context of Schoolies Week it was necessary for researchers to adopt the field role of volunteers. In other event settings, researchers adopted the field role of fellow patron and assumed an active yet peripheral involvement juggling the tension between being 'part of the action' and a subjective observer. How well researchers were received by 'the field' (the

young people socialising within the event setting as well as the event organisers) was dependent on the practical conditions encountered (e.g. access to underage events such as Schoolies Week celebrations and the Battle of the Bands), and individual factors or personal characteristics (e.g. at the Big Day Out researchers' field notes described how they felt social pressure to show commitment to the party through dancing and looking happy during performances, and at the Cricket, to act as enthusiastically as the Australian fans in order not to stand out).

The research team was required to negotiate access to many of the youth-oriented leisure settings. This was particularly relevant at the school-leaver festival, Schoolies Week, which excluded people over the age of 21. In this case, it was helpful to identify and liaise with event organisers and volunteers who served as key informants or 'gatekeepers' of the social setting. These key informants provided assistance in 'navigating the field' and could permit access to particular places and information. The willingness of key informants to work with us was predicated on their understanding of our research purpose. Their support gave legitimacy to our research and:

- An opportunity for us to ask questions we were not comfortable or able to ask of young people
- Enabled us to be introduced to others with knowledge of interest such as the organising principles underpinning events
- Gave us insight into the structural aspects of the event setting
- Raised our awareness about parts of the setting we may not have otherwise been aware of
- Helped us to interpret the meanings of our observations.

#### 2.1.1.5 *Field notes*

Comprehensive and detailed field notes were collated from at least two independent researchers for each observation. When constructing field notes, the researchers aimed to capture theoretically significant depth or 'thick descriptions' that detailed:

*"... context and meanings of events and scenes that are relevant to those involved in them. This task requires the ethnographer [researcher] to identify and communicate the connections between actions and events...In this sort of descriptive enterprise, actions are not stripped of locally relevant context and interconnections, but are tied together in textured and holistic accounts of social life" (Emerson, 1988, p. 24-25).*

#### 2.1.2 **Interviews with stakeholders (n=50)**

The perspectives of various stakeholders (e.g. teachers, event organisers, parents, marketing professionals, police, taxi drivers, see Table 2.2 for the range of stakeholders sampled) were obtained to enhance understandings of how young people behave in different cultural contexts (e.g. within the family home, with classmates at school, with peers in public social settings). Stakeholders' perceptions and experiences of young people's drinking behaviour were used to explore the dynamic interaction between young people and others who may influence, or are affected by, their drinking. Stakeholder interviewee categories and interview protocols and schedules were prepared based on findings from the observations.



### 2.1.2.1 Sampling

In-depth interviews were undertaken with 50 adult stakeholders or 'shapers' of cultural norms and social behaviours surrounding young people's alcohol use (Table 2.2). A range of stakeholders were identified that resided in Australia and engaged with young people and were considered to have the potential to influence young people's drinking-related behaviours, thoughts and perceptions. Stakeholder interviewees were grouped into five categories (see Table 2.3).

Table 2.2 Key stakeholder interviews

Stakeholder type	State	Female	Male	Total
Contact Drinking Youth	NT		1	1
	QLD	1		1
	SA	6	7	13
<b>Contact Drinking Youth Total</b>		<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>15</b>
Event organisers	NSW	1	1	2
	QLD	1	1	2
	SA	2	1	3
<b>Event organisers Total</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>
Key Adult Figures	NSW	1		1
	SA	7	4	11
<b>Key Adult Figures Total</b>		<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>12</b>
Marketing, Advertising	NSW		2	2
	SA	1	2	3
<b>Marketing, Advertising Total</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Youth & health worker	NSW	1		1
	SA	8	2	10
<b>Youth &amp; health worker Total</b>		<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>29</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>50</b>

Table 2.3 Key stakeholder categories

Category	Description	Examples
1. Contact with drinking youth	People who have direct contact with young people when they are / have been drinking	Police, hospitality staff, taxi drivers, youth program coordinators, health care professionals and ambulance drivers
2. Event organisers	People who are involved in organising events that are youth-oriented (with or without alcohol available)	Organisers of music festivals, Schoolies week etc.
3. Key adult figures	Adults who have routine interaction with young people	Parents, employers, teachers
4. Marketing and advertising	People who are involved in marketing and advertising strategies that target young people (alcohol or non-alcohol products)	Advertising sales and marketing executives, market researchers
5. Youth health workers	People who work with young people	Youth leaders, psychologists, social workers, school counsellors

### 2.1.2.2 Recruitment

Stakeholder recruitment occurred through existing research and professional networks as well as through linkages forged through the process of undertaking the research (e.g. meeting volunteers working at events who were also employed as youth workers). Key informants established through the observation phase of our fieldwork also provided useful stakeholder contacts. Difficult-to-access stakeholders in the categories of 'marketing and advertising professionals' and 'event organisers' were identified predominantly through direct calling (e.g. companies in the Yellow Pages), but some contacts were made through fieldwork observations. A call for stakeholder participants was also posted via a listserv for professionals within the drug and alcohol field (i.e. ADCA update).

A recruitment protocol was designed using steps adapted from MacDougall and Fudge (2001) and followed for recruitment of key stakeholders (see Table 2.4), as well as for participants in the young person interview and focus group methodologies.

Table 2.4 Recruitment steps

Prepare	→ Contact	→ Follow-up
• Describing the sample	• Initial approach	• Feedback from participants
• Finding information sources	• Negotiation with key contacts	• Feedback to participants
• Finding key contacts or champions	• Direct negotiations	• Continuing links
• Discovering recent or related projects	• Confirmation	
• Drafting alternative samples	• Involvement	

Interviews were organised by making initial contact with a potential participant who met the criteria for one of the key stakeholder categories and arranging a time for a telephone interview. At the beginning of each interview, interviewers briefly described the project aims and the participant's role in the project, and sought verbal consent.

### 2.1.2.3 Data collection

Interview schedules were used as a guide to elicit information from stakeholders on their perceptions and experiences with drinking, youth and alcohol products. A generic stakeholder interview schedule (see Appendix F) was initially developed and tailored to include questions specific to the area of expertise of each group. For example, event organisers were asked specific questions surrounding event organisation such as *What kind of drinks can people buy at the event?*; while teachers were asked *What are some of the challenges in talking to students about alcohol?* Stakeholder interview schedules were piloted and refined before being used to elicit information on the topic areas with which the stakeholder was most familiar. Five different interview schedules were developed:

1. Event organisers
2. Marketing and advertising
3. Key adult figures
4. Youth health workers
5. Contact with drinking youth.

Stakeholders were interviewed via telephone or in person, depending on geographical location and time availability (e.g. telephone interviews were often the more convenient mode of data collection for busy professionals). The interviews were undertaken by a team of five trained interviewers. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviewer used a comment sheet to note the stakeholder's insights and reflections about young people and alcohol, as well as emotional tone and their own feelings about the interview (see Appendix E).

## 2.1.3 Focus groups (n=20)

The purpose of focus groups was to understand the meanings and norms surrounding alcohol and drinking behaviours which underlie group responses (Bloor, Frankland, & Robson, 2001).

### 2.1.3.1 Sampling

A stratified purposeful sampling technique was used to identify participants for focus groups. Each focus group comprised 3-7 young people (14-24 years), who were known to each other (e.g. friendship groups, school/TAFE/university classmates, sporting teammates, work colleagues) and were brought together for informal discussions about their views and experiences about alcohol (see Table 2.5).

Table 2.5 Focus groups

Focus Group#	Location	Age	Facilitator	Gender	Schooling level	Number of participants	State
FG01	University campus	17-18	Joseph	Female	Secondary	4	SA
FG02	University campus	17-18	Joseph	Female	Secondary	6	SA
FG03	University campus	all 17	Toby	Female	Secondary	4	SA
FG04	University campus	15-18	Joseph	Mixed	Secondary	4	SA
FG05	Community centre	19-22	Anje	Female	Undergraduate	4	WA
FG06	Community centre	all 18	Anje	Mixed: 2F, 4M	Undergraduate	6	WA
FG07	TAFE	18+	Anje	Male	TAFE	5	SA
FG08	TAFE	20	Joseph	Male	TAFE	7	SA
FG09	School	15-16	Huw	Male	Secondary	4	SA
FG10	TAFE	18-19	Angella	Female	TAFE	5	SA
FG11	Community centre	14-16	Toby	Mixed: 3F, 3M	unknown	6	SA
FG12	School	14-16	Anje	Female	Secondary	5	SA
FG13	TAFE	17-21	Angella	Mixed: 5F, 1M	TAFE	6	SA
FG14	Home	19-21	Huw	Female	Undergraduate	6	QLD
FG15	Library	22-24	Huw	Mixed: 5F, 1M	unknown	6	QLD
FG16	Church	17-21	Toby	Mixed: 2F, 3M	unknown	5	NT
FG17	University campus	unknown	Anje	Female	unknown	4	VIC
FG18	University campus	unknown	Anje	Female	unknown	3	VIC
FG19	Home	15-16	Anje	Female	unknown	5	NSW
FG20	Home	15-16	Toby	Male	unknown	5	NSW

Criteria for inclusion of participants in focus groups were determined by age (stratified by age groups 14-17, 18-21, and 22-24 years) and gender (male/female). Salient social and cultural influences that differentially impact on young people located in school, university, and workplace settings were also acknowledged. Focus groups were further stratified according to geographical location (metropolitan/rural), schooling (public/private; secondary/tertiary) and life transition stage (school/university/work) and also demographic and other risk factors associated with low, risky and high risk drinking. Due to potential sensitivities surrounding unemployment, young people who had reached school leaving age (15 years) but were unemployed were not included in the focus groups. However, unemployed young people were included in the sampling frame for individual in-depth interviews. Prior to recruitment these inclusion criteria were applied to potential participants through several short answer questions about age, gender, location and life transition stage and alcohol consumption levels, which determined suitability for participation.

Diversity in participants' drinking experiences and alcohol-related views and perceptions was sought. The precise sample design was flexible and evolved as the research progressed, and was considered in conjunction with the sampling for the young person interviews. The aim was to consider as many different perspectives as possible to broaden the patterns that emerged from early analysis. Sampling included searching for participants who had experiences, opinions or views that differed or seemed to contradict previous explanations that were evident in the data. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached (i.e. where no further novel issues were raised) (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The sample was constantly scrutinised in light of early findings to allow further purposive recruitment. Thus, participants were purposefully selected to enhance our understandings of what contributes to different views about alcohol.

As the focus groups (and young person interviews) progressed, it was evident that drinking behaviours were contextual and varied according to life transition stages (e.g. university, work). It was important to capture the nature of these transient drinking styles by speaking with a variety of young people at different life transition stages. Sampling to include participants from environments where drinking alcohol is not the socially accepted norm was recognised as just as important as sampling for young people who drink often. This was especially important given the range of cultural factors<sup>6</sup> that may impact on the way young Australians view their social world, and how those diverse factors concomitantly shape behaviours. Whilst not specifically targeted for recruitment, young people who identified as having come from diverse familial backgrounds where English is a second language (e.g. Italian-Australian, Chinese-Australian, Indigenous-Australian, Indian-Australian) were represented in the research cohort in addition to young people with Anglo-Saxon Australian backgrounds.

### 2.1.3.2 *Recruitment*

Young participants (in focus groups and young person interviews) were purposefully recruited through various avenues primarily using snowball recruitment (i.e. where

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6 Cultural factors are those that influence and motivate change in norms, attitudes, beliefs and values of a group thus impacting on behaviours and experiences.

participants suggested others (e.g. friends, work or team mates, for participation) and recruitment through existing networks. Participants were recruited through existing NCETA networks such as youth-oriented alcohol and other drug non-government organisations and government-funded youth health services, and through the extended networks of NCETA researchers. Young people attending a Flinders University open day were approached by researchers, given information about the research and asked to participate in an interview or focus group<sup>7</sup>. Focus groups were organised by making initial contact with a potential participant who then invited friends, colleagues or school mates of the same/similar age and in some cases the same gender to participate in the focus group.

Among the materials used to assist recruitment was a flyer which called for young people to voice their opinions on youth drinking (see excerpt below).

Excerpt 2-1 Young people recruitment flyer

Are you tired of seeing the same news story talking about young people and binge drinking? If you're like us, and think that there's another side to the story, then we'd like to hear from you. The National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) is conducting focus groups to hear your opinions and experiences on alcohol – whether you drink or not.

The language used in all research materials was designed to appeal to young people and the format was engaging and appropriate to a youth audience.

Young people are widely acknowledged as a difficult-to-access research population. Success in recruiting young people for this research was largely attributed to:

- Personal and direct contact with young people who vouched for our authenticity, enabled us to develop rapport with participants and increased the likelihood that ongoing contact was permissible
- Persistent engagement with young people through reminders and continuous contact
- Flexibility in setting up times to meet with young people by acknowledging their various commitments (e.g. study, casual work, sport, etc)
- Finding and developing a relationship with key contacts, 'champions' or 'gatekeepers' who espoused support for the research endeavour.

### 2.1.3.3 Data collection

Each focus group was led by a facilitator who provided a brief description of the project, the objectives of the focus group and the 'rules of engagement' (e.g. respect for other people's opinions, confidentiality of comments made in the group). The facilitator's role was to prompt discussion among participants using open-ended questions, visual stimuli (e.g. PowerPoint slides or printed materials) and a range of activities. Activities employed in the focus groups included designing an advertising campaign for a new alcohol product and drawing a picture of 'a good night out'. This activity generated discussion about what appeals to young people in alcohol product advertisements; how they interpret marketing messages;

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7 The potential bias inherent in recruiting from this group of further-education-seeking students is acknowledged.

and shed light on the context in which young people drink (e.g. location, friends, types of drinks, drinking games and other activities). While the facilitator followed a schedule of questions (see Appendix B), participants were encouraged to contribute to open discussion and express their views in their own words. Prompts for group discussion included: word association for when someone is drunk; listing likes/dislikes about drinking; and imagining a non-drinking scenario. Focus group discussions were also highly participatory and interactive. Various activities were developed by the research team to engage young people and to generate conversations around the topic questions.

A note-taker assisted the facilitator to conduct the focus group by collecting participants' consent forms and demographic data, providing materials when needed, assembling and monitoring several recording devices, and taking notes on the setting, context, insights and issues raised, as well as the emotional tone of participants. At the end of the discussion, the note-taker provided the group with a brief summary of the ideas and issues that were raised to ensure that the notes accurately reflected the group's views. This process of cross-checking:

- Clarified and validated the findings
- Balanced the power differential inherent in the researcher and the researched relationship by positioning the young participant as the expert knowledge bearer.

Group discussions ran for approximately 90 minutes and were conducted in a range of youth-appropriate locations including communal rooms at Universities, TAFE colleges, libraries, community centres and in the meeting room of a Baptist church.

## **2.1.4 Interviews with young people (n=50)**

Individual interviews were undertaken with 50 young people from a range of cultural and social positions. They enabled exploration of issues that arose in the focus groups to be explored in more depth from the individual perspective without the sway of the social group and to encourage a response from less outspoken demographics (e.g. males and younger age groups, 14-17 years). In many cases, individual interviews enabled the researcher to elicit sensitive information that may not have been accessible through group discussion (Liamputtong, 2007).

### **2.1.4.1 Sampling**

A stratified purposeful sampling technique was used to identify participants for interviews. Individual interviews were undertaken with 50 young people (14-24 years) representing a variety of ages, male and female, residing in various geographical locations and experiencing different life transition stages, experiences with, and patterns of, alcohol consumption (see Table 2.6)

Table 2.6 Demographics of individual young people interviews

Demographics		No.	%
State	SA	11	22%
	VIC	6	12%
	NSW	6	12%
	WA	2	4%
	TAS	5	10%
	QLD	14	28%
	NT	3	6%
	ACT	3	6%
Gender	Male	20	40%
	Female	30	60%
Employment status	Employment	38	76%
	Student*	5	10%
	Unemployed	6	12%
	Self-employed	1	2%
Level of schooling	Secondary	27	54%
	Diploma	4	8%
	Undergraduate	15	30%
	Post graduate	3	6%
	Apprenticeship	1	2%
Secondary school type	Private	20	40%
	Public	22	44%
	Not specified	8	16%
Location	Inner suburb	30	60%
	Outer Suburb	8	16%
	Rural	12	24%
Age	14	3	6%
	15	2	4%
	16	1	2%
	17	6	12%
	18	9	18%
	19	2	4%
	20	8	16%
	21	5	10%
	22	4	8%
	23	6	12%
	24	4	8%



The research took a national focus and young people were sampled from a variety of Australian geographical locations – metropolitan, coastal, regional and rural – including:

- Capital cities (e.g. Sydney, New South Wales; Hobart, Tasmania; Brisbane, Queensland; Darwin, Northern Territory)
- Suburban / metropolitan (e.g. Bayview, Darwin and Bonython, Canberra)
- Coastal towns (e.g. Labrador, Gold Coast)
- Regional centres (e.g. Murray Bridge, South Australia; Kirwan, Queensland)
- Rural locations (e.g. Barooga, New South Wales; New Norfolk, Tasmania).

National data indicates that consumption patterns (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008; White & Hayman, 2006) and alcohol-related attitudes (Shanahan, Wilkins, & Hurt, 2002) vary between age groups within the age range of interest (14-24 years old), and that consumption patterns differ between metropolitan and rural adolescents (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008), between employed and unemployed young people (Pidd, Boeckmann, & Morris, 2006) and between young people at university and other youth populations (Roche & Watt, 1999). As for the focus groups, criteria for inclusion of young participants were determined by age (stratified by age groups 14-17, 18-21, and 22-24 years) and gender (male/female). Unemployed young people were included in the sampling frame for the interviews.

The precise sample design was considered in conjunction with the focus group sampling (see 2.1.3.1 Sampling of focus groups for more detail on the flexible and evolving nature of the young person sampling).

#### *2.1.4.2 Recruitment*

Recruitment of participants for the young person interviews followed the strategy used for focus groups (see 2.1.3.2 Recruitment selection of focus groups for more detail).

Interviews were organised by making initial contact with a potential participant who met the criteria for purposive sampling and arranging a time for telephone interview. Detailed information sheets and consent forms (for young people or their parent/carer) were emailed or posted to all potential participants prior to the interview. At the beginning of each interview, interviewers briefly described the project aims and the participant's role in the project.

#### *2.1.4.3 Data collection*

The key stages of the individual interview began with finding a young person who represented a different viewpoint and/or social status position, gender, age category and area of residence than young people previously spoken to and explaining the research aims and purpose to the potential participant. Establishing rapport and trust was crucial to ensuring the young person committed to research participation, and later, increased the likelihood that appropriate information was collected. Interview schedules followed a semi-structured format whereby depth and detail in the qualitative data focused on norms, behaviour, contexts, beliefs, perceptions and meanings associated with drinking. The individual interview schedule was developed from the emerging themes identified through the literature review that preceded the research phase and early analysis of

the observation data, following the process depicted in Figure 2.2. Using the schedule, researchers adopted an analytical interviewing approach to aid the process of understanding, whilst maintaining a conversational style of interaction that ensured respondents were willing to share their thoughts, opinions and experiences. This involved continually prompting for more information and new avenues to explore. Researchers often purposefully adopted a naïve position when undertaking interviews with young people. This allowed the researcher to be open to participants' responses and probe areas to avoid wrongfully assuming inherent meanings or understandings in participants' responses.

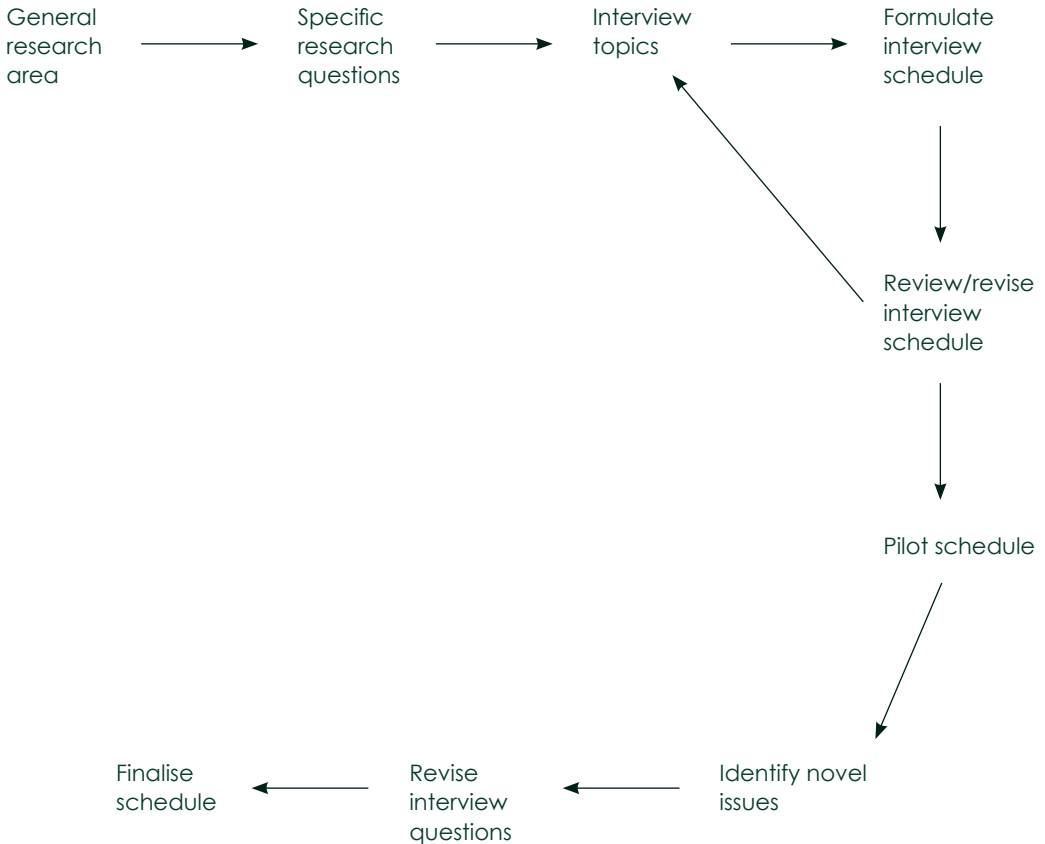


Figure 2.2 Formulating interview questions (adapted from Bryman, 2004)

The schedule was piloted with six young people across 14-17, 18-21, 22-24 age categories and both genders, and was refined according to the interview outcomes and feedback received from young participants. The interview schedule designed and used for data collection is included in Appendix H. Each interview took approximately 30-60 minutes.

## 2.2 Ethics and safety

Permission was obtained from the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee to undertake this research.

Written consent was required from all participants and where participants were underage (<18 years) written parental consent was also sought. All participants were assured that:

- Their anonymity would be preserved
- Participation was voluntary and dependent on consent
- They could freely withdraw from the research at any stage
- Confidentiality would be protected.

Pseudonyms in place of participant's names were generated using a name-generation software program and were used to de-identify data and preserve anonymity. However, pseudonyms were not utilised for focus group comments as researchers were unable to identify who was speaking through the audio recordings. In this instance, speakers were identified by their gender and the order in which they spoke. Interviewers gained consent for the interview and focus group discussions to be recorded using a digital voice recorder.

All young people were reimbursed for their time involved in participating in interviews or a focus group.

### **2.2.1 Researcher safety**

Throughout the fieldwork component of the research, researchers followed a safety protocol that detailed how data collection was to be conducted in a safe and ethical manner. This protocol covered interviews that were conducted face-to-face (some of which took place in the participant's home), focus groups that were held in public locations unfamiliar to the researcher and observations in public leisure settings. Care was taken to select a range of settings and participants from geographic locations that both fulfilled the research aims and that did not constitute an identifiable risk to the research staff.

For safety reasons, fieldwork was carried out in teams with a minimum of at least two researchers working together (e.g. focus groups comprised a facilitator and note taker, observations were attended by at least two researchers). Researchers were trained to identify possible cues that might represent a threat to researcher safety and how to diffuse a risky situation (e.g. aggressive behaviour). Informal debriefing sessions for all researchers took place after every point of contact with the research field.

### **2.2.2 Participant safety**

Researchers provided all participants with links to further information in relation to alcohol and/or other drugs (e.g. Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) hotline and other counselling contacts specific to the local region). If anything discussed in the research interview or focus group raised concerns for the young participants they were encouraged to use the contacts provided.

## **2.3 Data management and analysis**

Data were subjected to thematic and systematic constant comparative analysis. A modified grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) termed 'adaptive theory' was employed. Adaptive theory:

*“... endeavours to combine the use of pre-existing theory and theory generated from data analysis in the formulation and actual conduct of empirical research” (Layder, 1998, p. 1).*

Following the adaptive theory approach, extant findings and theoretical ideas identified through the literature review that preceded the research phase (Roche et al., 2007) and researchers' existing knowledge and discipline-specific expertise (e.g. alcohol and other drug research, sociological theory, psychology, and gender studies) were lenses through which emerging data were interpreted and analysed.

Two key methods were combined to achieve in-depth analysis:

1. Content analysis of the emerging research data was used to generate analytic categories
2. Constant comparison of these categories with new findings was undertaken to identify emerging themes.

This method enabled analysis that went beyond description to meaningful interpretation and theoretically-oriented explanations of findings and resulted in the emergence of new understandings and analytic frameworks surrounding the social and cultural context of young Australians' drinking behaviours (see Chapter 9 Implications).

### **2.3.1 Data storage**

Data emanating from the research and included for analysis included:

- Audio recordings of interviews and focus group discussions
- Observation field notes
- Facilitator focus group and interviewer comment sheets.

Other sources of data that were used to aid analysis included photographs taken by researchers undertaking event observations to aid memory recall when writing field notes and to help explain findings to the research team. Event paraphernalia such as event guides and/or maps and drinks advertising material and items that resulted from focus group activities (e.g. participant's drawings and hand-written lists of likes/dislikes about drinking) were also collected.

#### **2.3.1.1 Audio files**

Interviews and focus groups were recorded on a digital voice recorder and uploaded to a secure location on the NCETA computer network with access limited to authorised researchers. Electronic copies of field notes and researcher comment sheets were stored in the same secure location. A recording protocol was designed and implemented by all researchers to ensure audible sound quality and appropriate sound file storage. Focus group discussions were recorded using two digital recording devices to ensure all voices in the room were audible. The use of software to analyse audio files negated the need to transcribe interviews, which improved the quality of data analysis as researchers analysing the data were able to tune into the nuances in the voice during analysis. This was particularly important among the younger (under 14-17 years) research cohort who often experienced difficulty articulating or expressing their opinions (e.g. a laugh was not always an expression of humour but an indicator of discomfort, a cover for humiliation

or embarrassment, or a cue to nervousness). Such nuances are more difficult to access in a voice-less transcript.

Hard copies of comment sheets, researcher's hand-written field notes and the materials that resulted from focus groups (e.g. participants' drawings) were stored in a locked filing cabinet.

Most research materials were formatted (photographs were resized, drawings and promotional or advertising material were scanned) and uploaded for storage and analysis in NVivo qualitative data analysis program (QSR software).

### 2.3.1.2 *NVivo software*

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was selected to aid data management and analysis for its capacity to manage the large volumes of data in various formats (audio, visual, written) that were generated through the research project. The research team undertook extensive training in the uses of NVivo that was tailored to the specific requirements of the project, including working in a research team (which moved beyond the usual capabilities of NVivo) with diverse and complex data. NVivo was used in accordance with the adaptive theory approach (Layder, 1998) to assist with storing and managing the data generated through the interviews, focus groups and observations. The onus was on the researchers to interpret, conceptualise and examine relationships and to generate the theoretical positions discussed in the sections that follow.

## 2.3.2 **Process for data management and analysis**

### 2.3.2.1 *From categorisation to themes*

Data analysis began by 'open coding' the data sources (audio recordings of interviews and focus group discussions, observation field notes, researcher focus group and interview comment sheets), that is, grouping together conceptually similar data into categories. A mixed approach of topic coding (open coding) and analytic coding (using a pre-defined coding scheme) was undertaken. The meaning of each code was noted in the researcher's memos along with thoughts about how the code linked to the evolving theoretical understandings. Using NVivo data management software, audio files (focus groups and interviews) were coded directly from the file. Researchers listened to each recorded interview or focus group and selected sections of the recording that were relevant to this project. The selected recordings were then copied and coded by researchers into themes by creating 'nodes' in the NVivo program (Richards, 2005). Observers' field notes were also coded by selecting relevant sections of text and copying them to nodes.

Data collection and analysis were closely affiliated. The research team followed a process of cross-checking across the different data sources (e.g. observations from the field were used to assess the meaning and relevance of interview and focus group data) to improve their understandings. The identification of relationships and running complex queries across the different data sources to identify links between the themes were undertaken to interrogate the data and generate themes.

### 2.3.2.2 *Researchers' memos*

Memos were linked to codes and cases, and contained questions used to explore the data, detail accounts of emerging analytical thoughts, and highlight

relationships between concepts. Methodological considerations, researchers' personal thoughts, notes about research procedures and anything pertaining to the research was housed in the memos. Researchers' memos were dated and initialled to create an inbuilt audit trail for tracking conceptual developments and emerging theoretical interpretations. This also built transparency into the data analysis approach and enhanced the reliability of findings.

### 2.3.2.3 *Team analysis*

Weekly research team meetings were held throughout the data collection and analysis phases (Bazeley, 2007; Ezzy, 2002; Kelle, 2000; Richards, 2005; Silverman, 2006). During these meetings emerging theoretical ideas were discussed and refined; and sometimes resulted in existing categories being merged or the emergence of new ideas. Researchers regularly 'checked' each others coding and interpretations for synergies with their own coding. This process of gaining 'inter-rater reliability' or group consensus of the emerging themes reduced bias in analysis. The different analytical perspectives offered by the multidisciplinary team strengthened findings.

## 2.4 **Methodological considerations**

Various challenges are often encountered in undertaking research with young people. The experience gained through this research project highlighted the importance that all materials designed for use with young people needed to be relevant to ensure young people were engaged and willing to share their honest thoughts and perceptions. This was imperative to generate quality data. Eliciting motivation and engagement with young people required attention to various potential barriers. In order to generate quality data, these barriers were overcome by:

- Recognising the importance of rapport creation with participants prior to data collection and allocating time for this
- Using language that was suitable and engaging to young people (e.g. language and discourse used by adult researchers needs to be tailored, for example taken-for-granted concepts such as consumerism and gender/sexuality may be ambiguous, if not foreign, to some young people)
- Using relevant materials and interactions that values their subjective position and that positions them as the experts on their own experiences
- Maintaining energy and enthusiasm of the participants (e.g. young people's focus was maintained by providing activities and snacks during the focus groups)
- Employing researchers who could connect with the youth demographic (e.g. mixed gender and demographics)
- Diffusing the power often inherent in researcher/researched relationships (e.g. where the researcher is seen as the expert and young people feel like they are required to 'demonstrate their knowledge') through privileging the opinions of young people by focusing on their views, perceptions and experiences (Popay et al., 1998)
- Being committed to moving away from media and political debates when talking about the issues surrounding young people and alcohol and encouraging young people to be critical and reflexive of their understandings.

Other factors that impacted on the quality of data collection methods in generating data related to structural aspects of the method:

- Mode (face-to-face or telephone)
- Location
- Participant's available time.

Interviews with young people were a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews. The face-to-face mode was particularly useful for interpreting non-verbal communication and external factors that may contribute to the 'tone' of an interview and data interpretation. For example, in an interview with a young female (aged 14 years) in her home, the interviewer noted that the young teenager seemed willing to disclose information about a drinking episode, but was mindful of her mother's presence in a nearby room. Such surveillance would not have been apparent to the researcher if the interview had been conducted by telephone. Other visual or non-verbal data, such as facial expressions, hand gestures or other body language, which may indicate emphasis, prevarication or 'thinking' pauses, were not accessible to the interviewer in telephone interviews. Similarly, the location of the interview or focus group may have facilitated or hindered the process. At times there was a 'trade-off' between arranging a convenient place for the discussion and ensuring the location provided sufficient uninterrupted privacy. This was particularly evident for face-to-face interviews, but may also have been a constraining factor in some telephone interviews, such as where the interviewee was in an open-plan workplace. Alternatively, anonymity is maintained through a telephone interview and may have advantages in encouraging young people to disclose personal stories.

For this research, the researchers' approach to data collection was driven by evidence-based and theoretically-grounded procedures yet were flexible according to what worked best with the young people sampled in order to produce the most relevant and insightful data. What 'worked' was often ascertained through a process of trial and error (e.g. the approach often required adaptability and tailoring to specific interview or focus group situations).

## **2.5 Introduction to findings**

### **2.5.1 A note on reading the results**

#### *2.5.1.1 Synthesis of themes from a mixed methods approach*

As detailed in the Approach and Procedures chapter, we undertook a mixed methods approach under the umbrella of qualitative research. The components of the research project entailed ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews with young people and stakeholders and focus groups with young people. These differing methods are linked in that they all contribute towards the aim of the study, which was to better understand the cultural influences on young people's use and non-use of alcohol. Therefore, the findings are organised according to the overarching themes that emerged across the range of methods employed to produce them. As such, some chapters report on the theme by integrating material from a range of methods. For example, field notes from the ethnographic observations sit alongside interview excerpts taken from the participants. This follows

on from our research design in which each method was developed based on the findings from the other methods in order to progress our understanding of the cultural context of young people's experiences.

### 2.5.1.2 *Reporting and interpreting qualitative research*

In comparison to quantitative research, the qualitative approach used in this study aimed to illuminate young people's own perspectives and subjective meanings through a variety of methods. Consequently, the opinions and experiences of the participants have been transcribed in the findings. In order to represent the context in which these were spoken we have utilised a transcription key included below that can provide this extra information. As much as possible we have attempted to capture the social context in which words were said in order to avoid overly literal analysis and to provide the reader with a more valid form of assessing the research.

## 2.6 Transcription key

The transcription notation system employed for data segments is an adaptation of Gail Jefferson's work (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984, pp. ix-xvi; Beach, 1989, pp. 89-90; Du Bois, 2009). The symbols and their meanings are as follows:

<b>Jill:</b>	Speaker attribution. colon follows name
<b>INT:</b>	Interviewer attribution in. colon follows name in CAPS
<b>FG#</b>	Focus group identifier
<b>Female#1</b>	Gender and speaker attribution for focus groups
<u>—</u>	Underlining: Vocalic emphasis.
<b>(( ))</b>	Double Parentheses: Scenic details. analyst comment on any topic Eg ((sarcastically)), ((thinking))
<b>( )</b>	Single Parentheses: Transcriptionist doubt. transcribed words are uncertain
<b>(.)</b>	Brief pause
<b>...</b>	Three periods with spaces before and after: part of quotation omitted for brevity.
<b>?</b>	Question Marks: Rising vocal pitch indicating questioning manner, regardless of whether actual question asked.
<b>=</b>	Equal Signs: Latching of contiguous utterances, with no interval or overlap.
<b>[ ]</b>	Brackets: Speech overlap.
<b>[[</b>	Double Brackets: Simultaneous speech orientations to prior turn.
<b>!</b>	Exclamation Points: Animated speech tone.
<b>-</b>	Hyphens: Halting, abrupt cut off of sound or word.
<b>OKAY</b>	CAPS: Extreme loudness compared with surrounding talk.
<b>hah</b>	
<b>heh</b>	Laugh Syllable: Relative closed or open position of laughter
<b>hoh</b>	



## 2.7 Structure of the findings

The following five chapters present the key findings from this research project. They consist of:

**Chapter 3 (Alcohol and Belonging)** builds on the role of alcohol in a social context by highlighting its use as a marker of social inclusion and exclusion. More specifically, we critically analyse how dichotomous views of drinking limit alternative and non-drinking options for young people.

**Chapter 4 (Autonomy and Control)** examines how many young people look to alcohol as a facilitator and enabler in social situations. We find the limits to this perceived 'freedom' by exploring how young people's pleasure and control are restricted.

**Chapter 5 (Events, Marketing and Media)** takes a closer look at the 'event' context in which many young people seek to attain desired states of intoxication. We find that 'events' are made meaningful according to the degree of planning and expectation involved before the event as well as the amount of discussion preceding it. Alcohol features heavily in this section as a commodity form that has been co-opted by alcohol, marketing and branding industries to sell a leisure lifestyle.

**Chapter 6 (An 'Ideal' State of Intoxication?)** presents the ways that many young people attempt to attain a hazily defined state of intoxication. This desired 'ideal' is only a transient state as many young people struggle to engage with imperatives based on the self-management of intoxication.

**Chapter 7 (Alcohol and Gender)** takes an in-depth look at the role of alcohol in constructing gender identities. Whilst there is some evidence of a loosening of gender norms, alcohol is ultimately used to sanction traditional ideas about gender that subordinates young women.



# 3 Alcohol and Belonging

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One of the first sets of themes that emerged from this program of qualitative research involved issues pertaining to the role alcohol played in young people's negotiations of belonging, at an occasion or as a member of a group of peers. This chapter begins by highlighting the ways in which alcohol is used to achieve a sense of inclusion, and a feeling of belongingness with peers. We found that for many young people, drinking alcohol was a critical strategy used to demonstrate and achieve a sense of inclusion, and to actively participate in a group event. The chapter then examines the role of alcohol in excluding people from memberships and social spaces, and strategies young people use to negotiate belongingness without alcohol.

It is widely understood that alcohol plays an important role in young people's construction of social in-groups and out-groups, and that young people who choose not to drink alcohol (on a specific occasion, or in general) risk peer disapproval and negative attention for this choice. Consequently, young people's decisions around alcohol are inherently intertwined with choices around strategies to belong, or what is sometimes referred to as 'belongingness'. Belongingness here refers to a young person's feeling of inclusion and group membership with their peers.

Belongingness is highly valued by young people, and it makes young people's decisions around alcohol inseparable from negotiating belongingness. Young people socialise in what has been termed 'neo-tribes' of loose, social gatherings, with multiple, fluid group memberships. Consequently, drinking has become a behaviour that must be constantly negotiated and navigated hand in hand with group membership (Bennett, 1999; Maffesoli, 1996). As one young female noted in one of the focus groups:

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**FG18, Female#1:** You put on different masks around different people, different social groups. I find I act differently around different social groups.

---

This quote highlights the effort young people need to exercise in order to negotiate belongingness with multiple group memberships. Negotiating belongingness is often seen as a youth issue. However, it is important to note that such issues also apply to adults. Much is made of the central role of alcohol in Australian culture, particularly around celebration, sport, and socialising. Adults, just as young people, who choose not to drink at a particular occasion, or at all, also face social sanctions and exclusion (Halliday, 2005). Derogatory labels for adults who choose not to drink, such as 'wowers' and 'teetotallers', and the fact that abstainers are defined by something they don't do, are indicators of the challenges to acceptance and belonging faced by adults as well as young people.

*"The boys are into the big shout at the bar and you say 'no, I don't drink' and they say 'what's wrong with you?'," Smeaton says (Halliday, 2005).*

Adult use of alcohol as a marker of social inclusion may indeed contribute to young people's utilisation of alcohol in a similar manner.

While it is known that drinking alcohol can play a pivotal role in young people's quest to belong, there is little in the literature that examines how young people use alcohol to mark inclusion and exclusion. There is even less about how young people navigate fluid and contextual group memberships, and drinking behaviours and expectations. This chapter provides an in-depth examination of this fluidity and contextuality, and the strategies used by young people to negotiate belongingness with or without alcohol.

### 3.1 Drinking and Inclusion

Discussion of the function of alcohol in inclusion and belongingness may raise beliefs about the role of 'peer pressure'. However, there are inherent limitations to the popular concept of 'peer pressure' that this chapter aims to move beyond. Traditional accounts of peer pressure depict young people as being forced or encouraged to consume alcohol, and it is up to the individual young person to be strong and confident and resist this pressure. Discussions with young people in the interviews and focus groups revealed a much more subtle and complex role for alcohol in achieving a sense of belongingness.

Some young people were quick to emphasise that the role of alcohol in facilitating group inclusion should not be framed as simple peer pressure:

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**Jeremy, 18:** Like with my close mates, it's not really an issue how much I drink. I'll just say "I'm not having a big night". But um, obviously it's easier, it's kinda boring if I'm sober and they're absolutely trashed. Often that's more the reason. Not so much cos I'm worried I have to drink, it's just I'll be pretty bored basically.

---

**FG19, Female#1:** No one pressured you into doing it or anything, it wasn't like "Oh why aren't -", people might ask like "Why aren't you?" ... it was kind of like you'd feel left out ... when everyone else is like doing that stupid stuff, you kind of =

**FG19, Female#2:** =Feel left out.

**FG19, Female#1:** You don't want to join in and do that stupid stuff because you know how stupid you look, but then you don't want to just stand there because then you're just by yourself.

---

It is interesting that the participants in both quotes above named some kind of pressure to drink alcohol, but chose to frame it in a way that did not compromise their sense of individuality and autonomy – i.e. they expressed their decision to drink as a choice that alleviated boredom or social isolation.

This is not to disregard peer pressure, however, or argue that it does not exist; it is clear that social sanctions exist around alcohol that work against young people who choose not to drink, and that these sanctions can be very significant for young people. As the above exchanges indicate, the only freedom provided to

young people here is to opt out of consuming alcohol, and this does not empower the young person to do anything about the social pressures, except to remove themselves from it. This lack of alternative options is discussed further in Chapter 4. The exchange also provides insight into the decision-making involved in choosing to participate in an activity (e.g. drinking-related behaviours) even when the shortcomings or risks involved may be apparent. That most young people still choose to participate, rather than risk isolation and not belong, speaks to the importance placed on this sense of belongingness.

As suggested above, one reason young people may not want to frame the role of alcohol in belongingness as peer pressure may be to maintain a sense of autonomy. Young people are, and want to express themselves as, autonomous agents, rather than passive recipients of influences such as peer pressure. They rationalise that if they consume alcohol, then it is because they have chosen to consume alcohol, not because any forces external to them have made them do so.

---

**FG11, Male#1:** Mates would be, like, don't be f\*\*ked, don't be a pussy. (long silence) It's your choice at the end of the day.

---

Represented in this quote is the tension between independence and autonomy on the one hand, and attaining and maintaining group membership on the other hand. Discourses on peer pressure tend to focus on encouraging the former (i.e. autonomy) over the latter (i.e. group membership), while in reality young people are required to constantly balance and re-negotiate both. Issues of autonomy and agency are discussed further in Chapter 4.

Alcohol is used to achieve a sense of inclusion and group cohesion through several means. Firstly, alcohol facilitates inclusion by aiding social interaction and helping young people overcome barriers to socialising with peers. This is illustrated in the popular notion of alcohol as a social lubricant, and is discussed further in Chapter 4.

The second contribution alcohol can make to inclusion is that drinking signifies to the rest of the social group<sup>8</sup> that you are a youthful, energetic, fun person worthy of being included. Many of the social functions of alcohol come from the symbolic capital of alcohol: the symbolism it confers on the drinker in the eyes of peers who share the same evaluations of alcohol's capital. This is discussed further in the Events, Marketing, and Media chapter. In regard to negotiating belongingness, symbolic capital is related to the need for young people to demonstrate commitment to the party.

### 3.1.1 Commitment to the Party

One key way for young people to demonstrate and reproduce inclusivity and group membership is by showing commitment to the party. This commitment is communicated through actions, such as drinking alcohol, dancing, and socialising in a manner similar to, or commensurate with, their peers.

Bourdieu (1984) discusses group membership as being akin to a 'game' in which potential members must accept the stakes that each 'player' is competing for. In the case of young people's leisure activities, the dominant rule that all must

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8 Assuming the group values/endorsed alcohol, see Section 3.2 'Not Drinking and Exclusion' for some exceptions.

abide by is a demonstrated commitment to the party. This particular rule works as something that all who participate in the party must accept as being worthwhile and valued.

Jonathan provides an example of a group of young people establishing the stakes and the rules of the party:

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**Jonathan, 21:** When it's a planned event, people usually drink a lot more because they, they've got it in their minds that "we're going to a party so let's have a party". They get into the party lifestyle. They've got the idea of you know, Let's you know "we're here to drink, let's drink, let's have fun".

---

Leisure has become central to identity for young people. It is no longer their work, or their study, or other aspects of their lives that they use to define themselves, but how they spend their leisure time (Winlow & Hall, 2009). Measham (2004, p. 338) argues that there are 'aspirational' and 'image-enhancing' aspects to young people's choice of leisure activities, and Featherstone (1987) contends that people actively design their lifestyle to express individuality or a particular style. Leisure lifestyle is discussed further in the Events, Marketing, and Media chapter.

One prominent leisure lifestyle ideal that young people strive for and draw on is that of the party, and the party lifestyle. This is demonstrated in Jonathan's quote above. Parties and the party lifestyle express many of the most desirable aspects that comprise youth branding, such as fun, lack of responsibility, spontaneity, and sociality. Hence, to go to parties, and show commitment to the party, is to establish for yourself a fun, social, leisure identity.

The pressure of this demand to show your commitment to the party emerged in reflections such as those in the quote below:

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**Julia, 21:** I was at their house watching movies that afternoon, so I hadn't planned to do anything that night. Didn't have any alcohol or anything. So I was just kind of sitting at the back while they were going wild with the Moët and whatever, and like, I kind of felt a little bit awkward because it felt like I had a bit of expectation, but, like "why don't you go to the bottle shop and then we'll go and have fun". It's almost like, if you're not as wasted as they are when you go out, you're kind of a burden if you're not looking like you're having fun. That's never said, but I kinda get that sometimes still, even from some of my closest friends."

---

As Julia indicates, the pressure may not be explicit and verbal, but a feeling of "expectation", exclusion, social discomfort and unease, and that you are a "burden" to your peers may be associated with any perceived lack of commitment to the party. These are complex social sanctions, and the options open to Julia to negotiate these sanctions are not obvious.

The benefit of displaying one's commitment to the party is to feel included and that you belong, not only in the current group but also in the wider idealised youth culture of the party lifestyle. The consequence of failing to display your commitment to the party, as the above quote suggests, is to risk dragging down the mood of peers, and to face potential exclusion as the group seeks to protect their mood and sense of fun. A group member failing to show commitment to the party is a threat to group cohesion, and the sense that 'we're all in it together'.

This camaraderie and cohesion is a group quality, and belongingness can only exist when there is a cohesive group to belong to. That is, belongingness is not just something to be navigated at an individual level, the group must work to maintain a sense of cohesion for members to achieve that belongingness. Displaying a commitment to the party is a key mechanism by which to attain this.

Phil describes some of his male friends responding to this perceived threat to the group's cohesion:

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**Phil, 20:** I gotta be honest here, when I was at these parties, and I was withholding myself, there was at least one or two guys there who thought I was being self-righteous. Who thought that I was holding out on them because I thought I was better than them. And they see that as kind of a bit threatening for whatever reason. ...I'm keeping sober, I'm not putting myself in the same situation as they are, you know, therefore somehow I'm not willing to be one of the guys as much as them, or something. That's the way I interpreted that.

---

In the reaction of Phil's friends there is a sense of a betrayal that goes beyond not just belonging, as evinced in their perception of threat and accusations that Phil is "self-righteous". Similarly, the following quotes indicate how someone who is not a full participant in the party can feel like an outsider, and not part of the camaraderie:

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**FG13, Male#1:** I don't like going out if I'm not drinking. I might as well stay home. It's not as much fun. That's just my opinion.

**Female#1:** A lot of places you go to you feel sketchy if you're not drinking

**INT:** What do you mean?

**Female#1:** Out of it, everyone's looking at you - you start freaking out.

---

**FG15, Female#1:** It was almost as if the people around you felt worse that you weren't drinking than you did yourself. Because it's like, it's as if they're more conscious of their behaviour if there's someone around that's not drinking. Cos it's just accepted that everyone else is drinking so you can relax and do whatever, cos everyone else is drunk as well. But when there's someone there who's clearly not, it's like you're a spy or something.

---

The term "spy" here suggests that the young woman feels like she looks like she should belong, because she is young and among her peers, but in fact doesn't feel like she belongs, because she's not contributing to the party lifestyle or the camaraderie. The sense of separateness and rejection is profound when perceived in the highly negative terms of a 'spy', i.e. someone 'other', not of us and certainly not to be trusted, liked, or accepted.

It is also of interest that when asked about what made for a good night out, occasionally, young people would refer to their peers' drinking, rather than themselves:

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**FG18, Female#1:** I find there is sort of two different social groups and it's just like when people are drinking at a party or something then it makes it OK to talk to them. Whereas normally people would be like "oh, why are you talking to them?"

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**Phil, 20:** Actually, that's probably the best part of the night right there. Just, people are starting to open up, starting to socialise. They've had just maybe half a ... just enough alcohol to get rid of their social inhibitions and their teenage insecurities.

---

These quotes indicate that the knowledge that others are disinhibited and affected by alcohol appears to be an important aspect of the confidence and enjoyment that comes from drinking in a group. Thus, members who are not drinking may reduce others' confidence and enjoyment, and make others self-conscious.

Data from the interviews, focus groups, and event observations all highlighted the key role of alcohol in displaying commitment to the party. Drinking alcohol helped young people to display their commitment to having fun and the party atmosphere, and also helped their confidence and disinhibition, facilitating them to exhibit behaviours that further demonstrated their commitment to the party, such as dancing, socialising, and flirting.

However, just consuming alcohol did not guarantee a display of commitment to the party. Alcohol needed to be consumed in a way that fulfilled the ideal of the party lifestyle. If drinking alcohol leads to being upset, or anxious, the young person may be seen as pulling down the mood and subsequently excluded:

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**FG18, Female#1:** Only a couple of the [drunk young] people there were really anxious or depressive. And they left, so everyone was really happy.

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**Corinna, 24:** She never stops when she should and she always ends the night in tears ... People try to help her and console her in whatever she's upset about at the time, but then I think a lot of people now are sick of it and think she shouldn't drink.

---

Corinna's assertion that 'she shouldn't drink' may equate to 'she shouldn't come out at all' with the group, because she doesn't contribute to a party atmosphere.

Not all occasions however required young people to demonstrate a commitment to the party. The requirement is contextual, and only needed for occasions aiming for a party atmosphere. On more casual nights, there was an absence of this pressure:

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**FG15, Female#1:** If you go to a club and stuff, it's usually, you know, you don't really have much fun unless you have like a little bit of a buzz or something like that and alcohol really helps you with that. But then there's other situations like dinner and whatnot like it's a situation that doesn't call for pressure, to like, you know, it's just, you know, you are who you are and you're quite accepted, so you don't have to be anything you're not.

---

In this example, going out for dinner did not necessarily entail a pressure to drink. Other examples proffered by the young people in our study included barbecues and movies. Of course, for such relaxed occasions, different commitments and ideals are likely to be at play and shape young people's behaviours in other ways.

The pressure to achieve the ideal of a 'party lifestyle' was most prevalent when partying and clubbing. Partying and clubbing were also the contexts where alcohol consumption was typically riskier, and often involved drinking shots and alcoholic energy drinks. Risky alcohol consumption, particularly involving these types of alcoholic beverages, has become an integral part of the definition of the



'party lifestyle.' One field researcher recorded the following notes that linked a commitment to the party with rapid intoxication and riskier drink choices:

**Field notes, The Grand:** Pre-mixed spirits seemed to be popular, particularly notable among young men was the consumption of glasses of red liquid which was presumably vodka and raspberry or "fire engines" a drink which was associated with "partying" among my peers when I was younger due to the hyperactive effect of the sugary red drink combined with the alcohol.... We also noted the occasional small group of young people lining up at the bar to undertake 'tequila slammer' or 'Jagermeister and red bull' shot drinking rituals. *Most of the drink types young people were consuming were "party/energy drinks" or consumed in ways that facilitated rapid intoxication eg "shots".*

The link between demonstrating a commitment to the party and risky consumption of shots is supported in the following focus group exchange:

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**FG01, INT:** When do people tend to drink shots? Would that be say at the start or...

**Female#1:** ( ) big celebrations.

**Female#2:** Yeah everyone's like "ok shot to this girl, it's her birthday".

**Female#3:** =or sometimes either like at the very beginning or if they want to get like drunk quickly or if they've had a few to drink they think "I know! Let's have a round of shots" or "'Let's see who can shot the most".

---

It is clear in this quote that rapid intoxication and consumption of shots takes on a celebratory and party status amongst these young women. The desire to display commitment to the party can become competitive with competitions such as "who can shot the most." This may also be the case for other drinking games, where there are more literal rules and commitments that young people have to make in relation to drinking.

Further to this form of risky drinking, the concept of a commitment to the party may help to understand young people's risk taking behaviours. Parker and Stanworth (2005, p. 326) argue that risk taking is necessary to demonstrate commitment, because "taking risks for something is how commitment is demonstrated" as without any risk, there is no proof of commitment:

*"Commitment cannot be based on 'just talk'; it must involve personal, embodied 'doing'. In this light, risk-taking is necessarily required by every productive concern. It is the currency of authenticity and doing things 'for real'. Risk-taking involves doing to prove competence, but also to mediate nature and to secure approval"* (Parker & Stanworth, 2005, p. 326).

Hence, young people's need to demonstrate commitment to the party has to be understood if risk-taking behaviours are to be fully comprehended.

### 3.1.2 Sociality of drinking

The previous section discussed how drinking occasions are opportunities for group cohesion and camaraderie. However, discussions with the young people in our study suggested that the sociality gained from a drinking occasion is often multifaceted, and is evident in at least three distinct phases of social engagement:

1. the planning and preparation phases,
2. the event itself, and
3. subsequent discussions of the event.

Each of these phases is discussed in turn below.

#### 3.1.2.1 *Planning and preparation*

Discussions with young people revealed a wide variation in the amount of planning and preparation that goes into a drinking occasion. Some young people expressed their preference for ad hoc nights, with no planning:

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**Jeanette, 18:** It's not really planned out all that well. We meet up at a time, and then - it's usually only then on the spot that we decide where we'll go, so it's kind of all done on a whim.

---

Acting on unplanned "whims" may be attractive to young people because it enhances the leisure lifestyle ideals of fun, spontaneity, and lack of responsibility. However, others described a meticulous approach to the planning of a drinking occasion:

---

**Nikki, 20:** Usually before we go out we tell each other like what kind of night we want to have. Like say to my partner if I want to get drunk or if I wanna not really get drunk, just a little bit tipsy or our other friends tell us if they wanna meet a person while they're out or if they don't so then we know if someone's harassing them or if they're ok with certain things like that.

---

For those groups that did plan such occasions, preparation provided opportunities to socialise and raise and define expectations of the event. The quote above is an example of actively and consciously defining the expectations and rules for the night out, as Nikki and her friends establish their desired level of intoxication and interest in meeting people. Special occasions, such as New Years Eve and birthdays, typically involved a greater degree of planning. Music events, where tickets often sell out and generally need to be purchased ahead of time, may also require more planning than usual. This planning was often accompanied by heightened expectations, and also more socialising to discuss the anticipated event.

Immediately prior to the night out, there may be a social gathering, particularly for women, where they get ready for the night, and, in some groups, have a few drinks. This social time is discussed further in the Events, Marketing, and Media chapter.

Other preparation aspects, such as obtaining alcohol (especially for underaged young people) may also have a strong social, bonding component. The following example suggests a high degree of sociality and the use of democratic group processes around obtaining alcohol:

---

**FG20, Male#1:** Like if there's an event coming up, you know, prior like one or two weeks, so you get your older brother, your mate's mate, and then everyone agrees on what they want, everyone goes in a little group.

**INT:** Together?

**All:** Yeah.

---

The phrase "everyone goes in a little group" suggests a strong group cohesion, the collectivity of risk taking, and the concomitant opportunities for sociality and belonging.

### 3.1.2.2 *During the event*

The most obvious form of socialising around alcohol occurs during the event. As discussed in relation to commitment to the party, this is an important time for camaraderie and socialising. This was demonstrated when, as part of the focus groups and interviews, the young people were asked to describe a good night out. Almost universally, responses centred around sociality:

---

**FG14, Female#1:** Drinking with friends.

**Female#2:** Yeah.

**Female#1:** And chatting, not just like, just drinking as social, you know, social interaction. That's what you do on a night out with friends, like when it's the weekend.

---

As this quote suggests, drinking for the young people in our study was seen as an inherently group exercise, and most would not consider drinking outside of a group situation as some adults would:

---

**FG06, Female#1:** Drinking is a social thing. So when you drink by yourself it's like "what are you doing?"

**All:** Laugh.

**Female#1:** Cos alcohol is bad enough. Like, you know, it tastes bad. It's only fun if you do it with a group of people and stuff.

---

**Jonathan, 21:** You're drinking because you can and you're with your friends. But I wouldn't do it on my own, I'd say it that way, I wouldn't just go home and sit at the table and drink by myself. I usually do it social thing.

---

This camaraderie also extended to looking out for each other and trying to keep each other safe:

---

**Evvie, 22:** With my friends, like we sort of look out for each other and say "oh, you know, I think you've had enough" or "maybe you should have some water." That type of thing. We're always looking out for each other in that sense.

---

Evvie's quote provides a strong demonstration of the sense of 'we're all in this together' that underlies the camaraderie of young people's drinking. The importance of the care giving role is discussed further in the 'Beyond existing alternative identities' section.

The prevalent cultural norm that alcohol is a social lubricant, and eases social interaction was also drawn upon and reproduced by the young people in our study:

---

**Andrew, 20:** Alcohol is a good sort of, I like to think, um, when I was younger I used to think that alcohol was a good leveller because it would bring everyone to the same sort of level in a way, you all have something to talk about, i.e. drinking, and it just loosens you up a bit I suppose.

---

This quote also suggests a role for alcohol that is not just about its function as a social lubricant, but a democratic one that washes away social differences. This might hold particular importance for young people, who often have varying levels of social standing, competence, and degrees of membership to groups.

This use of alcohol as an enabler is discussed further in Chapter 4.

The sociality and camaraderie of drinking places strong demands on participants to drink at the same rate as each other, and maintain the same level of intoxication as other group members. This was most evident in the focus group where the young women designed a drink with the slogan “Drink in Sync.” Julia’s assertion in an earlier quote that “if you’re not as wasted as they are when you go out, you’re kind of a burden if you’re not looking like you’re having fun” highlights the need to “drink in sync” and be at the same level of intoxication as your peers to maintain the camaraderie and feeling that you’re all in it together.

The concept of drinking in sync was so important that it was not left to chance. One group of young males explain how the intoxication level is arranged before the event:

---

**FG20, Male#1:** There’s usually an event, and in the weeks leading up to this it’s “Are you drinking?” and then word will spread that everyone’s drinking at this event, and then if there’s another one the night after, that, you know, “Oh no, I’ll have a quiet one, coz I had” you know sort of thing. So usually everyone’s drunk or not drunk.

---

By discussing and organising beforehand how drunk they wanted to get, these young males ensured they agreed on the stakes they were playing for and the degree of intoxication they wished to achieve. This pre-discussion and decision-making highlights the importance of the group context in drinking and how the level of drinking needs to be uniform – everyone’s in or everyone’s out. Being too sober or too drunk compared to everyone else puts you outside the main group experience, undermining your belongingness and barring you from the sociality of the drinking experience.

Julia’s earlier quote is an example of the exclusion from the sociality felt when a young person is more sober than everyone else in the group. A similar exclusion can occur if a young person consumes more alcohol than the rest of the group:

---

**Matthew, 23:** Having alcohol around to start with I guess is normally a benefit to having a good evening. It relaxes people, I enjoy the taste, it gets people talking, so to have alcohol there is usually a positive. I guess however if people are drinking so much that they become a nuisance to everyone else. You know, they're embarrassing, or they're picking fights, or they have to somehow, they've drunken too much so they (?) get themselves home, so we have to find a taxi, then the taxi driver won't take them because they're loud and obnoxious. Something like that would make, you know, a downer for the night, and that would be a bad thing. If they were drinking enough to be a nuisance to other people.

---

By being "a nuisance to everyone else" the young person has disrupted the social bonds of the group and detracted from everyone else's enjoyment of the night. One group made this distinction using the terms "pissed" and "paro":

---

**FG12, INT:** So what's the difference between 'pissed' and 'paro'?

**Female#1:** Pissed you can have fun with and paro you can=

**Female#2:** =You can't.=

**Female#1:** =You're f\*\*ked. Like you're just gotta lay down or something, something like that.

---

"Pissed" equated to a state where you are still participating in the sociality and demonstrating your commitment to the party, while "paro" equated to a state where you are incapable of being social or contributing to others' enjoyment, and are potentially a burden to the other participants.

Hence, the rules surrounding alcohol and inclusion are not as straightforward as 'drinking will provide you with group membership and inclusion'. A young person needs to match their level of intoxication to those around them in order to achieve this belongingness, and this level of intoxication needs to be constantly negotiated as a group. This is discussed further in the An 'Ideal' State of Intoxication? chapter.

The sociality around drinking is heightened for some key events. For example, at music festivals, a heightened sense of sociality was observed by the field researchers:

**Field notes, Big Day Out:** Later I realised how common it was for people to approach and speak freely with others in these highly social environments.

**Field notes, Good Vibrations:** I saw many instances of sharing (i.e. food), friendliness between strangers (i.e. high fives) and general sort of sense of playfulness (i.e. running, dancing—not just up close to the stage but throughout the venue).

This heightened sense of camaraderie and altered rules of interacting with strangers may be derived from the way in which music festivals create a feeling of unreality and otherworldliness (see the Events, Marketing and Media chapter). They also represent a strong embodiment of the party lifestyle, in which camaraderie is so highly valued.

### 3.1.2.3 *Discussion after the event*

The third aspect of sociality is the discussions that occur subsequent to the event. The importance of this third form of sociality can not be overstated, as the following quotes highlight:

---

**FG10, Female#1:** I like the funny photos that you get when you look at them the next morning and you're just like "what the hell?"

**All:** haha.

**Female#1:** It's like the best thing.

---

**FG08, Male#1:** You have good stories to tell.

**Male#2:** From the last time you were drunk.

**Male#3:** That's right.

---

**INT:** Do you ever talk about previous nights out?

**Jeremy, 18:** ((enthusiastically)) Oh, yeah, definitely, yes, I think um, that's one of the most interesting things. If you're looking for why people drink, often it's like in terms of like what they talk about the night after, like, to be honest a lot of like nights out are pretty shit, club wise but people trump them up to be like really really good because of how much they drink they're just sort of showing off about, you know, like, can't remember this bit at all and like I passed out and blah blah blah and so like, yeah definitely people talk about it a lot like afterwards.

---

This third form of sociality is presented by these young people as potentially 'the best thing' about drinking. The last quote also touches on how the event is reconstructed in a positive way in discussions, to create a story of fun more in line with the idealised notion of the party lifestyle, rather than what may in fact have eventuated.

The post-event discussions therefore serve at least two purposes: 1. they create further social opportunities out of the one experience, and 2. they also re-write the experience to align it with the ideal of the fun, carefree, party lifestyle.

Negative events can be reframed in a positive way by becoming humorous stories in these retellings. The following quotes describe what would be seen by most non-participants as negative events – young males getting drunk, vomiting, falling down, and potentially damaging property. But for the participants telling the stories, these occurrences were a source of humour:

---

**FG16, Male#1:** It was probably one of the funniest nights of my life, but after a while like it was getting really bad cause one of 'em he hadn't eaten anything that whole day so he was absolutely smashed. He started spewing up ... And then he also faceplanted the ground, it was hilarious.

---

**FG04, Male#1:** At my party this year, this kid got heaps, heaps drunk, and he was just like, like he wrote on my bedroom wall, and like another kid vomited in my bed.

**Female#1:** Laughs.

**Male#1:** Although they're bad, they're not exactly like, they're more like a funny story.

---

The young people in this focus group went on to recount in great detail the story of the young male who vomited in the bed. The humour and camaraderie in this group retelling was very evident in their tone and enthusiasm, and highlighted the unsanctioned enjoyment derived from this third form of sociality.

Such reframing of negative events in such a positive and humorous light is likely to constitute a barrier to public health campaigns aiming to warn young people about the potential negative effects of alcohol. Such campaigns have to contend with these retellings which emphasise fun and reframe negative events as humorous.

### 3.1.3 Inclusion in the wider Australian culture

The desire for belongingness goes further than immediate social groupings. Alcohol also plays a role in seeking inclusion in the wider Australian cultural context. The following field notes excerpt illustrates how the relationships between alcohol, nationalism, and ideals of partying and mateship are all intertwined:

**Field notes, Big Day Out:** Nationalism was expressed in a huge way through the omnipresence of the Australian Flag; Australian artists with nationalistic jargon in their lyrics. This was most notable during the Hilltop Hoods' performance. Hilltop Hoods also linked their lyrics with alcohol consumption and mateship eg "if you're going to the bar grab your mates one" – when they sang this lyric the crowd sang it with them and cheered. Young people were wearing national colours of green and gold, a few young men were wearing the Australian flag as a cape.

To have fully participated in this celebratory moment, a young person would need to endorse all of these values: nationalism, mateship, and partying, and in doing so, would contribute to cohesion in the form of strengthening a national identity and a sense of their own belonging in this culture. Here a young person reflects on wanting to achieve this belongingness that was only attainable once she had reached the legal age:

---

**Michaela, 18:** I think it's just sort of, since like being young, down at the - having a barbie, having a beer sort of thing. Like I've always wanted to have a beer with my Dad and older brother sort of thing. At the cricket and stuff you always see people drinking, and it's just sort of, like, I guess in society how it's like perceived these days, alcohol's in most things, like everything.

---

In summary, alcohol can contribute to achieving a sense of belongingness and group cohesion in a number of ways, and young people are adept at protecting and employing this role for alcohol using strategies such as reframing negative events as humorous stories. As this role of alcohol in achieving inclusion suggests, not drinking alcohol can be a barrier to achieving belongingness, and can result in exclusion. This is explored further in the following section.

## 3.2 Not Drinking and Exclusion

The first half of this chapter has focused on the function of alcohol in negotiating belongingness. However, the double-edged sword of the role of alcohol in achieving belongingness is the potential exclusion this can create for young people who do not want to drink. This is captured well in the following quote:

---

**Rick, 23:** I like the idea that for some reason, drinks bring people together. I don't like how if somebody doesn't drink at all, it's almost, not frowned upon, but it's sort of like "oh, how come?" because I sort of know how they feel, like they don't wanna drink, or they don't like alcohol at all, you know, they shouldn't be, for example, when people say "I don't drink at all", you know, the look they get from other people is "Oh really?" And it just confuses me, because they can't go out with us and whatever because they don't do much?

---

Rick enjoys the inclusion and group cohesion that alcohol can bring, but expresses frustration that alcohol is also used to exclude, and rejects the idea that peers who don't drink can not contribute, and can not demonstrate a commitment to the party. However, he is arguing that this exclusion is a common experience for those who choose not to drink. This section focuses on the experience of exclusion, and how young people negotiate the achievement of belonging and establish social identities in the face of exclusion.

### 3.2.1 Dichotomising drinking

Public discourse on drinking is a history of dichotomies: dependence versus abstinence, or problematic drinking versus non-problematic drinking. These dichotomies mask the actual continuum of drinking patterns that ranges from abstinence, through low risk drinking, to risky and high risk drinking and dependence. Dichotomies are often used to exclude, in these cases to exclude the drinkers responsible for alcohol-related harms, while preserving a majority of blameless, 'unproblematic' drinkers.

Therefore, it is not surprising that when young people discussed how belonging and not belonging is negotiated, that some invoked a polarised dichotomy. This black and white polarity placed drinking with the group on one side, and being 'soft' – not drinking with the group, on the other side. In the drinking versus non-drinking dichotomy evident in discussions with and among some young people, drinking meant the popular youth conception of drinking – pursuing a state of ideal intoxication (see An 'Ideal' State of Intoxication?). As would be suggested by the concepts of commitment to the party and matching levels of intoxication, the definition of drinking in this dichotomy tends to exclude drinking in moderation; you're either matching the level of drinking in the group, or you're not really drinking.

Young people who fall onto the 'soft' side of this dichotomy: those who drink in moderation, or not at all, seem to adopt the point of view of an outsider:

---

**Jonathan, 21:** I mean I honestly don't go out that much. I'm not an 'out' person. I'd rather, you know, be at home or someone's house and do it that way. No real reason, just don't like the populous in general when they've been drinking usually, so.

---

---

**FG18, Female#1:** I kinda, well, I don't get invited to these things because I don't drink. So I don't know, so yeah. And I hang out with different kinds of people who don't drink and I just have a good time with them, so...

**INT:** You're OK with not being invited?

**Female#1:** Oh, yeah. Pretty much ((unconvincing)).

---



Two different forms of exclusion are demonstrated here: Jonathan is experiencing a more subtle exclusion arising from not feeling like he belongs with the drinking “populous in general”, while the female in the second quote is being actively excluded through not getting invited to drinking occasions. Both forms of exclusion are important and can prevent young people from attaining a sense of belongingness.

### 3.2.2 From a dichotomy to a continuum

Despite young people drawing on this dichotomy, ‘drinker’ and ‘non-drinker’ are not fixed labels. Young people’s drinking behaviour is contextual, and can depend on time and place. Young people can move between drinking and non-drinking status across events and within events, and between social groups. For example, within events, young people may switch from drinking to not drinking in order to take care of intoxicated friends,

---

**Letitia, 18:** If I sort of see that everyone around me's sort of been drinking, and I might have had one, then I think I'm just going to stop because that person has had way too much, and that person's on the verge of having way too much and you just know that something's going to happen.

---

or switch from being a non-drinking non-participant, to being a full drinking participant once alternative transport is arranged:

---

**Evvie, 22:** We were actually going to be the designated driver, and then we got out and everyone was having a good time, and a couple of friends showed up as a surprise from Sydney, so with that I sort of wanted to get into a party spirit and yeah, I sort of. I thought well no, like cos I'd driven the week previous last week, like that Saturday night and I thought “Ah, na, I'm not going to drive this week anymore” so we ended up, I took my car home, and got my stepdad to take me back into town, so then I started drinking from there.

---

Hence, participation in drinking, and the attendant belongingness or exclusion is dynamic and constantly negotiated by young people. Negotiation can often be difficult and challenging, as the following account of one young male trying to stop drinking but maintain inclusion with his (discouraging) peers demonstrates:

---

**FG04, INT:** What happened with that? Did people just accept that or was it hard?

**Male#1:** Most people said just “yeah, bullshit”.

**Female#1:** For ages [yeah].

**Female#2:** [But everyone's] just like “you will not, you will keep drinking”.

---

From a public health perspective, it is important to challenge this dichotomy and highlight the potential for a middle ground between not drinking and drinking to intoxication. However, current media campaigns and discourses may in fact reinforce this dichotomy rather than deconstruct it, if all depictions of youth drinking are demonstrations of drinking to intoxication.

One form of middle ground that may have currency with young people was getting 'tipsy'. Although the meaning of this condition was highly subjective, and may in reality cover a range of different levels of intoxication, it may also represent an acceptable but low level of drinking. One young female in focus group 12 described the distinction between pissed and tipsy as "pissed is when you're like just passed tipsy." 'Tipsy' has connotations of being fun and happy, and hence may still be a valid demonstration of commitment to the party, while reducing the amount of risk and risky behaviour associated with greater levels of intoxication. This 'tipsy' state was mentioned positively by young people in our study, as illustrated in the following young female's response to the question about what she liked about drinking:

---

**FG15, Female#1:** Being tipsy. When shy people stop being shy. So that's like, when other people are drunk, I like it when they loosen up. And I like it when, because you're all loosened up, people talk to people they don't usually talk to.

---

'Tipsy' was the degree of intoxication sufficient for this female to achieve positive effects such as "loosening up" and gaining confidence. Such positive references were generally expressed by young females, such as in the following examples:

---

**FG10, Female#1:** We don't want anyone, like, overly drunk. I mean tipsy is ok but, you know, stumbling, can't walk, can't talk.

---

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**FG11, Female#1:** I like the feeling of being tipsy. You can be yourself. (?) You have more confidence.

...

**INT:** So you like the feeling of being tipsy?

Female#1: Yeah.

**INT:** What about it?

**Female#1:** Like, sort of, you just don't care what people think, you just like walk around and you're having a good time.

---

Hence, the positive regard for 'tipsy' may be gendered. There was one exception of a young male who reported enjoying being tipsy:

---

**Jeremy, 18:** I like to occasionally get drunk but not like so hammered that I'm sick but, yeah, just generally like maybe a bit tipsy and have a good night with a lot of different people, see heaps of different people. And, yeah, that's a good night for me.

---

It was more common amongst the young males in our study to prefer an ideal state of intoxication beyond tipsy, what the following young male referred to as "after tipsy":

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**FG13, Male#1:** I like the drunken state of mind. After tipsy, but not hammered, not slaughtered.

---

This male's description highlights the continuum of drinking and the various stages between not-drinking and being "slaughtered" or "hammered". Exploration of these middle ground states are important in changing the discourses around drinking away from narrow and rigid dichotomies and towards an understanding of the continuum of drinking, and the contextual factors that influence drinking.

### 3.2.3 The contextuality of drinking

In contrast to the more common and rigid classification of young people into heavy, moderate, or non-drinkers, it was more common for the drinking behaviour of the young people in our study to be highly fluid and contextual:

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**FG16, Female#1:** Depending where I am I might have one drink but usually if it's ever in like a group, in a peer group kind of setting, I won't have any, or anything like that. Maybe if it's with the family at Christmas, and my Mum's side are having wine and cheese, maybe I won't be able to resist the wine and cheese.

---

**Jenny, 23:** I like sporting events as well.

**INT:** OK. Do you drink at the sporting events?

**Jenny:** Yeah, I do.

**INT:** How does that work?

**Jenny:** Yeah, that's always good, but obviously they're sporting events as well, so it's not going to be a case of, you know, having 10 to 12 drinks. It's more a case of having one or two or three.

---

Here the company and the type of occasion affected the young people's choices about whether to drink and how much to drink. Young people raised a number of such factors that affected decisions around alcohol. Having work, school, or sport commitments the next morning often lead to young people refraining from drinking to intoxication:

---

**Mark, 16:** It'd be pretty dumb to get drunk on a school night, or for arguments sake, a night where I've got a game the next day. Like, I usually don't go out days before soccer.

---

There were also some exceptions to this where young people said they wouldn't sacrifice drinking for work:

---

**FG20, Male#1:** For work, I always worked on Sundays. If something comes up on Saturday like you can't just say "No I've got work". You just go and just deal with it.

---

---

**Jenny, 23:** Quite often I've gone to work with a hangover so it's not something that stops me from doing anything in life.

---

One employer of young people in a key stakeholder interview also noted that one of his young male workers would pre-arrange to take the day off work following a planned night of drinking – a strategy that allowed the young person to negotiate their commitments and prevent having to sacrifice drinking.

The choice of whether to drink in the face of these commitments involved a component of weighing up the importance of the commitment. For example, there were differences in attitude according to whether the young person held a more important, career-related job versus a temporary and less demanding retail (or similar) job:

---

**Corrina, 24:** My job was very easy, we were just retail assistants, so no, I don't think it affected my work.... If I did it now, and went to work hungover, then yeah, it probably would, because I'm always so busy and dealing with important people and things like that. And it would be very inappropriate and I wouldn't put my job in that line.

---

However, the excuse of commitments the next morning also did not provide an escape from criticism from the rest of the group for not drinking:

---

**FG04, Male#1:** Any excuse you can.

**Male#2:** Anything, anything.

**Male#1:** Come up with, any idea. Like oh I've got to do something tomorrow.

**Male#3:** Yeah, it doesn't really matter.

**Male#1:** I've got to do something tonight.

**Male#2:** They'll just be 'soft.'

**Male#1:** They'll be like 'you're soft.'

---

Curtailing drinking to fulfil other commitments was sometimes counterbalanced with periods of bounded hedonism when young people were free of those commitments and engaged in greater levels of drinking:

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**Phil, 20:** During the semester, during the week, I'm just study, study, study, and as soon as I go to the uni bar it's like, "ahhhh, relax".

---

**Julia, 20:** Pretty much all my friends are uni friends, and every uni holiday that comes up like first day in they want to do something really fun and they want to go out and dance and drink and whatever ... and expect to try and get as much fun in as they can in this short period of time.

---

This style of drinking parallels the ritualistic drinking in the wider Australian culture of "work and bust" discussed in the Phase One report (Roche et al., 2007). According to Lewis (1992) the "work and bust" ethos of working for long periods in remote areas, followed by extended drinking sessions once the workers went into town to spend their leisure time, has spread to modern workers. This pattern of working hard or fulfilling other commitments, and then engaging in periods of more liberated drinking is evident amongst the young people in our study as illustrated through the above quotes.

Many young people also chose not to drink when they needed to drive home after an event. Most young people in our study were very strict about not drinking and driving, and would abstain from alcohol when driving. A third reason provided by young people for when they may not drink is when going to music events. This is discussed further in the section below on Alternative leisure identities.

Conversely, there were some situations that made it more likely for young people to choose to drink alcohol. Young people cited occasions that would be marked by alcohol consumption such as going away parties, birthdays, seeing friends they haven't seen for a long time, and the end of exams. More ad hoc reasons for drinking that spontaneously occurred included when someone broke up with their girlfriend/boyfriend, or otherwise wanted to "drown their sorrows":

---

**Julia, 20:** A friend of mine had gone through something with her parents, and she decided that it was time to crack open the champagne and try and drown her sorrows.

---

It is interesting that the drink of choice in the example above was champagne, a drink that, amongst adults at least, is associated more strongly with celebration rather than commiseration. It suggests that maybe young people are not enculturated into the full range of symbolism accompanying alcohol and different alcoholic drinks, or that they choose to ignore or subvert some of this symbolism. It is also possible that Julia misattributed the meaning of drinking champagne for her friend, and it actually signified a victory, or break away from her parents - symbolic uses of champagne that would accord more closely with more traditional use.

Julia goes on to describe the more spontaneous reasons for her friends choosing to drink:

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**Julia, 20:** When they're trying to forget something horrible, or they're drowning their sorrows, or they're feeling sorry for themselves, or some sort of occasion when they feel it's appropriate to drink. It doesn't have to be a birthday or it doesn't have to be New Years Eve or whatever.

---

In summary, as well as planned social, celebratory events, there are many more spontaneous triggers, both positive and negative, for young people to choose to drink alcohol. Again, this underscores the contextuality of drinking and the decision-making and negotiation young people undertake around alcohol.

### **3.2.4 It's hard out here for a non-drinker**

A striking feature of the interviews and focus groups with young people was how hard a young person had to work to justify not drinking (at a particular occasion, or in general) to other drinkers. Typically, the young person was required to come up with not one, but several reasons why they were not drinking.

Previous researchers have noted that alcohol is almost mandatory for young people in establishing a 'legitimate' social identity (Abel & Plumridge, 2004; Nairn, Higgins, Thompson, Anderson, & Fu, 2006). Non-drinkers, infrequent or light drinkers are deviating from an established, heavily enforced norm and hence they are required to construct an alternative identity. Non-drinkers face potentially heavy social exclusion at worst, through to constant interrogation at best. It is surprising, therefore, that with some exceptions (eg, Nairn et al., 2006), little research has been directed towards understanding how non-drinkers, or infrequent or light drinkers, navigate teenagehood without participating in the norm of periodically drinking to intoxication. There are exceptions to this social norm, such as alternative religious or cultural norms, as discussed below in section 3.2.9 'Following cultural or religious norms', where drinking is not as highly valued. This demonstrates how important it is that the identities young people adopt reflect their group's norms and values if they want to achieve belongingness. The fact that being a drinker is usually so highly valued is a reflection of the norms and values of Australian culture generally.

As discussed earlier, there are generally three phases of sociality surrounding a drinking event: the planning, the event itself, and the subsequent discussions of the

event. Young people who do not drink at the event may be excluded from the sociality of all three phases.

Not drinking alcohol excludes the young person from the organisation of the acquisition of the alcohol:

---

**FG16, Male#1:** People will be talking about like going to a party, and they'd be like "yeah, I'll get some alcohol", and they'll be saying it to me and they go "oh, you don't drink, so it doesn't really matter for you". I'm just like "oh, oh well."

---

During the event, not drinking can result in exclusion on a number of levels, ranging from implied to explicit:

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**FG16, Female#1:** When a couple of people asked me what I was having, I said water, or tonic water, I had a few people like "oh, how am I going to remember everything?" coz it was a different order to what everyone else was getting, they're like "how am I going to remember that?" and I'm like. They didn't remember it, and I had to go get my own.

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Those who did not drink may also not be able to benefit from the discussion of the event. Some young people reported that when they did not drink at an event, they felt different to the drinkers, and did not find the same things funny, or interesting:

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**FG17, Female#1:** It's so funny watching people who are actually 'off their faces' and you're completely sober.

**Female#2:** I don't like it. I find it boring.

---

However, there were some exceptions where young people found these differences amusing:

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**FG04, Male#1:** You're just like "that's dumb" and you're just like "that's stupid" but you [realise that.]

**Male#3:** [Yeah it's not funny unless you're drunk as well.]

**Male#1:** You'd be like enjoying yourself with them. Like you wouldn't be.

**Male#2:** Yeah.

**Male#1:** Sitting on the couch criticising. You'd be up there laughing and joking with them.

**Male#3:** Yeah.

---

**FG10, Female#1:** Yeah, I just think it's more boring and you notice everyone else is like having fun, and I don't know. Just like, stupid things happen they'll think it's funny, and you're just like "yeah, it's not funny". (All laugh) Because they're just drunk they think everything's funny, and they just do whatever, and you're just like, you know, you sort of feel left out, because everyone else is.

**Female#2:** Like they've got their own little personal joke.

---

This separation is likely to be continued into the discussion of the night before, where the perspective of someone who was sober at the time, and therefore not a full participant, may or may not be welcomed.

The intrusion of reality, as suggested by video recordings in the following quote, may not be welcome in these discussions:

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**FG12, Female#1:** You know what's the worse thing? - when people video record ya.

**Female#2:** Mmm.

**Female#3:** That's the worse thing.

**Female#4:** Yeah, then they show you in the morning, and you're like "what?!!"

---

If young people who did not drink at the event tried to participate in these discussions, this raises the possibility that their sober accounts would be viewed as presenting a more realistic and less idealised version of events, equivalent to a video recording. Hence, exclusion of non-drinkers from this form of sociality reflected their status as a non-participant, but may also serve to protect young people's ability to positively reframe the event.

The experience of exclusion varied among young people. Some insisted it wasn't significant, and still mingled with young people who were drinking:

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**Kurt, 18:** They don't really care that much either, coz they're at a party, they're happy, they've got some drinks, coz they don't really care, so nah, it's not really an issue, no.

---

Others were more confronted by the exclusion.

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**Letitia, 18:** But you still sort of feel like "are they judging me?" Like, are they thinking "oh wow, she's soft" or because something or, you know something else. It was kind of a bit intimidating.

---

This range of experiences may be due to different groups applying different levels of pressure around drinking alcohol with the group, but there may also be interpersonal differences in the experience of pressure, how important the pressure feels to the young person, and how willing they are to talk about being socially pressured and excluded.

### 3.2.5 Establishing alternative identities

Nairn and colleagues (2006) interviewed young people in New Zealand who did not drink, or drank infrequently, and presented five alternate legitimate social identities: 1) constructing alternative leisure identities through enjoying activities that did not require alcohol, 2) rejecting the drinking norm as undesirable, 3) passing as a drinker amongst drinkers, 4) following cultural or religious norms that prioritise non-drinking, or moderate drinking, and 5) establishing a sporty or healthy identity. Aspects of these alternative identities also emerged in the current analysis, with some additions.

### 3.2.6 Rejecting determined drinking

Reflecting Nairn's finding of rejecting the drinking norm as undesirable, several young people who did not drink or drank only in moderation expressed disgust when discussing peers' excessive consumption. Arguably, the defining feature

of much of young people's alcohol consumption that separates it from the main experience of adult drinking is the practice of drinking solely to pursue a state of intoxication – what Measham and Brain (2005) described as “determined drunkenness”. Particular disgust at determined drunkenness was a prevalent theme among non-drinking young people, or light drinkers, possibly as a strategy to establish a maturity that emulates adults:

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**Phil, 20:** I mean I'd never actually understood why people would drink to get drunk, because I'd see my friends when they were first experimenting, or we all were, 15, 16 years old, and they'd just drink as much as possible, skulling cheap vodka which tasted awful and then getting the lemonade or something to try and wash it all down and then they, then 15 minutes later they'd be on the front lawn or something, vomit coming out of their mouths, and I'm thinking “is it really that worth it?”

---

This disgust may be fuelled by a moral imperative that classes determined drinking as immature and reflecting bad character. Sometimes young people who engaged in determined drinking were seen as morally deficient: unreliable or untrustworthy. Alicia describes this:

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**Alicia, 18:** They could just not take you seriously at the times when you need them, or just change, like, they could be a trusting person when they're not drinking, but when they are they might not care about you as much, or the other way around. You're getting inconsistency, which could like become a consistent inconsistency, which is just not dependable the same.

---

Here Alicia is valuing the characteristics of trustworthiness and dependability, and views the change in young people when they drink as mercurial and untrustworthy. The patterns of drinking of either not drinking alcohol at all, or drinking infrequently or in moderation, are typically associated with adults. Therefore it is not surprising that non-drinkers cast themselves in adult ways, and it is arguable which comes first for the young non-drinker: adult emulation or exclusion from a perceived youth norm.

In a similar vein, many non-drinkers or moderate drinkers cast alcohol into a role where it was perceived to fill a deficiency, in particular, a deficiency that was not applicable to themselves or their friends, which is why, they argued, they did not need alcohol. For example:

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**Jeanette, 18:** Usually those people [who drink to intoxication], in my experience, are very uninteresting when they're sober. And they're very, very, very keen to drink all the time, because it's only when they're drinking that they can have fun and when they can be interesting and charming, or charming, you know, in quotes.

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**Debby, 17:** People drink to get accepted and they don't need to. All these people drink because they're insecure.

---

As discussed, young people who did not drink to intoxication faced all manner of pressure and social exclusion. The counter-arguments provided by Jeanette and Debby, similar to claiming an adult maturity when rejecting determined drinking, served to reverse this judgement, placing those who did not drink to intoxication as superior, and those who did drink to intoxication as deficient. As with following



alternative identities, these young people are providing alternative interpretations or negotiations of normative expectations and social judgements around being a fun, social person, in order to present arguments for not drinking to intoxication.

However, care needs to be taken in supporting this type of alternative identity. The arguments young people provided, similar to some traditional adult arguments about young people and drinking, pathologised individual behaviour, without looking at the reasons why young people drink alcohol. The portrayal by young people of other young people who drank was generally very negative and heavily stigmatised.

### 3.2.7 Alternative leisure identities

Alternative leisure activities that did not centre around alcohol that were raised by young people in our study included relaxed barbeques at people's houses, and watching movies.

Events such as barbeques offered activities that were not centred around alcohol and provided opportunities for drinking groups to have a more relaxed "quiet one."

Some young people who choose not to drink in general had hobbies, such as film (e.g. Jeanette) or camping (e.g. a young male in Focus Group 16), that did not centre around alcohol.

The more creative, alternative leisure activities recounted in Nairn et al.'s (2006) study were less commonly drawn upon by the young people in our study. Nevertheless, some young people described such activities:

---

**Melissa, 21:** Some of my uni friends who don't drink I think because they're in the same boat as me, and they just (laughs) It's everybody else they're just drunk all the time. We're just, you know, when you say like "what do you sort of do when you hang out?" It's kind of whoever suggests a stupid thing to do at the time. Like yeah, I don't know, they're sort of up for stuff that other people wouldn't do unless they were drunk, like, you know, like we'd go to an arcade and get a bunch of bouncy balls and go and find the highest spot we could drop them off. I guess I don't drink that much because I don't need it.

---

This quote also shows how this approach manifests itself in judgements such as they did not need alcohol like other people need it to be a fun, interesting person. Similar to the disgust at determined drinking discussed above, this changed the judgement around drinking and not drinking to make these non-drinking young people the fun ones, and the drinkers the boring ones.

Music concerts were also often occasions that would not necessarily centre around alcohol, because young people wished to remember the experience:

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**Phil, 20:** For me, I've paid \$120 to get in there. That's a lot of money for me! I want to remember every last second of it.

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**Kurt, 18:** I'd like never even think about drinking at those events. I mean, I know even like apart from the fact that drinks are ridiculously expensive there, they're just like outrageously expensive there I've sort of like spoken to people, like even people overseas who've been to amazing festivals like Glastonbury and stuff ... they're like "ohh, can't even remember, we were totally gone". ...I'm like "what a waste of an experience".

---

However, observations from music festivals suggested that this may not always be the case, and depended on the event:

**Field notes, Big Day Out:** At the BDO the focus seemed more about the activity of listening to/ watching the music perhaps alcohol was an accessory to this but also part of the experience.

**Field notes, Good Vibrations:** At various times I was prompted to think that perhaps the majority of people were not there to hear the music but instead the day was about being social and spending time with their friends, (and importantly with an extremely large group of strangers) outside, in a big, garden-like space designated for drinking and hanging out, running around and dancing.

### 3.2.8 Passing as a drinker

Non-drinkers, or light drinkers, described several strategies for passing as drinkers in drinking spaces, or appeasing drinkers, to escape negative attention. For example, one common strategy was to hold one drink, and slowly drink it over the course of the night, to make it look like they're drinking. Several young people who had not drunk for many years, and who had no interest in drinking, had begun drinking one or two drinks when in drinking spaces in order to be able to use this strategy to pass as drinkers and avoid attention and potential pressure or embarrassment:

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**Melissa, 21:** I'll just have one and just you know sort of hold on to it until everybody else is too drunk to notice that I've only had one.... People would give me stuff to taste, and I hated it. I sort of found a couple that I didn't mind, so I sort of had them just to sort of to appease everybody else.

---

There are significant reasons why young people would attempt to 'pass' themselves off as drinkers when it goes against how they would usually see themselves. This is explained by Sociologist Erving Goffman:

*"Because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent"*  
(Goffman, 1963, p.95).

This strategy is linked to the importance of showing a commitment to the party, discussed earlier. When young people do not drink at an event, or drink only in moderation, they are unable to prove their commitment by matching levels of intoxication, and often try to seek out other ways to demonstrate their commitment and maintain their inclusion.

One strategy mentioned by young people was to mimic the 'high' of drinkers – matching their energy levels and mood:

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**FG18, Female#1:** I was going to say I'd have an energy drink, but my Mum wouldn't buy me any. I didn't have any money and so I couldn't buy it myself. I think I just loosened up a lot, cos everyone else just sort of like I didn't know a couple of people but because they were drunk I felt like I could talk to them.

---

**FG16, Female#1:** You end up like, in a way, not mimicking behaviour, but mimicking the high that the other people.

**FG16, Male#1:** Yeah.

**FG16, Female#1:** Like still having fun.

**FG16, Male#1:** Yeah, definitely.

---

This can be expressed as the phenomenon of the 'natural high':

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**FG16, Male#1:** I was on a natural high so I was having fun as well.

---

The quote from Focus Group 18 above also notes the strategy of drinking soft drinks or energy drinks to match the energy levels of the drinkers. Another focus group of young women also used this strategy:

---

**FG01, INT:** Anything else that would make it fun even though you're not drinking?

**Female#1:** Drink soft drink.

**Female#2:** I find it does the same for me.

**Female#3:** Get some sugar. So you're just as happy, not high, just like, energetic, as energetic as those who have drunk.

---

Although the young female in Focus Group 16 (quoted above) argued against mimicking behaviour, to an extent this is a requisite part of mimicking the energy and mood. The most prominent example of this was dancing. Dancing was a prevalent activity associated with nights out and drinking for young people, and a way of achieving inclusion and belongingness. This was evident in the interviews and focus groups with young people, and also the experience of observers at events:

**Field notes, Big Day Out:** Everyone was dancing! After JB had left a guy came up to ask if I was okay because I didn't "seem that into it that's all" which was funny because I felt like I was actually dancing quite vigorously!

This experience suggests that to be a full participant you need to match the energy levels of others at the event, and falling short of this identifies you as "not into it" or an outsider. The US author H.P. Lovecraft is believed to have argued that "almost nobody dances sober, unless they happen to be insane." As this quote illustrates, dancing is usually done with the aid of some degree of alcohol intoxication. Hence, one way young people who weren't drinking at a party or night out maintained their belongingness and successfully mimicked the high of their intoxicated peers was to join the dancing:

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**FG16, Female#1:** I still got up and danced with the people who were drinking.

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**Isabelle, 19:** My friend Emma and I, she doesn't drink alcohol at all, whereas all the others pretty much were having a couple of drinks. We just got up and started dancing.

---

However, this mimicry can be a dangerous strategy to employ if the young person is not seen as being authentic. Authenticity is highly valued by young people, including around drinking identities, and some young people expressed strong dislike and distrust for 'fakers':

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**FG19, Female#1:** It's like when people fake being drunk, I hate that. I mean, that's not real.

**FG19, Female#2:** There's a group of girls, the 'fake drunk' and they will go to a party and half the time they're faking it and you know it!

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**FG01, Female#1:** Like, the people that pretend to be drunk, you know –

**Female#2:** Just to fit in.

**Female#3:** I think that's even worse.

**Female#4:** Than drinking to be drunk. Just pretending to be drunk. Obviously they're not happy with themselves.

---

Again, this demonstrates how intertwined alcohol and negotiating belongingness and inclusion are for young people, and the difficult narrow spaces young people can legitimately occupy when achieving belongingness.

### 3.2.9 Following cultural or religious norms

Several young people explained their moderate drinking by pointing to European cultural influences when they were growing up – including Italian, Greek, and Polish influences. For example:

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**Troy, 18:** I have friends that, you know, their family, they didn't have it in their families, like it sounds racist, but the Australian people they didn't have it, coz all the Italians, they well, generally, always have the wine on the table. So I know that a lot of the Italian guys I notice don't get as drunk as much as the Australian guys do because alcohol isn't as big a deal, like it's not like the forbidden thing.

---

The idea that the European drinking culture emphasised moderation and enjoyment more than intoxication, in contrast to the Australian culture, has a lot of currency, including among young people who had not been brought up in that culture:

---

**FG15, Male#1:** Like the European culture, very open around drinking.

**Female#1:** Yeah, like, very casual, social.

**Female#2:** That's the culture I grew up in. And I never, ever, gotten sick after being drunk.

---

The higher degree of integration and inclusion demonstrated by Troy, and other young people who identified as belonging to a European culture, suggests that such young people enjoyed more inclusion than other non-drinkers or moderate drinkers. In other words, it may be that drawing on European cultural norms may be

perhaps the only one of Nairn and colleagues' (2006) alternative identities to be generally accepted and included by young drinkers.

For the most part when young people drew on a European heritage it was to invoke moderate drinking norms. One young person who had not drunk alcohol felt it might influence them in the opposite direction:

---

**INT:** So do you think later in life you might be someone who drinks alcohol a bit?

**Demetrios, 14:** Yeah, probably will, since my Dad's Greek, so he drinks alcohol and beer and etcetera, and I've been to Greece, so I've grown up with all that, and probably will.

**INT:** Why's Greece an effect on alcohol?

**Demetrios, 14:** They have the big parties and all, and everybody in the family drinks.

---

One young person who identified as Asian noted that alcohol did not form a large part of her cultural norm:

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**Jeanette, 18:** I notice, even when you go out for, like, family dinners, when I go to restaurants, like Asian restaurants, I notice that the Chinese families don't usually order a wine, but the Caucasian families almost always do.

---

Religion is a known contraindicator for risky alcohol consumption. This was reflected in the young people who identified as religious, and who did not drink alcohol, or drank little alcohol. Religious moral codes provided alternative norms young people could subscribe to that promoted non-drinking or moderate drinking over drinking to intoxication. Young people who did not participate in group drinking because of religious reasons appeared to face greater exclusion and negative social sanctions compared to the young people who drew on cultural norms:

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**Aiden, 21:** These women, one of them wasn't drinking. I was just curious about it. I pried into it for a while. I you know, had my suspicions. She was very religious, that was my assumption. I didn't want to say that directly to her (laughs) but I'm pretty sure that's what it was, but yeah. Coz it was New Years, so it was like, "ohhhh" ("downer" sound).

---

As a consequence, religious non-drinkers or moderate drinkers may choose not to enter or participate in mainstream drinking spaces, instead seeking out non-drinking alternatives, such as Debby, 17, who was going to an event run by a Presbyterian church rather than attend the main schoolies festivities. Young people who identified themselves as religious also had youth groups or other church-related communities to which they felt they belonged, which may offset exclusion from participating in events deemed important to their peers:

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**Alicia, 18:** Well, I know my identity is much bigger than just myself, and like it comes from being part of a Christian, to know that God accepts me for who I am, and my friends accept me for who I am, my family accepts me for who I am.

---

These groups also have the power to reverse the normal inclusion/exclusion rules around alcohol use, so that alcohol users were the ones who face potential exclusion:

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**Alicia, 18:** Some do go and maybe drink now and then, but it wouldn't be a regular thing, because the rest of us don't do it, so there's not much point doing it on your own for them, they'd rather hang out with us than go and be a loner, drinking.

---

### 3.2.10 Healthy and sporty identities

The one alternative non-drinking identity presented by Nairn and colleagues (2006) that was not evident in our current data was that of a healthy or sporty identity.

In Australia, much sport is heavily intertwined with alcohol use: beer drinking is popular at cricket and football matches, sporting identities regularly have heavy drinking episodes in the media, and many sports, including car races, are sponsored by alcohol. At a volleyball event, a football match, a cricket match, and the Clipsal 500, visited as part of the event observations component of the data collection, alcohol branding and alcohol consumption were prevalent. This relationship extended to informal sport, where one field researcher described a cricket match in a public park:

**Field note, Australia Day:** It was very 'Australian' in the choice of sport and the fact that most people playing were either fielding, bowling or batting with a beer in their hand.

This strong association between sport and alcohol in Australia may make it very difficult for young people to use sport to establish an alternative, non-drinking identity, and indeed none of the young people interviewed had done so. One young person did have a male friend who "hates alcohol, because he's right into his footy" (Rose, 14), but this response was from a member of a younger age group potentially before drinking had become a strong youth norm. In almost all other contexts, when sport was mentioned it was in the context of drinking or noticing drinking, sometimes heavy drinking.

The propensity for sport-oriented young people to drink more than some of their other peers was highlighted by one of the teachers interviewed as a key stakeholder. Supporting this, young people whose socialisation was primarily with a sporting group consistently reported a culture of drinking at the club: alcohol was sometimes present, and was sometimes almost mandatory, particularly for celebrations, such as after a final:

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**Michaela, 18:** At the cricket and stuff you always see people drinking, and it's just sort of, like, I guess in society how it's like perceived these days, alcohol's in most things, like everything, but same with lacrosse I guess, like everyone has a beer down the club, or has a drink, so.

---

**FG05, Female#1:** We've got a proper bar and everything, and =

**FG05, Female#2:** = It's all licensed and everything but because, given the nature of the club, and the sporting clubs and stuff I guess, it's part of the culture to go back and have a drink after the game.

---

Sporting clubs in Australia are also often associated with sometimes heavy consumption of alcohol, although programs such as the Australian Drug Foundation's "Good Sports" are working to achieve cultural change in this area.

However, sport can act as a barrier to drinking when it is viewed as a commitment the next morning. As discussed earlier in the contextuality of drinking section, young people may reduce their alcohol consumption, or not drink, before such commitments, although the extent to which this was viewed as a legitimate excuse for not drinking by peers varied.

Few young people mentioned choosing not to drink for health reasons. Two exceptions were a young male (Bryan, 21) and a young female (Corinna, 24) who had previously drunk heavily, but had since moderated their alcohol consumption for health reasons. One potential explanation for this different finding to Nairn and colleagues (2006) is the recent phenomenon of health branding of alcohol products, such as low carbohydrate beers and sugar free premixes. With the introduction of such drinks, it may be harder for young people to view all alcohol as unhealthy and to establish health as a legitimate reason for not drinking among drinking peers.

### 3.3 Beyond existing alternative identities

Two findings from this research that provide further important extensions to Nairn and colleagues' (2006) research on alternative non-drinking identities are the role the non-drinker can take in the form of the care giver, and the pressure on young people to construct more than just one alternative non-drinking identity.

#### 3.3.1 Angels of the drunk people: The role of care giver

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**Phil, 20:** I really used to enjoy helping out people, I kind of felt like an angel or something of the drunk people, helping them out.

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Discussions with young people showed a high level of awareness of the value of having a non-drinking care giver who could drive them home or otherwise take care of them if they drink too much and vomit, pass out, or otherwise suffer negative consequences from drinking. This care giving role can encompass physically taking care of a friend, being the designated driver, and being vigilant in regard to the safety of peers.

The establishment of an acknowledged duty of care amongst friends can be seen as a prime example of the resources young people have to offer, their ability to organise themselves and plan to avoid negative consequences, and a reason why the level of harm from youth drinking is not higher.

Three main models of allocating the care giver role were evident in the discussions with young people. The first model was that one or more young people regularly took on the role of the care giver (such as Letitia and Phil), usually because they were regular non-drinkers or moderate drinkers.

In other groups, where all members wished to participate in the drinking, the role of care giver or designated driver was shared around:

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**FG10, Female#1:** Me and my friends used to take it in turns to be designated driver and stuff.

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In the third, and potentially least desirable from a public health point of view, type of group, there was more confidence that they could all drink, and that one of them would be able to sober up enough to at least get help:

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**FG05, Female#1:** I reckon you'd always, not obviously fully to sober up, but you'd come to the fact that you'd know what you're doing, you'd know what to do, and most things =

**Female#2:** = Or at least know you need to find someone who can help, like even if it's "OK, I'm really drunk, I can't deal with you, but I need to find someone who can look after you".

---

Although this planning and care giving is to be applauded, the levels of knowledge surrounding how to help intoxicated people varied from a high level of understanding, as evinced by young people such as Phil,

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**Phil, 20:** As soon as, you know, someone hits the deck, it's like, the first call is put them on their side, second call is to make sure their airway's clear, and then that's when they start talking about "get him some water, get him some water, oh, you're OK". You know, that kind of thing.

---

to young people who had less than ideal approaches to trying to keep their intoxicated friends safe:

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**FG13, Female#1:** We've had to tie one of my friends to a chair cos she was so paro we could not control her.

---

**Stakeholder, Police Officer:** One of the blokes had fallen asleep, collapsed, whatever, and they put him in the back of the panel van to sleep, and they covered him up, and what they thought were the right things. But in the morning he'd actually choked on his own vomit and died.

---

This points to the need to help provide young people with the knowledge and skills they need to take care of their intoxicated peers in the most appropriate manner, through alcohol education in schools or other avenues.

Few young people talked about the experience of being on the receiving end of the care. Jenny reported feeling ashamed by it, and said the experience lead her to take drinking more seriously:

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**Jenny, 23:** There's been a few times when I've been out and I've had to have other people take care of me, you know? And I just don't enjoy that and I don't want to be seen like that.

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### 3.3.2 The burden of the care giving role

There are costs or sacrifices that young people have to balance against choosing to help their intoxicated peers:

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**Laura, 17:** And it's hard for his friends as well because they're kind of stuck like trying to make a decision "should I stay with him be a good mate?" Cause they spent a lot of money to go to schoolies and stuff, or like to go out. Yeah it's really hard.

---



Laura's quote highlights the ambivalence towards the care-giving role. On the one hand, it is an expression of responsibility for one's friends in a reciprocal system, where one's friends would do the same. Conversely, the care giving role can also signal the end of the fun, enjoyable part of the night, and be resented. This ambivalence is captured again in the following exchange:

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**FG02, Female#1:** When I was at New Year's and one of my friends got really drunk down the bay, she was vomiting in the toilets and I had to stay there in there with her for two hours. But I mean it was horrible but cause it was New Year's and I wanted to go out and have fun but I wasn't going to leave her in a public toilet, you know. I just had to stay there with her. You just have to do it. Because if anything happened to them, you'd never forgive yourself.

**Female#2:** Yeah but it works both ways though, they'd do it for you.

**Female#1:** Yeah they'd do it for you too.

**Female#3:** I don't know it's not that much =

**Female#1:** = It's annoying though. You can't be like "oh this is fun" but you do it for them because they'd do it for you.

---

The extent to which the care giving role is resented is likely to relate to whether this ideal of reciprocity is fulfilled or whether one or more members of the group are reluctantly required to fulfil this role regularly while others drink to intoxication. The above exchange suggests the possibility that some of the other young women are pushing Female#1 to accept the care giving role and downplay the burden it carries, while not directly saying that they have fulfilled this role for her or others. Another example of this is the following young woman's disenchantment:

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**FG18, Female#1:** I always end up being the soberest one who has to take care of everyone.... I get a bit sick of somehow being the responsible one. It's kind of my duty to take care of people.

---

Because of the burden of this role, young people in our study expressed annoyance or even anger at others who drank to the point where they needed to be taken care of:

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**Jeremy, 18:** Like looking after a mate, that's one of the most common worse nights out. You go out wanting to do your own thing then one of your good mates just drinks too much and they're so out of it you end up looking after him the whole night, so that's pretty underwhelming.

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**FG02, Female#1:** It's kind of annoying, yeah, cause it kind of ruins the night.

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The allocation of the care giving role by the rest of the group highlights the value placed on the role, even if the drinkers are not necessarily overtly thankful:

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**Laura, 17:** I don't feel appreciated a lot of the time.

**INT:** Oh really?

**Laura:** Yeah. Like, my other friends, like some of my other close friends, they do the same thing, or they sober up to do it. But I just, like, I don't think they feel appreciated as well. Like, the friend which is like passing out and throwing up everywhere they don't say thank you. Not even the next day a lot of the time.

---

However, this value can change when it comes to the prevention of behaviour that the non-drinking care giver judges as risky. Such situations are more difficult for the care giver to navigate, and may result in arguments and aggression:

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**Letitia, 18:** Oh wait, no - he's going to the road. Then you're like "maybe I'll try and stop him". Then he's like "oh what the hell are you doing?" rah rah rah. And so you think "oh my god I'm trying to help you, and here you are getting angry at me".

---

This navigation and potential interpersonal conflict may be an additional burden for the caregiver in some groups.

The burden associated with the care giving role raises the question of why young people would take on the role. In some instances, the care giving role is allocated to a person, perhaps begrudgingly, by the rest of the group:

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**FG10, Male#1:** He started spewing up. They were all "oh mate you haven't drunk anything, help him out". And I was like "oh yeah, whatever" so I had to help him out.

---

However, in other cases, young people readily took on the role of taking care of intoxicated friends, as illustrated by Phil at the start of this section. The extent to which young people were willing to take on the role of caregiver was highly gendered. This is discussed further in the Alcohol and Gender chapter.

There are several reasons why young people may actively take on the burden of the care giving role. Firstly, it can satisfy the young person's value system by looking after their friends (e.g. feeling like an "angel"). Secondly, everybody being intoxicated and so no one having a potential care giver to look after them if anything went wrong could provoke anxiety, and ruin enjoyment of the night. The following quote highlights these two points:

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**Letitia, 18:** Well, it kinda felt good because I thought well I know at least I know my friends is going to be safe, if they're all sort of together and you know there's one of us that you know isn't as bad as the rest of them, and there's part of the ways of thinking well, if I wasn't looking after you, who would be? And who'd be looking after me?

---

Thirdly, the care giving role provides a means for young people who do not wish to drink to take on a valued role in the group, thus attaining some level of inclusion and group membership without drinking alcohol. The role of the care-giver or designated driver is usually related to not drinking – young people were either designated these roles because they were not drinking, or young people would choose not to drink, or cease drinking, in order to take on the role. The role is the default position for young people who chose not to drink, and is the easiest way for a non-drinker to achieve acceptance from other drinkers. The burden associated with the care giving role, however, suggests that this does not extend to full inclusion, as their participation in the fun aspects of the night is heavily curtailed.

Because of this high level of acceptance, being the designated driver was often used as a pre-arranged excuse for not drinking when a young person did not feel like drinking on a particular occasion:

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**Letitia, 18:** I'd go out and be like "oh yeah, yeah, I'm designated driver" and you know. Because for some people, if you didn't drink, you weren't cool.

---

**Melissa, 21:** So then if people want to hassle me about it then I can just say the excuse that I'm driving so I can't. Then everybody automatically drops the issue. So that's a good way to get out of it.

---

The acceptance of this excuse can be seen as a positive unintended side effect of the public health campaigns around drink driving and planning to have a designated driver.

One New South Wales young person noted new laws (in New South Wales and Victoria) that impact the ability to have a designated driver strategy:

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**Isabelle, 19:** Usually there's always a designated driver, but now the new laws have come in, and P-plates can only have one passenger under the age of 25. ... There's always one designated driver for four people, that can fit in the car. But now I don't know how people are going to get home at the end of the night.

---

These laws may have a negative influence on young people's ability to arrange their transport after drinking, making it illegal for a sober young person to drive their intoxicated friends home.

### 3.3.3 One is never enough

Similar to non-drinkers having to provide several legitimate excuses for not drinking at an event, non-drinkers also drew from more than one alternative identity to establish legitimacy. In the case of Phil, he rejected the determined drinking norm as disgusting, took on the care giving role for intoxicated, established a healthy identity that involved moderation:

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**Phil, 20:** I, being a doctor's son, would particularly worry, even among the worried people, I would really make sure I would have four standard drinks exactly and no more.

---

drew on his Polish cultural heritage to establish his norm of moderate drinking:

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**Phil, 20:** Whereas once again, for me, like how was I introduced to vodka? OK, Christmas day, you get the bottle out of the freezer, you put it in these tiny little glasses, you pour it into there, you have it with your entree ... it accompanies your meals.

---

and also passed as a drinker in drinking spaces by drinking a small amount of spirits such as vodka or bourbon.

Again, this need for multiple excuses for not drinking, or the need to establish various alternative non-drinking identities, points to how entrenched a norm alcohol has become in our culture, and the amount of work required by young people to be able to successfully deviate from that norm.

### 3.4 Conclusion

Negotiating belongingness, both at an event, and in groups of peers, is a challenge for young people with or without alcohol. Just consuming alcohol does not guarantee belongingness. Alcohol needs to be consumed in a way that demonstrates commitment to the party. If drinking alcohol leads to being upset, or anxious, the young person may be seen as pulling down the mood and subsequently excluded. Being too sober or too drunk compared to everyone else puts you outside the main group experience, undermining your belongingness and barring you from the sociality of the drinking experience. This sociality is not only during the event, but also involves planning before the event, and post-event discussions. All of these aspects are highly social, and a young person's participation in drinking during the event is necessary to access these extra forms of sociality.

Without alcohol, young people are required to construct alternative identities. Without credible alternative identities, non-drinkers face potentially heavy social exclusion at worst through to constant interrogation at best. The most prominent alternative identities evinced by the young people in our study were taking on the role of the care giver, rejecting determined drinking, and finding alternative leisure identities that did not centre around alcohol. It is important when trying to encourage young people not to drink to intoxication, therefore, that these other alternative means to establish their identity are presented, and strategies are put in place to negotiate belongingness without alcohol.

In general, young people overestimate the prevalence of drinking among their age group (Hughes, Julian, Richman, Mason, & Long, 2008). Consequently, it's important not to exacerbate perceptions of the ubiquity of drinking. It is also important not to stigmatise non-drinking, and young people who do not drink, and over-emphasise the potential negatives.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the difficulties faced by young people who opt not to drink on a particular occasion, or in general, and to understand that it is unrealistic to expect young people to simply cease participating in drinking. Opting out of group drinking may mean sacrificing belongingness with one's peers, facing social sanctions, and being excluded from substantial aspects of young people's social lives, not just during a night out, but also before and after the event. This is illustrated by this young person referring to a non-drinking peer as brave:

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**Rose, 14:** He's brave enough to say "don't do it".

---

Being 'brave' here can be interpreted as facing severe social sanctions or exclusion for their behaviour. If young people are merely told to sacrifice belongingness when asked to consider not drinking to intoxication, the message is unlikely to have much effect.

These findings also raise potential points of leverage for interventions, which could emphasise some of the reasons for not drinking to intoxication that hold currency with young people. For example, there may be scope to promote not drinking at music events in order to remember the bands, and not "waste the experience." There may be other comparable arguments for other events and settings.

It is also critical to deconstruct the dichotomy in use among young people that separates those who drink to intoxication from other drinkers or non-drinkers, and raise awareness that drinking exists along a continuum, and that young people's drinking is contextual and changeable. Without this dichotomy, rigid rules around the role of alcohol in inclusion and exclusion lose their footing and the case for drinking to intoxication merely to achieving belongingness is weakened.

This chapter has focused on the role of alcohol in negotiating group memberships. There were often tensions evident between the themes we explored. One key tension experienced by the young people in our study was between trying to achieve inclusion and group membership, and still maintain a sense of independence and autonomy in their decisions around alcohol. The next chapter examines the latter component of this tension: young people's use of alcohol to assert their autonomy, and the effects of alcohol on young people's autonomy.



# 4 Autonomy and Control

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It has become something of a truism that alcohol acts as a 'social lubricant' that can facilitate social interactions, particularly between strangers. The use of alcohol as a social lubricant is especially pertinent to young people as their social worlds are constantly changing. This produces an ongoing array of novel social situations that heighten the desire for interactions in which young people are comfortable and socially at ease. In this manner, we build upon work that looks at alcohol as enabling and facilitative in social situations (eg Feldman, Harvey, Holowaty, & Shortt, 1999; Hoel, Eriksen, Breidablik, & Meland, 2004; Orford, Krishnan, Balaam, Everitt, & Van Der Graaf, 2007).

In the previous chapter, the role of alcohol in locating young people's position within the social group was explained by a need to belong that was made more difficult by the dominance of a dichotomous relationship between alcohol and social inclusion/exclusion. Alcohol draws considerable power as a cultural artefact because of its perceived ability to assist individuals cope with social situations and enable the transgression of otherwise established social norms. Alcohol is therefore viewed by young people as being able to help them move around in social space with some degree of freedom. Many young people reproduce this idea and use alcohol to attempt to assert a degree of autonomy. In this chapter, we question how smoothly this ideal of freedom translates into the lived experience of young people. We critically examine how young people engage in social interactions underpinned by alcohol in which their actual degree of autonomy is constrained by restrictive social norms that normalise alcohol.

This chapter begins by highlighting the ways in which alcohol was found to play an integral role in the transgression of social norms, and in facilitating social interactions. We found that this typically was discussed by young people as an appealing aspect to drinking. The chapter ends by asking whether alcohol as an enabler can be equated with the notion that it is freeing. To answer this we focus upon the notion of control as being central to understanding the degree to which young people regard drinking alcohol as liberating.

## 4.1 Alcohol as enabling sociability

The positive value placed upon alcohol as a social lubricant is reflected in our data. When we asked young people what they liked about drinking alcohol, the most common response expressed by participants was that alcohol gave them more 'confidence'. Typically, this was a confidence that was needed or deployed in social situations.

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**FG01, Female#1:** It [alcohol] gives you confidence to go up and talk to different people.

---

The need for confidence was particularly evident when interacting in unfamiliar settings or with new or different people. For young people, the definition of 'different people' did not necessarily mean strangers but could be peers with whom they were familiar but that were considered 'different' because of their exclusion or distance from their own cliques. This is demonstrated by the following female focus group participant.

---

**FG18, Female#1:** ...I like the confidence it gives you it sort of - it breaks down a lot of social barriers I find. Especially at our school I find there is sort of two different social groups and it's just like when people are drinking at a party or something then it makes it OK to talk to them whereas normally people will be like "oh why are you talking to them?" I can actually like - even I find I can still actually hold an intelligent conversation when I'm drunk, it's just the nerves are gone like it just calms me down a lot. Yeah, so definitely confidence.

---

Similarly, Phil referred to alcohol as enabling him to gain momentum so that he felt confident when engaging in social interactions such as conversations.

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**Phil, 20:** If I'm completely sober, I have to push myself into the conversation, and really get going, get over that initial hurdle, and then I'm fine. But if I've had, say, one and a half pints of beer, then, yeah, there's no hump to get over, kind of, the conversation just flows easier.

---

For young people, the imperative to be sociable amongst a group of similar aged peers is unrelenting. Being inept or withdrawing from such situations can be regarded as being unsociable and can elicit the label of 'deviant' (see also Chapter 3). This imperative is made more difficult for young people when their group memberships are as malleable and flexible as the female quoted above in Focus Group 18 demonstrates.

Consequently, alcohol manages to carve out its place as a readily available resource that young people can use to successfully engage in social situations. For example, alcohol can work as a catalyst to facilitate a wide array of behaviours that would not be evident without alcohol. One of the most commonly cited of these behaviours is that of dancing. This is discussed by Laura who talks about her 'unique' ability to be sober and dance at the same time.

---

**Laura, 17:** I'll go up and dance sober. Like literally, completely sober I'd go up there and dance.

**INT:** Yeah OK.

**Laura:** Other people have to be drunk to do it.

---

Similarly, Rick can dance when he's sober but finds that alcohol makes him less self-conscious and therefore 'freer' to enjoy himself while dancing.

---

**Rick, 23:** I can dance normally without any drinks but if I have been drinking I dance a lot more freely and I could care less what other people will think. And I don't know I guess it's a self-conscious thing when when you're not drinking you sort of thinking "oh am I dancing alright?" and whatever. But when I have been drinking I get - I just let loose and I have more fun dancing.

---



Underpinning Rick's response is the priority given to the self-management of social identity. Young people scrutinise their own appearance and behaviour in accordance with how they think other people will perceive them. This is demonstrated in the following field note from Schutzenfest in which the activities of patrons in a mock German beer hall are described.

**Field note, Schutzenfest:** Dance floor parquet surrounded by chairs facing them from three sides of a square. One side taken up by DJ area. Further out from dance floor are trestle tables and chairs. Mainly seating older people but some youngster (teens - 20s) dancing. Maybe 20 people dancing in total. Notice two teens, early 20s female dancing with young male in 'rave style' to traditional polka music. The girl is looking around while she dances.

The scene depicted here highlights the performative aspects of drinking within a social context. In this situation, drinking overcomes typical constraints by transforming the display of the active body in a potentially anxiety inducing activity (i.e. dancing) into one which is pleasurable. This is indicative of how alcohol was generally regarded by the young people in this study. For many of them, the cultural value of alcohol rests largely on its capacity to facilitate the transgression of social norms. However, these transgressions are not always as benign as those around dancing in public.

#### 4.1.1 Alcohol as 'license to transgress'

Alcohol can serve as a socially acceptable way of transgressing particular social norms that govern young people's behaviour and relationships. Alcohol is viewed by young people as liberating because it functions as an excuse to act in ways that would otherwise be restrained or more heavily sanctioned. In this sense, drinking impacts upon how young people view their surrounds which orients them towards behaving within a social context in particular and patterned ways. By providing a context where social norms can be challenged and appropriated, alcohol is used as a 'license to transgress.'

Alcohol facilitates transgression of social norms amongst smaller peer groups. The male participants in Focus Group 20 highlight alcohol's role as a license to engage in sexual activities that would otherwise be negatively sanctioned. In the following excerpt, the discussion turns to cheating on your girlfriend and the convenience of alcohol as a mitigating factor.

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**FG20, Male#1:** It's not OK, it's never OK but it improves the situation if you were drunk. You know, you can always rely on that. Like "I was drunk, sorry about that".

---

Later in the same focus group, the young males discuss the role of alcohol in leading to one-night stands, or where sexual activity occurs as a result of both parties being intoxicated.

---

**FG20, Male#1:** Sometimes it just breaks the ice.  
**Male#2:** And then you know there's not even a need to say the next day "oh where do we go from here?" It's just a mutual "that was good, like, but we're still friends".

---

In this part of the discussion, the boys believed that they could still maintain a friendship with the girl and that it was not expected that a more substantial relationship would develop. That the 'mutual' agreement to revert to a more plutonic relationship is unspoken demonstrates the presumption that this type of sexual activity, undertaken in the context of drinking, is a relatively typical and accepted form of social transgression. It could be argued, therefore, that the presumption here refers to a wider acceptance of the 'one night stand.' If this is the case, then alcohol in this instance could be viewed as instigating the establishment of new social norms around sexual activity and social interaction.

By deviating from the contestable 'norm' of serial monogamy, the boys placed alcohol in a relatively positive light as alcohol opened up a space where they could live up to the heteronormative notion of males 'sowing their oats' while sidestepping any ensuing moral sanctions. The license to transgress, however, is heavily gendered. Whilst the freedoms afforded young men are being appropriated by young women, young women are much more heavily surveilled and judged according to traditional restrictive gender norms (see also Chapter 7). Although alcohol may be recognised as part of the context of transgressions of young women, the process of stigmatisation is more heavily applied. For young women, negative sanctions and derogatory labels tend to stick long after the role that alcohol may have played is forgotten.

This type of negative sanctioning is exemplified by 20 year-old male Phil who discusses the temporal nature of 'drunken hook-ups' and their consequences.

---

**Phil, 20:** It's like in the same way, you know, some girls that go out in the town and they try and wear as little clothing as possible to attract the opposite sex. So OK, alright, ten points for attracting attention but do you want a relationship or do you want a 24 hour relationship? Where do you think you want to go with this. I don't think a lot of them really understand that.

---

In a similar vein, Laura describes the behaviour of a young woman in a hesitant, yet ultimately moralistic, fashion.

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**Laura, 17:** Oh there's one girl, she's a bit - ok she's like 15, 14 or something, and she sleeps around a bit..

**INT:** OK.

**Laura:** I saw her once at a party. She was so drunk=like she's really nice. It's just she makes a few bad decisions. And she couldn't stand up, like she was falling onto the stairs and I was like "((names young woman)) love go home".

**INT:** Yeah OK.

**Laura:** And a guy just went up to her and like she'd just flirt with them like fall on top of them like "oh no". I don't really know her that well but it just gives a bad image. Like you're not gonna find a nice boyfriend being like that.

---

In both of these examples, the critical tone works as an informal sanction that constrains rather than expresses the autonomy that alcohol is supposed to bring about. For young women, alcohol does not always expand their ability to display transgressive behaviours, particularly when they may be judged by others who regard the drinking context as a moral space in which women have to vigilantly regulate how they present themselves (see also Chapter 7).

#### 4.1.2 'You see the you that you want to be': breaking free from the 'masks'

A key feature of drinking that young people discussed was the idea that it would help them break free from the more mundane and restrictive aspects of everyday life. In the following excerpts, young people discuss how the drinking context contrasts with other contexts where their roles are largely prescribed.

---

**INT:** OK, so tell me some of the things you think are fun about alcohol  
**Corinna, 24:** ... I think it's fun to just relax especially after (a big few) weeks so alcohol's quite relaxing. I think its nice sometimes, when everything can be so serious at work and when other situations - and if people have got things going on in their life I think it's nice to just let your hair down for a bit to get away from that.

---

Matthew juxtaposes the positive aspects of his drinking, such as its ability to calm and soothe, with the more hectic parts of his everyday life.

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**INT:** What do you enjoy about drinking? What are the positives for you?  
**Matthew, 23:** Umm the taste. I appreciate the taste of the spirits I enjoy. And I appreciate the effects, the effects being, to me anyway, that it is a relaxing drink ( ). It is something that if I have a very busy day and I had a drink I would start to calm down.

---

This distinction between different areas of young people's lives is taken further by the participants of Focus Group 18.

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**FG18, Female#1:** I disagree with it making it be yourself because if you need alcohol to make you be yourself [then ( ) it makes you be less like yourself].  
**Female#2:** [I think I think it makes people more honest].  
**Female#1:** Because you're not drinking all the time it makes you less who you usually are.  
**Female#2:** I think it makes people more honest.  
**Female#3:** I think - you know how you put on different masks around different people, different social groups. You'd act different - or I find - I act differently around different social groups because of the way I've grown up with them. It's more - there are some sides of myself that I don't show to certain groups and like that's - I'd consider that sometimes not being myself by not wanting to show them that because I'd think they'd disapprove. But when drinking it's normal, it's OK to act pissed.

---

In this passage, the young women employ the archetype of the 'mask' to explain how they manage different parts of their identity. The varying contexts in which this identity is articulated means that there is some uncertainty over the lack of cohesion in pinning down what their identity actually is. This is debated by the group, with one of the participants turning to the use of alcohol as an expedient way of at least temporarily resolving such tensions. The appeal of using alcohol to move, seemingly effortlessly, between different roles and 'masks' was also echoed in another focus group.

---

**FG20, Male:** You also lose focus of pressures, expectations and problems. So it's like a form of escape. That's one of my main motives, just an escape from who you are. Like the mask I put on for these guys to my family, when I'm with my family. I can be whoever the f\*\*k I want to be.

---

In discussing what they liked about alcohol, the notion of breaking free from the constraints of other people's expectations was strongly appealing to this young male of Focus Group 20. Drinking was freeing for him because it allowed him to "escape" from the prescribed roles that he occupies as a member of his peer and family groups. Alcohol was a way of breaking out of these roles as it allowed him to be what he wanted to be.

In the preceding statements, alcohol enabled young people to 'play' with their identity. It opened up a space where the incoherence or inconsistencies revealed in moving between differing social contexts is sidestepped. However, the ability of alcohol to permanently resolve these issues is limited. The debate over the authenticity of a drinking identity by young women in Focus Group 18 highlights that the use of alcohol in this way is contestable. The complications of 'true' and 'authentic' identities also emerged when the male participant of Focus Group 20 referred to alcohol as providing an "escape from who you are." In a different focus group, a young female hospitality student similarly described an identity where "you see the you that you want to be." This is again noted in the following passage where the students are asked about the positives of drinking alcohol.

---

**FG13, Female#1:**... Sometimes you maybe just want to be someone else.

**Female#2:** And by drinking you have the confidence to do that ((explaining previous speaker's comments)). Yeah...

**INT:** What was the comment you made there Louis?

**Male#1:** Just to be like someone else I guess. You don't want to be - like your self-confidence pretty much. You don't want to be who you are right now, but when you drink you can kind of see yourself in a different view. Like you're more confident, you're more likely to go out like meet new people and just be totally different like your (kind of) personality changes a lot.

**Female#2:** =Yeah you see the you that you want to be.

**Male#1:** Yeah.

**Female#2:** Like you [don't have the confidence to do that without alcohol]

**Male#1:** [Whatever your personality you can] talk to anyone and it shows where as long as you're sober or "I'm not drinking" it just kind of - not a loner, but more reserved and laid back.

---

Again, the notion of confidence is mentioned here, but it is more specifically outlined with regard to the movement between different forms of identity. In both Focus Groups 18 and 20, the positive value of alcohol is determined by its ability to move the young person's identity away from its more sober state. In this manner, alcohol marks different aspects of one's identity by being associated with a socially competent self; and conversely, the asocial or socially disengaged self becomes associated with the sober part of young people's identity.

These excerpts highlight the complex connections young people make between alcohol and identity. On the one hand, the participant in Focus Group 20 alluded to the notion of an authentic and essential identity when he referred to alcohol as orienting him to "who you are". However, he also proposed that the individual can

'escape' from this identity. This means that the authentic identity can be selected rather than simply or naturally expressed. Similarly, Jenny attempted to resolve this conundrum by including her drinking identity as just one part of her identity, but one which importantly stands in contrast to the rest of herself. Here she details how alcohol engages another side of herself by taking her away from the more "serious" aspects of her everyday life.

---

**Jenny, 23:** A different side of me will come out when I'm drinking. I feel like, you know, I'm more fun when I'm drinking. So a bit serious during the day and then (just letting it out) at night when I'm drinking.

---

These types of comments, whereby alcohol is viewed as facilitating movement between social contexts and identity forms, indicate how alcohol is highly regarded for its transformative powers. This is demonstrated by Vince who, when interviewed, noted that alcohol had helped him open up and overcome some of his shyness in social situations. When the interviewer probed about the differences in his behaviour in drinking contexts he offered the following assessment.

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**Vince, 22:** I probably talked to people that I wouldn't have had I of been sober but not too far differently from um yeah, - I suppose the comparison of talking to other people whilst drunk and whilst sober are reasonably close for me.

---

For young people like Vince, alcohol allows them to play with their identity without necessarily destabilising what they perceive as being who they truly are. The transformative power of alcohol lies then in its ability to enable movement (if only temporarily) away from externally defined roles or identity forms that are restrictive. In this sense, alcohol can be regarded as liberating in that it gives these young people a greater sense of agency and control over their own identity.

As Gabriel and Lang (2008, p. 327) note, contemporary narratives of the self are more fractured to the extent that "Today...identity and meaning are more fluid, tentative and inconsistent – choice has made such inconsistencies possible." However, the participants cited above do not necessarily regard this fracturing with tentativeness. Instead, alcohol is regarded as enabling more choice which liberates the possibilities of how they might construct their own identity. Perhaps, rather than providing young people with a more 'authentic' mask, alcohol's appeal can be explained by its use as a facilitator of more fluid movement between established 'masks' that are externally defined and alternate 'masks' over which young people feel they have more sovereignty.

## 4.2 Does enabling mean freeing?

A dominant theme to emerge from this study was that young people regarded alcohol as potentially liberating. Although the type of freedom experienced with alcohol may only be temporal and transient, the ideal of alcohol as enabling their sense of agency is one which appeared to have a lasting impact and appeal. From the research material gathered, however, the reality of young people's drinking behaviours and their perceived consequences did not always live up to this ideal. What we found instead was a host of tensions and contradictions that curtailed and limited how pleasure was experienced through alcohol. More nuanced research has begun to highlight the importance of these contradictions.

*"Participants balanced the physical risk of drinking and the impact on their social and cultural credibility of losing control in a drunken state with the desire to have fun and a good time with their friends" (Szmigin, Griffin, Mistral et al., 2008, p. 7).*

These findings are particularly relevant to young people who now, more than ever, are likely to find themselves moving between one social group and another. This type of movement between 'neo-tribes' becomes more pertinent in today's world than ever before as young people have to negotiate membership in multiple and often incoherent groups. For Bryan, this became a consideration when he had to deal with the issue of race.

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**INT:** Back when you used to drink more, was there any places where you found it difficult to drink? Or you couldn't get in there to drink?

**Bryan, 21:** Aw I had a little bit of trouble mixing in with people and stuff like that.

**INT:** What do you mean?

**Bryan:** What I mean of mixing - like trouble mixing in with people is like 'cause I'm Indigenous but I'm half caste.

**INT:** OK.

**Bryan:** I've got a fair skin than Aboriginal people and I like hanging around Aboriginal people because I got half caste skin on me, you know what I mean?

**INT:** Yeah.

**Bryan:** You know, I thought like people don't want to hang around me because I got fairer skin than them, you know what I mean?

**INT:** Mmm ((in agreement)) ... So did you use alcohol to get rid of that feeling? To try and fit in with them?

**Bryan:** Umm yes I did, yeah.

**INT:** Did it work?

**Bryan:** A little bit yeah.

---

In this instance, Bryan interpreted the original question that invited him to discuss how he had been excluded or made to feel like an outsider from the 'in-group'. Part of the strategy that he used to overcome this barrier and position himself as someone who 'belonged' with the in-group was through the use of alcohol. However, as he hesitatingly ends his response it appeared that this strategy was not particularly successful for him. What is important though is the belief that alcohol could potentially act as a social equaliser that would have him regarded as an equal peer.

A further factor in young people's movement between groups and identities is that drinking largely takes place in social settings where groups and cliques are in a constant state of flux. One of the focus group discussion points involved asking participants to think of and discuss a time when everyone else has been drinking but they had not. The response from the following young female emphasises the significance attributed to alcohol in these types of novel situations.

---

**FG18, Female#1:** This is a night - there's this place called 'The Crib' which is like, well people call it The Crib, it's like this little area in the bushes in a park ((rest of group laughs)). Which sounds very silly but it's a really great place because it feels like you're in the middle of nowhere. It feels like you have it to yourself with your friends and a spot where you can have a bonfire and stuff, it's just really nice there. And I went there for the first time but I wasn't drinking I was just going to see who was there and I didn't really know anyone, except my friends and I kind of wish that I had of been drinking so I could just, so it'd just be normal to be talking to other people and bonding but because I just knew nothing about them, but naturally very nervous, because they'd be off in their own thing. So I just sort of stuck with my friends. It was still - it was an OK night but I think it would have been more socially comfortable with alcohol.

---

In such novel situations, young people are compelled to continually reflect upon and monitor their social identity as a form of 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959). Using the model of the theatre, Goffman discusses how one's identity is constituted through the presentation of self to others.

*"When one's activity occurs in the presence of other persons, some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed. It is clear that accentuated facts make their appearance in what I have called a front region; it should be just as clear that there may be another region — a "back region" or "backstage" — where the suppressed facts make an appearance"* (Goffman, 1959, pp.111-112).

For the focus group participant cited above, the "fostered impression" is of someone who belongs at The Crib. However, she is unable to act upon her desire to socialise and meet new people and so this part of herself is clearly suppressed in order to not jeopardise her identity as someone who belongs in that space. Instead, the need to socialise is suppressed in the "back region" of her existing friendship group so that she ends up "just sort of stuck with (her) friends." Together with Bryan's comments, the excerpt from the female in Focus Group 18 could be interpreted as an example of alcohol's facilitative effect in novel social situations.

Whilst this may be the case, the unquestioned necessity of alcohol in these types of situations reminds us that the converse of facilitation is constraint. For the young female in Focus Group 18, alcohol is conspicuous by its absence. What this means is that as much as alcohol opens up social interaction, it can limit access to new social worlds. This is heightened for Laura who candidly outlined her anxieties and reservations about meeting new people anticipated as part of an upcoming overseas scholarship visit.

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**INT:** When you turn eighteen, Laura, is that gonna happen when you're in Belgium?

**Laura, 17:** Yeah it does actually.

**INT:** So you'll be able to go out when you're there?

**Laura:** Oh I'm not allowed to drink when I'm there.

**INT:** Is that something -

**Laura:** =It's like a Rotary rule. I'm not allowed to drink or date or drive -

**INT:** Ah! ((surprised)) That's interesting.

**Laura:** Yeah.

**INT:** So you're there for a year.

**Laura:** Aw well I'm allowed to drink with my host family, same kind of circumstances as when you're underage.

**INT:** Yeah, yeah it is interesting like that isn't it?

**Laura:** Yeah.

**INT:** So that won't be any different, you're used to doing that sort of situation?

**Laura:** Yeah, nah I reckon I'll be fine. I'm just a bit worried 'cause it kind of relaxes you. Like that's why I do like drinking, or I used to, 'cause it relaxes you and you talk to people more.

**INT:** So when you're in Belgium you think it might be a bit more difficult to?

**Laura:** =Yeah 'cause I won't know anyone.

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As someone who does not drink as much as her peers, the novel context in which Laura will soon find herself caused her to attenuate her attitude towards drinking. Prior to this part of the interview, Laura had classified herself as being largely averse to drinking amongst her friends. In spite of this, she maintains alcohol's function as a social crux by forecasting an anxiety over how she may cope in a new social situation in which alcohol is unavailable.

In the preceding examples, the freedom ascribed to alcohol by young people is not in terms of unfettered consumption, but rather in terms that are heavily circumscribed. Part of the anxiety experienced in these social situations therefore stems from young peoples' own perceived lack of resources that could help them engage in burgeoning and constantly changing social relationships. Given this context, it is almost by default that Laura, Bryan and the young female focus group participant outlined in this section turn to alcohol as a resource for impression management.

#### 4.2.1 'Was getting too drunk a mistake?' Calculating hedonism

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**Corinna, 24:** It was a really good night. So we drank a lot but I think everyone was in control except for one of my friends who always cries. She's not a very good drunk.

---

What makes for a "good drunk"? As Corinna discusses above, the moral imperative of drinking is contingent upon a range of factors that include the amount of alcohol consumed, the degree of intoxication, how this affects the individual, and the way the intoxicated person impacts upon others in the group. Corinna attributed all of these things to the notion of control. The assumption in this instance is that these factors, including those that are constituted through social relationships and interactions, are controlled and controllable by an individual's will.



In sociological literature, some of the most fruitful work aims to tackle the context in which choices around consumption are made. The work of Jacoby (1980), Campbell (1987), and Featherstone (1991b) develops a modern take on hedonism that emphasises the imperatives of fun, temporality, leisure and consumption. Of most relevance though, is their focus on the contradiction between these features of modern hedonism and the calculated rationality that it accompanies. They argue that consumer culture demands a “calculating hedonism” that supports the “illusion of technical mastery” (1991a, p.78). In other words, consumerism lulls us into thinking that we are in control of our own desires and how we seek out pleasure.

Applying this to young people and alcohol, the work of Brain (2000) and Measham (2006) further develops these ideas to explore the tensions of a ‘new culture of intoxication’ that oscillates between ‘excess’ and ‘restraint’. Drawing an autonomous or liberating experience from alcohol requires qualification of the contingencies and exceptions that belie simplistic cultural values around drinking.

Building on this idea, we found that the ‘calculated’ component of a ‘calculating hedonism’ can be shaped, to some extent, by what the individual wants to get out of the leisure setting.

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**INT:** The Big Day Out, the last one, what was the drinking like there? ... Do friends of yours drink differently than they normally would?

**Laura, 21:** I didn't drink there because it sort of felt gross enough as it was because it was so muddy and it was raining sort of on and off all day. But it was also quite sunny so it was sort of very moist and uncomfortable. So I didn't want to feel doubly bad by adding drinking to it and the drinking line was ridiculous. It was like seven times longer than the bathroom line even. It was like an hour wait, or something ridiculous, for one tiny little cup. And, you know, I didn't see the point in waiting, waiting that long when I'd paid to see bands, I didn't really feel like paying to get alcohol.

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In the quote above, Laura illustrates a form of calculated hedonism that is based upon pleasures that are distinct from intoxication. In the context of attending a music festival, the primary purpose is to enjoy the bands rather than to drink. Furthermore, the organisation of the service of alcohol within the event meant that accessing alcohol would have detracted from the time spent enjoying the music. Rather than enabling pleasure and social interaction, alcohol in this context is viewed as a constraint that would potentially limit Laura's enjoyment.

Alcohol can also be constraining in other ways. As stated earlier in this chapter, young people commonly regard alcohol as facilitating social interaction by giving them ‘confidence.’ Inherent in this assertion is a strong need to belong and gain entry into group membership (see also Chapter 3). Whilst alcohol can to some extent enable social comfort, we found that it can also serve to exclude young people from physical and social spaces. In the following field note, one researcher records her observations at the entry of the Big Day Out along with her interpretation of what occurred.

**Field note, Big Day Out:** Already, people were being refused entry due to intoxication. The advice delivered by security staff to intoxicated patrons seemed to be to go and sober up, "have some water" and attempt to come back with their ticket later.

*I was really shocked by this, particularly in light of the warnings in the media that this would happen. Firstly, I was surprised young people would jeopardise the opportunity to enjoy the day by consuming too much alcohol prior to the event. It made me really question/consider the role of alcohol in the structure of the day for some young people. If our theory that young people carefully plan for and look forward to events like the BDO, how would these young people feel about risking the opportunity to be part of it. Was getting too drunk a mistake/accident? ... Just how much do young people typically plan to drink when they go to an event like the BDO? How do they ensure they can find a happy medium between being drunk and still enjoying the event?*

The questions that the researcher raises in her notes refer to the contradictions inherent in a 'calculating hedonism'. A response to the question: "was getting too drunk a mistake?" requires some clarification. The young people who are refused entry are, on the one hand, enacting the role of the hedonist by drinking before the event. However, when security advises them to "have some water" they are judged to have miscalculated and mismanaged their own hedonism. In spite of this, they are told to effectively sober up before re-attempting to enter the event. This is telling as the young people are not completely excluded. Instead, entry is only refused on the basis of their individual miscalculations as their engagement of a hedonistic identity still fits within the social norms of the type of leisure lifestyle that such festivals embody. To return to the original question, it is their failure at being a rational hedonist that made becoming too drunk a 'mistake'.

Similarly, plans to manage or constrain the hedonism that underpins young people's leisure lifestyle can often go awry.

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**FG13, Male#1:** I would never know if I'm going to end up like that [intoxicated]. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. It just depends.

**Female#1:** Sometimes you don't even go out thinking that you're going to drink and you still do even if you're the designated driver.

**Female#2:** You plan not to but

**Female#1:** =Yeah, and because everyone else is doing it you just sort of think 'I don't want to be the one sittin' going "I want to go home, I'm tired"'

**Male#1:** Yeah, you don't want to be boring.

**Female#1:** So you start drinking and then you end up embarrassing yourself.

---

Due to the conflicting imperatives of rationality and hedonism, the young people in Focus Group 13 show how easy it was for them to subvert their own planned activities with unplanned hedonism. The cultural imperative of a calculated hedonism therefore translates to the lived experience of young people in incoherent and unstable ways. As the above examples show, this kind of hedonism cannot simply be controlled according to the desires of the individual.

Although many young people presume that intoxication can be controlled through personal responsibility, the demands of their surrounding social and cultural environment mean that the self-management of hedonistic desires are easily subordinated to other priorities or demands. In Focus Group 13, this is demonstrated

with the comment that “you don't want to be boring.” To follow consumer culture's demands of being a calculating hedonist therefore necessitates a form of control that requires ongoing dual monitoring of self-surveillance and the activities of the broader peer group. This is no easy task for a young person.

#### 4.2.2 Locating the control of pleasure

Freedom is only ever relative to the given context in which it is experienced. Although young people may discuss their drinking as enabling their agency and transforming their identity, this does not necessarily mean that alcohol facilitates a greater sense of freedom. To better explain how alcohol is experienced as both enabling and constraining we need to examine more closely how young people use alcohol to engage with their social environment. Early attempts to highlight this ambivalence can be found in the work of philosopher Immanuel Kant.

*“the actions, for example, of a madman or a drunkard can be attributed, though not imputed to them. In imputation the action must spring from freedom. The drunkard cannot, indeed, be held accountable for his actions, but he certainly can, when sober, for the drunkenness itself”* (Kant, 1997, pp.80-81 in Nicholls, 2006, p.36).

Nicholls (2006, pp.136-137) interprets Kant here as arguing that an intoxicated person is “neither properly free nor properly a subject.” Although Nicholls discusses this in the context of an individual's legal accountability, the idea is also useful in highlighting how alcohol mediates the experience of freedom and control when young people drink. As stated in our earlier literature review (Roche et al., 2007), the research field is beginning to gain a more contextual view of the socio-cultural influences on young people's drinking. With regard to drug use, Duff (2008) has pointed out the need to locate pleasure within specific contexts that are transformed through embodied practices. This type of approach informs our research in that we aim to contextualise young people's drinking rather than attempt to specify innate desires that predispose young people to 'binge drinking'.

Contrary to dominant popular media-driven images of drunken intoxication, young people are situated amongst imperatives that provide conflicting understandings of alcohol and its relationship to control. What we find is that young people negotiate a complex terrain that traverses extremes of constraint and excess. This highlights an aspect of modern consumerism wherein desire is exploited to focus upon a more controlled “modern hedonism” that is markedly different from more corporeal and immediate sensuous pleasures.

*“Modern hedonism presents all individuals with the possibility of being their own despot, exercising total control over the stimuli they experience. Unlike traditional hedonism, however, this is not gained solely, or even primarily, through the manipulation of objects and events in the world, but through a degree of control over their meaning”* (Campbell, 1987, p.76).

There are two competing and opposing forces at work here. On the one hand, there is the imperative of confidence as displayed through the 'sociable self' discussed earlier in this chapter. This is reinforced through notions of a leisure lifestyle and the temporal and fluid qualities of young people's social worlds. On the other hand, there are regulatory forces that seek to limit how pleasure, confidence and sociability are displayed. Measham and Brain (2005) point this out in their discussion

of the exploitation of hedonism in the night-time economy by the leisure industries and a general lack of willingness for the state to recognise and address how this links with the harms associated with sessional drinking.<sup>9</sup>

Alcohol then occupies a contradictory position of control. It can be attributed with enabling and facilitating social interaction whilst at the same time be viewed as taking away control from the individual who is drinking. The participants of Focus Group 13 put this in more concrete terms when they discussed the positive and negative sides of alcohol-facilitated confidence.

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**FG13, Female#1:** The fact that people aren't scared of anything that's also a bad thing and the fact that people have much more confidence when they're drinking.

**INT:** That's an interesting one 'cause you've sort of both said that it's a positive - it's something you like, but it's actually a negative.

**Female#1:** Yeah.

**INT:** Can you tell me how that works?

**Female#1:** Well confident - with the confidence one, sometimes people get overconfident.

**Male:** Yeah.

**Female#1:** And then but the good part about it is like - just say I had the hots for Louis for like the last four years and I'd never spoken to him or anything and I'd seen him in a club and I'd be drinking I'd go up to him and I'd probably [ask him -]

**Female#2:** [Make an arse of yourself].

((group laughter))

---

Following this, the discussion turned to violence and how masculine constructions of confidence are expressed through physical confrontation as a direct result of the enhanced self-confidence facilitated by alcohol. Part of the power or privileged position of alcohol lies in its apparent capacity to 'magically resolve' the tension between alcohol as something that enables interaction but takes away control. In a seeming contradiction, the young people of Focus Group 13 simultaneously regarded alcohol as both giving them more control yet, at the same time, as something that took control away from them. The next section takes this further by explaining how young people believe that alcohol not only takes away control, but that alcohol takes control over them.

#### **4.2.3 “It definitely wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for alcohol”: Alcohol taking control**

The young people in this study talked directly about losing control when referring to the relationship between alcohol and violence. This was raised in a couple of instances by Focus Group 20 which consisted of a group of young males aged between 14 and 17 years.

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<sup>9</sup> Although it is noted that there are increasing efforts directed to addressing this issue.

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**FG20, Male#1:** At the Easter show last year, there was this guy – like just said something silly which was not, nothing to go on about but because I was a bit drunk like I just kept going on about it and ended up being hit in the face and that day I got my braces on so I had a huge cut. It definitely wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for alcohol.

---

In this example, the control that this young male has over his own behaviour is not just 'lost' but is taken over by alcohol. He adamantly states that such an encounter would not have played out in the way he described had he not been drinking. Detailed below is an earlier excerpt from the focus group in which the same young male recounts a similar story of having been taken over by alcohol.

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**FG20, INT:** And do you guys have any aggression ((when you're drinking))?

Any fights happen?

**Male#1:** On Friday ...for example - that's a perfect example, like I would never do such a thing. Like he said something - I know it was about my sister - and I just gave him a little slap. And I just went 'crack' and like -

**Male#2:** Haha

**Male#1:** - smacked him in the eye and it

**Male#2:** It was like swollen.

**Male#1:** Yeah, it was a good punch.

---

Clearly, there is an element of bravado in recounting this story to the focus group facilitator and the rest of the participants. However, the laughter and light-hearted way in which his peers responded also serve to disavow him of the sense of being personally responsible, thus confirming the idea that it was alcohol that made him get carried away.

A number of young people also specified types of drink that make them more aggressive.

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**Jeremy, 18:** If I'm in a really bad mood, sometimes I will try and stay away from beer a bit... Me and my mates agree that it makes you more aggressive.

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Interestingly, the notion that drink type is a potential source of increased aggression, was also pointed out by two young women.

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**Jeanette, 18:** I like Bundy but it makes you angry.

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**INT:** And what about rum, what turned you off the drink before that?

**Selma, 20:** Oh fighting. That's when I was like, I'd drink rum and then as soon as like someone. It'd just put this thing in my head like if someone, you know, wanted to fight me, or if someone was being like a smartarse or something my first reaction was 'don't f\*\*ken say that to me! ra ra ra', you know. And just get all angry about it and I just got in so much trouble and I was just like "yeah I can't drink this anymore".

**INT:** so you think rum makes you have, like act in a different way?

**Selma, 20:** Yeah, definitely, definitely. I don't really drink it. There's so many other people that I know - some people it doesn't affect them at all. Like I've got mates that can drink rum fine and they've been drinking it for years and it doesn't affect them at all. But some other people like you see, it's just crazy the way it changes you.

**INT:** Do you think vodka changes you now?

**Selma, 20:** Nah not really. It doesn't make me feel violent or angry or anything.

---

Selma reiterates the same type of explanation as the young male in Focus Group 20. That is, she felt that she would be more likely to walk away from potentially volatile situations had she not been drinking. In these excerpts, alcohol use is coterminous with an inherent loss of control. Crucially, the young people cited here appear to retrospectively draw a line or tipping point beyond which the alcohol takes control over them. This presents a different picture to what we have outlined earlier in this chapter where young people's control was viewed as having been 'taken away' rather than the more extreme 'taken over' by alcohol that is being discussed here. With regard to violence, alcohol facilitates the transgression of social norms that are not seen by young people as particularly freeing. Other young people in the study picked up on this sentiment by outlining how alcohol taking control over them impacted negatively upon their status and position within their peer group.

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**FG18, Female#1:** And I don't like when I drink too much and don't have a lot of self-control or memory from the night. Like just knowing that I'm not in control, feeling as though I might need somebody to take care of me, put a burden on someone's night and also ( ) like its past the point of fun. It could get past the point of fun 'cause its easy for something to go wrong.

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In this excerpt, the young woman took the viewpoint of other members of her social group to explain how being the one that needed help relegated her to a lower position of status amongst her peer group. For her, self control was therefore highly valued in contrast to forms of intoxication that required the help of others.

An increased wariness of the potential loss of control that alcohol facilitated was taken further by Rick.

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**Rick, 23:** I let go to the extent that yeah I'm gonna have fun. One of my rules, ever since I started drinking is 'always be in control'. So always - if you want to stop drinking be in control that you can stop drinking. Never get to the extent that you can't walk for example or even when you start throwing up you know that you're no longer in control because you can't keep your drinks down. It's unnatural for you to throw up so -

**INT:** Has something bad happened to make you always want to be in control?

**Rick:** Umm ((thinking)) No, I guess its always been since high school, just seeing people throw up and get to the extent of, you know, throwing up and being sick and passing out and stuff I was just always disgusted by that behaviour, that they would get to that extent. And the thing is they would do that ALL the time and that's why I'd be disgusted. Whereas people who would do that once, I wouldn't think anything of it and thank god because that happened to me once, right? So its been a thing since high school that I've always thought "stay in control". So even though I am letting loose and everything, I still have the mind to sort of say "you know what if we have been out all night, we can keep going but we're going to be absolutely exhausted the next day".

---

Rick is somewhat of an exception in that he placed a much higher value on maintaining self-control. As a teacher, he prioritised his responsibility to his work and being able to function the next day. He clearly takes pride here in upholding his relatively strict forms of self-regulation that revolved around the principle of "always be(jing) in control". Rick, whilst being a bit more extreme than his counterparts, reinforces the elevated significance of control in the drinking context. As others revel in the transformative potential of alcohol, Rick was able to foresee the consequences of intoxication as leading to an intolerable lack of control. Ultimately, he deployed this as an ever-present guiding principle in regard to how much he should drink.

The examples in this section illustrate the juxtaposition that exists between self-control, on the one hand, and alcohol as a force that takes control over young people on the other. For the female of Focus Group 18 and for Rick, it appears that self-regulation is an individualistic stance that is determined in the group context. What is lacking from their accounts is the notion that self-control was supported by the group. In fact, elsewhere in Rick's interview, he mentioned how his stringent self-control was mocked by his friends who referred to him solely as the 'teacher' when emphasising what they saw as his intrusive commitment to being the 'responsible one.'

The difficulties of maintaining a sense of autonomy that distances oneself from alcohol is therefore very challenging for many young people. For most, the complex process of memory, re-articulation, self-regulation and resistance to social pressure, as displayed by Rick, cannot be easily followed. This is revealed in the more ad hoc innovative modes of self-surveillance and self-regulation applied by other young people.

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**FG13, Female:** Sometimes chucking can be a good thing.

**INT:** How's that?

**Female:** 'Cause if you're drinking and you chuck it can make you feel better the next day.....and other times I've been drinking and I've been feeling bad and then I've chucked and then I'm like, I feel good now - lets keep drinking!

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This attempt to re-define vomiting as a strategy of self-control of course differs to that displayed by Rick, as the female in this instance is aiming to continue drinking, thus maintaining her participation and inclusion with the rest of the group. Although this sentiment was not a dominant one among the young people in this study, others did relate similar strategies. Where once vomiting was the most prescient signal to the drinker that they had lost control, it is now something that can be negotiated, and even induced, in order to regain control and continue participation in a social drinking context.

### 4.3 Conclusion

For many young people, the effects of alcohol are pleasurable when framed within the notions of liberation and freedom. In this sense, alcohol is associated with a positively regarded cultural value. However, if we delve a little deeper, we find that the legitimacy of alcohol's cultural standing resides in its potential transformative capacities. The material analysed and covered in this chapter demonstrates that alcohol is not only used by young people to transgress social norms (through the loosening of acceptable forms of interaction) but also provides the license and means through which young people can transform norms typically based upon constraint and discipline. However, the idea that alcohol is liberating is quickly tempered by young people's perception that alcohol also takes control over them.

Whilst drinking may be pleasurable, it does leave young people feeling passive and subject to their own responses that they feel they have no control over. The ways in which liberation is actually experienced therefore reveal the reproduction of different and arguably even more stringent forms of discipline. As shown in this chapter, this discipline often comes in the form of self-control that necessitates the type of social support that is usually absent. Whilst wider social norms are often relaxed in the drinking context they are subordinated by a complex set of social and self-regulated values and norms concerned with the control of pleasure. Since these are highly contingent upon the social and cultural context and are more informally sanctioned they become even more complicated for young people to negotiate.

What we have attempted to do in this section was to highlight where young people encounter these difficulties, contradictions and tensions in order to illustrate how drinking is only ever temporarily freeing. While alcohol is used by young people to negotiate and navigate their way through their social relationships, the degree of autonomy experienced by young people along this path is always limited and constrained by the social environment, and to a lesser extent by forms of self-regulation.

In the next chapter we more closely examine the role of alcohol in the context of specific 'events.' As a key component of large scale events as well as more ritualistic celebrations, alcohol is commodified as representative of a leisure lifestyle founded upon hedonism and pleasure. However, the heavily marketed and branded social context created for such events means that the freedom to experience pleasure is always bounded and controlled.



# 5 Events, Marketing and Media

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In the previous chapters we have examined the role that alcohol plays in the lives of young people in our contemporary consumer dominated society. The emphasis on leisure lifestyles and the role that alcohol holds in the pursuit of freedom, pleasure, social facilitation and group belonging and group cohesion has been addressed. An important aspect of young people's lives today is that of social events. This chapter examines the position held by alcohol in large and small events and how drinking contributes to the perception of the 'size' of an event as it influences expectations and planning to effectively extend how these occasions are typically defined through alcohol. The chapter also addresses key factors in relation to the role of marketing of alcohol products and finally it also relates our findings about young people's views about the media, their responses to the manner in which they are often depicted and the extent to which they feel exploited or manipulated by it.

In the traditional sense, events consist of a range of leisure-time activities from small private functions that honour particular celebrations, such as birthdays, graduations, engagements, going away parties and house-warmings, to large public events, including music, arts and cultural festivals, parades (e.g. Australia Day) and sports events. Events may also evolve spontaneously from a relatively small ad hoc get-together.

Drinking is central to these occasions and indelibly etched in Australian culture. Participation in large youth-oriented public events symbolises young people's identification with both youth culture and what it means to be Australian. Alcohol marketing and advertising, which is prominent and pervasive at most large public events, taps into the leisure lifestyle and creates images of an idealised lifestyle that young people can attain if they consume the advertised product.

## 5.1 Planning and expectations

A great deal of planning and preparation often takes place before an event. This sometimes adds to the excitement and expectations of what will occur there. Planning and preparation involves a wide range of activities, such as setting a date, purchasing tickets or gifts, and organising transport. To a large extent, planning is a very social activity that involves democratic processes and negotiation within the group (see later in this chapter for further discussion).

Every aspect of an event can influence event-goers' expectations, including organising who will be the 'designated driver' for the evening, booking taxis, or arranging for parents to drop off/pick up, deciding what to wear and who to go with and getting together the accoutrements that will be needed throughout the event. This was demonstrated by the lack of preparedness felt by one researcher attending a one-day cricket event.

**Field notes, One day International Cricket, Adelaide Oval:** Once entering the event we observed groups of people who appeared as though they'd been 'minding their spot' for hours before the match commenced, evidenced by eskies, rugs set up, bags of ice, food etc. I felt ill-prepared and an obvious outsider in comparison to other spectators. Clearly, for some spectators, a deal of planning goes into attendance at the cricket – it's an event to be planned for, not just a sporting match to be observed.

Alcohol is symbolic in the construction of events, both large and small. It amplifies the importance of events and may extend the life of an event in the literal sense, by having pre- and post-event drinks, or by symbolically elevating its importance. Therefore, alcohol and alcohol-related activities, such as what to drink, where to get drinks, and how much to spend on drinks, become key aspects of the planning and preparations before an event.

### 5.1.1 Sociality of planning

Socialising with the group before going out provides an opportunity to catch up with friends, or to get into the required mood or frame for the event. Typically, for many of those interviewed in the current study, this involved having a few 'pre-drinks'. Often this initially involved same sex gatherings. The gendered nature of 'pre-drinking' ensured a degree of comfort, intimacy and safety that was not necessarily a part of the event that followed. In this way, 'pre-drinking' held a special and unique status all of its own.

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**FG2, Female:** Everyone has pre-drinks before.

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**FG10, Female:** Perfect night would involve pre-drinking at someone's house with just the girls.

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The terms pre-drinking, pre-loading and pre-gaming are used to describe planned drinking at a friend's house (also at parents' house, in cars or parking lots at an event destination) prior to going out. Typically, this occurs among a group of friends before going out to a nightclub or pub, but may also occur prior to events where alcohol is not served, is difficult to access or where drinking is monitored closely (e.g. music events such as the Big Day Out). This may be the only option for underage drinkers who want to be intoxicated at an event and may result in higher levels of consumption in this group (Pedersen, LaBrie, & Kilmer, 2009).

Pre-drinking is a misnomer, as it suggests an activity that occurs before drinking, rather than drinking itself. Pre-drinking also implies that alcohol is in the background as an incidental part of the context of an event; and that sociality is in the foreground as a more prominent and important element of social events. In reality, alcohol is central to these events, including unplanned events. A more accurate description would be pre-event drinking.

In terms of the social aspect of pre-drinking, young people reported that it was often difficult to chat with others inside a dark, noisy, crowded club or pub. 'Getting ready' to go out, especially for females, was a social activity in itself.

They had some drinks while they got dressed, did their hair, put on make-up etc (Focus Group 05). This may also have served as an 'ice-breaker' for the group

to relax and get into the mood for socialising (e.g. relieve stress associated with socialising with others) and to strengthen group bonding and 'commitment to the party'. For further discussion on 'Commitment to the Party' see Chapter 3 Alcohol and Belonging.

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**Rick, 23:** It's a common meeting place to meet everyone; everyone goes to the place together; you arrive together; you meet friends, you catch up.... When you're in a club, I don't see that as catching up because you can't actually speak to anyone...you're just yelling across other people and you're losing people during the night.... By having pre-drinks, you have a chance to meet each other, catch up, talk to each other and then go out and have fun.

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Rick (above) described the ritualistic aspects of meeting for pre-drinks and also depicted it as an opportunity to catch up with friends in an environment that was conducive to conversation, rather than competing with the background noise of a pub or nightclub. Underlying this was his perception of the opportunity it afforded to connect to other group members in ways that were not possible once they had entered a nightclub.

In recognition of the common ritual of pre-event drinking, some commercial establishments have aligned themselves with certain events to commercialise this aspect of young people's leisure lifestyle and sell it back to the consumers. For example, at the Big Day Out (BDO) in Adelaide, a crucial part of the pre-event activities was the social ritual of meeting a group of friends for drinks before entering the venue.

**Field notes, Big Day Out (BDO), Adelaide:** Located literally across the road from the BDO, this pub has been a traditional place for pre-loading. Other pubs in the city also offer special BDO deals on breakfast and beer. ... The pub across the road from the venue has capitalised on this informal tradition by setting up their venue to serve a large number of punters in the quickest possible manner.

Again, this 'tradition' which perhaps was started by patrons looking for somewhere to prepare/pre-load for the BDO has become more organised and consolidated for commercial purposes. This adds to the 'ritual' aspect of the whole day and therefore continually reaffirms the strong link between alcohol consumption and this music festival. It's not only the event itself that requires regulation and control. The boundaries of where the 'event' is celebrated and ritualised extends beyond the perimeter of where music is played.

...

The side bitumen on the outside of the pub that would normally be reserved for the drive through area has been set up as the main drinking and service area. A makeshift bar has been erected, similar to what you'd find at a music festival with \$6 beers sold in plastic cups. Late teens – mid 20s (largely male) drink out here in groups, some standing around tall tables. There are no chairs situated outside here.

One commercial business nearby the BDO venue (described above) capitalised on this ritual by mimicking the atmosphere of the main event. To do this, they created a special drinking area outside the pub and served drinks in disposable cups (similar to those used at the BDO). Such commodification of the leisure lifestyle also reproduces the idea that alcohol is what makes this event special; and that alcohol 'extends' the event. That is, the event started with pre-drinking at the pub in the morning before the gates to the venue were opened.

Pre-drinking also has a strong effect on bonding that enhances the social aspect of going out drinking with friends. Participants stated that drinking as a group involved very democratic processes, such as going halves in a bottle of spirits, sharing the cost of taxis and organising where the night will begin and end. Group processes, however, are very social and require negotiation and compromise to organise the night around alcohol consumption. Consequently, young people plan an event within the social context through which they manage their social identity. Their social status among their peers is at stake here as it is constituted through these democratic processes.

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**Andrew, 20:** There's no one person that controls the scenario....We just do what everyone wants to do and just go with the majority.

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"The majority" that Andrew mentioned here entailed negotiation of preferences and beliefs around drinking. In this way, young people's identity within a group is always connected to their social interactions with others and their status is related to how they deal with this social process.

### 5.1.2 Event expectations

Pre-drinking is just one of the ritualised aspects of an event that extends its definition. Another is the expectation of what will occur at the event, such as the prospect that they will drink, get drunk, have fun, party hard etc. In some cases, the very notion of going to an event conjures up an 'ideal' of what the night will contain. The more regular the events, the more ritualised they may become.

The Big Day Out (BDO) is the main music festival of the year, is held in most states and territories and attracts large crowds of primarily young people. A great deal of promotional activity typically precedes this event, including substantial marketing and advertising, to stimulate patrons' expectations. For example, prior to the BDO in Adelaide, the local media cautioned ticket-holders that drunken behaviour would result in eviction and a youth-oriented radio station (Nova 91.9) invited listeners to recall anecdotes from previous BDOs or tell others what they planned to do and wear at the forthcoming event. In this way, the general expectations of what the event would comprise were increased; young people's membership of the BDO participant group was consolidated; and their social capital within their peer group was enhanced.

In our study, the young participants talked about their perceptions of events and the activities that occurred prior to a planned event, including their expectations of the event.

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**Jonathan, 21:** When it's a planned event, people usually drink a lot more because they, they've got it in their minds that "We're going to a party so let's have a party". They get into the party lifestyle. They've got the idea of you know, Lets... you know "We're here to drink, let's drink, let's have fun".

---

Jonathan's comment that "we're here to drink" illustrates the purposeful intent associated with the use of alcohol at such events. It also highlights the strong connection between having fun and drinking alcohol. "Let's drink, let's have fun" underscores the belief in the explicit connection between alcohol and fun, and that one inextricably leads to the other (i.e. drinking → pleasure). While it was clear that alcohol was central to Jonathan's "party lifestyle", he engaged in circular reasoning in that it was not clear if he drank because he was going to a party or if it was a party because he was drinking. Whichever was the case, alcohol was the central element that underpinned his expectations of the 'event' and helped to reinforce the value of his leisure lifestyle.

In contrast, for some young people, the expectations of an event carried a level of uncertainty and anxiety.

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**Julia, 20:** It depends on the night as well. If it's just during the week or something, like, it's fine, it's just like a normal conversation, but if it's like a Saturday night, and we know we're going to be doing something, it's like, it feels like we should have like started drinking or something.

Certain occasions I do feel like I should be drinking more, or having a better time, but that doesn't make me (.) like it just seems like if I decide that on that night, for whatever reason, I don't want to drink, people are like "What are you talking about?" So yeah, it is kind of this expectation to drink more on a special occasion.

---

Julia talked about the social pressure and expectation to drink, particularly if it was a 'big' night or special occasion. Her comments suggested that she felt some tension or trepidation if she did not meet those expectations ("should be drinking more, or having a better time"). The party lifestyle is the dominant cultural imperative here, yet Julia's expectations of the event were constrained. She had little choice but to engage in the party lifestyle through the consumption of alcohol and felt uneasy when the party did not meet her expectations. Her response may relate to her status within the group.

Event-goers may plan ahead for some aspects of an event and this planning often fuelled excitement and expectations of what the event would entail. This also helped to define the symbolic importance of an event. However, the structure and organisation of an event often added a layer of uncertainty that may alter people's expectations or motivate them to change their initial plans. For example, at the BDO patrons had to line up for multiple security checks, to buy tickets for drinks, and then again to actually order drinks.

**Field notes, Big Day Out, Adelaide:** The entrance process is cumbersome with multiple checks. The system is this: line up to get into the venue, line up to get your ID badge, line up to get your drinks tickets, line up to get your drinks. Each of these different stages happen in different areas, with the drinks tickets stalls and the drinking areas not necessarily being close to one another. The prime example of this is the largest of the drinks tickets places – a long row of makeshift containers with multiple rows of people lining up. This is the first one that you see as you enter and not having had a chance to grab a plan of the venue I mistakenly think that this is the only one. Others also think this as the queues are at least 20-40 deep. There are actually 2 other drinks ticket places that are far less populated but that are located further into the event closer to the bar areas. Given that there are so many people lined up at the first place everyone seems to assume that this is where you must go.

Waiting in line for about 15 minutes I notice people walking away with multiple drinks tickets. The ticketing system is controversial in that you cannot buy any drinks, alcoholic or not without a ticket, ie they will not take cash at the bar service areas. It is also confusing as there are a number of prices that people have to convert to what each ticket is worth e.g., there may be two prices for beer vs spirits, another price for water. So you have to work out the combination of drinks and convert that to the value of each ticket (about \$5). With this in mind, and with people estimating how much they would drink, the lines moved incredibly slowly as many did not understand the signage explaining pricing and would figure out what they needed only by talking it through with their friends and the ticket seller.

The other problem is that these prices do not convert neatly into the cost of a ticket. E.g., a drink may cost \$7 but the ticket is only worth \$5. You are then required to buy drinks in combination e.g., a water + beer = 2 tickets, but 1 beer and 1 spirit is not equal to 2 tickets.

While this convoluted mechanism for accessing drinks may act as a barrier, it is difficult to determine whether the net result was a decrease or increase or a disincentive to consume alcohol. That is, patrons who did not want to spend their time standing in queues had to estimate from the outset how much they were likely to drink and buy sufficient tickets to last throughout the day. For some, this may have led to overestimation of their alcohol consumption. Furthermore, even if they decided they had drunk enough, they had only two choices of what to do with leftover non-redeemable tickets: they could use them to get more drinks, thereby drinking more than they had planned; or they could discard them or give them away. Neither choice was ideal for individuals who did not want to drink more.

These organisational factors may impact substantially on the way young people drink at events like this, by restricting their choices and potentially pushing them to drink beyond their intended level of intoxication. Interview participants also talked about the strategies they used to manage such organisational barriers to drinking.

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**Vince, 22:** I suppose on the occasions where I was feeling like I was probably going to drink a reasonable amount I'd buy up lots of tickets and probably get a couple of drinks at a time. So the feeling is if I decide not to have the drinks I could always pass them on to my friends.

---

By giving away drinks tickets (at another event using a similar ticketing system as the BDO), Vince enhanced the camaraderie within the group, as well as his own social capital, and, since he usually passed drinks tickets on to friends who were not drinking as much, everyone ended up around the same drinking level. In contrast, for some young people, drinking at events was very low priority.

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**FG02, Female#1:** If there's like a band and stuff that's like entertaining you, I don't really see the need to drink.

**Female#2:** and if you've paid money to get in there you don't want to be (?) and not remember it and not enjoy it.

---

While an overarching feature of public events was the commodification of leisure, this young female preferred to enjoy the entertainment rather than get drunk and have no memory of the event. In contrast to most other interviewees, for whom drinking was an integral part of the event, this young female was an exception. She explicitly stated that she did not like to drink at such an event. She defined her leisure lifestyle in terms of the music and dancing rather than getting drunk, which had little social value for this participant.

## 5.2 The role of alcohol in events

A unique combination of features make up a particular event, such as the motivation or reason for the event (e.g. celebration, commiseration), the size and importance of the event, the features of the event itself (e.g. context, location, type, organisational factors), the build-up prior to an event (e.g. advertising, buying tickets or gifts, reservations, pre-drinking), and personal arrangements, such as deciding what to wear, who to go with and how to get there. This cluster of features contributes to what may be referred to as 'eventness'.

It was also clear that alcohol was a key, and expected, ingredient at most events. The physical and organisational structure of events, with alcohol in prime physical and symbolic positions, contributed to the build up of expectations of an event. Some interviewees used terms such as "big" and "massive" to indicate the importance/significance of certain events (e.g. New Years, birthdays, Christmas, competitive sports).

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**FG10, Female#1:** If it's something massive then people go all out really.

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This young female participant above suggested that "massive" or more important events carried an expectation of putting in a bit more effort, such as dressing up, and behaving in ways that made the event more memorable.

Moreover, it appears that the size or scale of an event may be related to the amount of alcohol an individual drinks on that occasion. At big parties, people were more inclined to drink more, whereas at smaller occasions they had less expectation of heavy consumption or getting drunk. For example, one observer at the Clipsal 500, a major motorsport event in Adelaide, noted that larger group size was related to higher alcohol consumption and more intoxicated people within the group.

The size or scale of an event was also reflected in the drinking patterns of study participants.

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**Selma, 20:** If it's a big game [footy] where we like both of the teams maybe we'll go watch it. ... And sometimes, you know, we'll have footy on and have just a couple of drinks and just go to bed after or whatever ... if we go to watch it, that's a kind of big one as well, we'll save up heaps of money and get pretty drunk 'n that ... at the stadium.

---

Selma distinguished between two ways of watching the football. The "big" one was going to the stadium to watch a game and this usually involved getting drunk. The smaller scale version was watching it on TV with "a couple of drinks". Although both involved watching football and drinking alcohol, there was less planning involved and no expectation of getting drunk when watching the game on TV.

Alcohol may alter the meaning or symbolic importance of an event. That is, participants referred to a "big" night as one in which large amounts of alcohol were consumed.

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**Kurt, 18 (about schoolies):** Everyone was like "It's going to be a big piss up and there's going to be alcohol everywhere".

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In contrast, other interviewees said they preferred smaller get-togethers, without the expectation and pressure to drink too much.

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**Letitia, 18:** It wasn't a big party, but it was sort of fun and you didn't feel the need to get drunk.

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**Jonathon, 21:** But when it's more just you know after work and just to wind down, I prefer that scenario, just have a couple you know and then watch some TV and relax. It's more of a relaxed atmosphere than "let's have a party" attitude that people get.

---

Letitia and Jonathan talked about the "need" (Letitia) or expectation to get drunk at big parties, whereas smaller ones that had less pressure to drink too much were perceived as more relaxing. House parties implied a higher level of safety compared to public venues and, ironically, young people felt free to get drunker and engage in riskier drinking as they considered themselves to be in a safer context.

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**FG06, Female:** Feel safe [at home] – and more comfortable ... less dramas.

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Not surprisingly, as young people turned 18, their drinking careers progressed from the private sphere (house parties) to the public sphere (pubs/clubs). However, some still preferred the comfort, relaxed atmosphere and perception of safety at house parties.

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**Jonathan, 21:** I mean honestly I don't go out that much. I'm not an 'out' person. I'd rather, you know, be at home or someone's house and do it that way.

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**FG14, INT:** So do you miss house parties?

**All:** Yeah!

...

**Female#1:** We dress up. Most (21st) are cocktails.

**Female#2:** It's not as laid back as house parties where you can spend the night there.

---



It was not clear why some young people preferred private functions compared to public events, when they were not underage. Economy, perceived safety, anxiety about their position within the group, or liking for socialising with people known to them may have contributed to their preferences.

Young people are not a homogeneous group and move readily across different social contexts. A young person's pattern of consumption and their drinking identity changes with the social and physical context. That is, an individual may drink heavily on one occasion and in a specific setting, and the same individual may choose not to drink at all under different circumstances (e.g. Selma's consumption pattern differed depending on whether she watched football on TV or went to the stadium).

Sometimes it is the transitioning to different contexts that maintains the momentum during a night out.

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**Rick, 23:** Went from club to club to club and had a couple of drinks at each.

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Some participants, such as Rick, commented on the tendency for alcohol to 'extend the night' and turn it into an event, even if it had not been planned or intended to evolve into such an event. That is, if they were drinking, they were more likely to stay out much longer (than if they only had a couple/no drinks), in this instance moving from one venue to another.

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**Nikki, 20:** Usually when I go out I don't take my key card. I set myself a limit and I take that much cash out and if I run out of money then that's the night over for me.

...

**INT:** How did that strategy come about then?

**Nikki:** It's usually all gone because one night I went out and spent my whole pay.

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In contrast, Nikki described how she set limits on her spending and her night ended when her money ran out. For both of these young people, their financial capacity to drink determined the length of the event. For Nikki, this strategy originated from a negative experience, but it nonetheless provided an effective self-regulatory mechanism that not only helped her to manage her money but also served to contain the possibility of drinking more than she intended to.

## 5.2.1 Alcohol creates an 'Other world'

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**FG14, Female:** ...in their own little drunk world

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Alcohol plays a central role in how events are viewed and constructed by young people. One of the ways in which these events were discussed was as a distinct and contained social space that had its own internal meaning. This 'other world' was separate and removed from everyday life, a point emphasised by Bryan who referred to a high level of intoxication as being "off the moon".

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**Bryan, 21:** ... I got quite drunk there [friend's birthday party]. Bought myself two bottles of spirits and I drank a bottle and a half. I was quite off the moon, over the fence.

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In other instances, several participants commented on the 'other world' as something that was recognised as much by the non-drinker as the drinker. In the following example, Selma talked about the occasions when she was not drinking but everyone else was.

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**Selma, 20:** Everyone gets so annoying when they're drunk and you're not drunk. You're like "you idiot! what are you talking about?"

**INT:** ... How do you know that people are annoying when they're drunk? Have you had situations where you were there and they -

**Selma:** =Oh yeah, yeah. Just if you're at a party or at someone's house, or something like that, and then, you know, people there are drunk and you're not, you're just like "have a listen to yourself you d\*\*khead!" But then when you're drunk you think it's funny too.

---

Similar distinctions were made by other participants who demarcated the drinking 'other world' from the 'sober reality'. There was recognition that drinking or not-drinking changed the interpretive context and young people's perceptions of what made for a fun or pleasurable time. Alcohol underpins these examples and thus demonstrates how it has colonised the notion of 'other worldliness' for many young people. Of course, this does not happen naturally, nor by accident. As the following section shows, an 'other world' can be fostered, if not constructed by the structuring and organisation of events.

## 5.2.2 Freedom within leisure spaces

From our participant observations of several youth-oriented events, it was clear that the physical space in which many public events are held foster the notion of freedom from the typical constraints or social sanctions that occur in other public settings.

Alcohol's influence on the meanings of a particular social space impacts upon the type of behaviours engaged in and use of actual physical space. This was demonstrated with the following field notes taken by a researcher who conducted observations near 'the hill'<sup>10</sup> at an international cricket match.

**Field notes, One day International Cricket, Adelaide Oval:** Located in a prime spot just under the old scoreboard and next to the new video screen, the hill is a significant reference point not only for cricket related information, but also as a highly visible, public spectacle. Appears to have cultural significance in it is a 'constructed space' of authentic Australian culture revolving around sport, parochialism, alcohol, and national identity. While this space is rooted in the physical surrounds of the spectator's area, it is also lodged in the memories and consciousness of 'ordinary Australians' reproducing what it means to be Australian – something which is easily transferred to other national sporting events and 'hills' across varying cricketing venues. It is a place where more socially transgressive behaviours are permitted (by security, bar staff and other spectators) and encouraged (many of those on the fringe of the hill area watched those on the hill very closely as a form of entertainment. Said one patron: 'they're more entertaining than the cricket'.

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<sup>10</sup> The hill tends to be a general admission area where policing of behaviours is more difficult.

The regularity of those being kicked out of the hill gave the place an almost ritualistic feel i.e. it was a rite of passage to be dragged out by police – something to brag about later on (overheard early 20s males discussing how they had been kicked out at a prior similar event). Therefore, part of the purpose of the hill is as a form of enculturation – e.g. older fans praising younger ones for wearing a lot of memorabilia and someone watching the fight telling a girl to take her top off – older fan then turns to me and says 'get into it'.

In this context, the directive of “get into it” illustrated an attempt to reinforce a collective atmosphere in which sexist attitudes towards women were readily expressed and accepted. Alcohol, the social environment and gender imbalance in this setting all served to give license to patrons to play out identities based upon hegemonic masculinity and jingoistic patriotism as expressions of power that are now challenged in today's more liberal society. Without these factors in place it is unlikely that such beliefs and attitudes would be so publicly displayed. 'The hill' therefore provided a space that gave people licence to transgress particular social norms that would otherwise be heavily sanctioned in the 'real world.' The construction of these opposing worlds was made even clearer in the following field notes from a researcher who attended a large music festival.

**Field notes, Good Vibrations Music Festival:** Entering the grounds of the music festival was like entering another world for the day. Although the tickets say things about rules of the festival being like rules of the outside world, there is a sense that social rules and ways of relating to each other were quite different from the outside world, allowing people to engage with each other with a sense of freedom, free from the formality of being among strangers in the “real world”.

Noticing how the social interactions within the event were not like those found in the 'real world', the researcher noted that strangers shared food with one another, and young people greeted strangers like old friends.<sup>11</sup> She then explains how these types of behaviours were encouraged as part of a broader sense of freedom that was structured by the set up of the event as well as young people's engagement with the event space.

**Field notes, Good Vibrations Music Festival:** I keep coming back to the notion of freedom but again I think it is relevant here. It is a special occasion at which people are able, indeed encouraged to drink alcohol all day long, in one demarcated venue. This sense of freedom I believe is created largely by the attendees and encouraged by the way in which the venue is set up. I think there is something maybe about its circularity, the way in which you can walk, or sweep, the venue easily around its circumference and hit all the spots where alcohol is available, including food and other drink areas. The way it is laid out never lets you feel too contained or closed-in, instead you can wander around the venue and find other spots within it to keep drinking. Not just wander but maybe the shape of the set up allows you to be swept around it.

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11 Not all examples were particularly sociable. The researchers also noted that some young males used the perimeter fencing as a urinal in order to avoid queuing for the toilets.

The notion that the festival event functions as a 'free' space is not necessarily a new idea. Referring to literature that looks at carnivals in medieval times, Bakhtin (1968, p.10) finds that the "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions." This work has inspired other researchers to examine the links between medieval carnivals and modern festivals (eg Halnon, 2004; Ravenscroft & Gilchrist, 2009). Within the festival events analysed in this study, alcohol facilitated the suspension and transgression of particular social norms. As noted above, such events gave young people license to transgress typical gender codes such as young men who engaged in more homosocial behaviour displayed through more friendly physical contact. For young women, these spaces made it more permissible for them to be 'loud' and act 'unladylike' in ways that are usually only acceptable for males (see also Chapter 7).

However, we need to recognise that the boundaries between the real and other worlds are clearly marked.

**Field notes, Good Vibrations Music Festival:** The main rule that I saw being enforced (which was clearly developed and enforced by the festival and staff) was that you had to pay to get in and once in you couldn't leave and come back again, in other words the main structure in place was the boundary of the festival, the fencing around it.

This demarcation occurs not only through symbolic and emblematic means but also through clearly defined, and often 'policed', physical boundaries. In the event above, a fence was employed largely to prevent 'fence jumpers' from entering the event without a ticket. This occurred a number of times when the crowds within the event became large.

Unlike the medieval carnival, modern festivals and events are heavily commodified, meaning that freedom is often limited and therefore experienced in more regulated ways. Within events, tented areas were often set up to sell or promote specific brands of alcohol.

**Field notes, Good Vibrations Music Festival:** Creates own space within but external to the festival space ie though physically located within festival, not typical festival experience as its enclosed (indoors) and set up like a bar/club wherein the drinks service bar lines the whole tent, you wait with others to get served in non-organised way, designated dance area.

The set up of these areas mimicked how young people would typically experience parts of their leisure lifestyle in the 'real world.' It is in these types of spaces that the reality of a commodified culture comes to the fore. However, the policing of these areas varied. At one particular 'all ages' event, drinking was very tightly controlled by police and volunteers, with clearly demarcated areas for drinking, identification checks and surveillance of intoxication and potential trouble-making. In contrast, at a much larger sporting event, security around the drinking tents was sparse in comparison to the large number of patrons who were lining up for their drinks in an ad hoc fashion.

### 5.2.3 Economic considerations or hedonistic pursuits?

While pre-drinking before an event was recalled by many participants in terms of sociality, for others the rewards were economic and/or hedonistic.

Once young people have made the decision to go to an event, they need to consider economic factors, such as saving up for tickets (e.g. Music festivals/concerts), buying new clothes or presents (e.g. birthday party) and/or allocating funds for food and drinks.

Bringing your own drinks (i.e. purchased off-premise), or having 'free' drinks at a friend's house reduced the overall cost of a night out. The cost of on-premise drinks was substantially higher than buying the same drinks from a bottle shop and consuming them at home. For some, the prohibitive cost of drinks at events served to limit the time spent there.

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**Selma, 20:** Didn't stay out as long as we planned to.

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**FG10, Female:** Or just like take a flask into town so you don't have to buy their drink... but you have to pick and choose the right place that won't catch you out.

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For example, while Selma and her boyfriend saved up \$200 each to go to a particular music event, they left early as the drinks were very expensive. Alternatively, others circumvented this barrier by smuggling in their own drinks. The surreptitious introduction of drinks (e.g. through concealing it on their person) was noted in a number of settings. For example, it was also noted by observers at the one-day cricket in Adelaide.

**Field notes, One day International Cricket, Adelaide Oval:** This event prohibited BYO alcohol, yet we saw evidence of BYO in empty spirit bottles on the ground and one group of guys bring a new bottle of cougar bourbon into the ground by hiding it under his shorts. I thought, it would have been easy to bring alcohol in, the bag check was cursory and the main concern seemed to be that "no cans" (which could be used as projectiles to throw onto the cricket ground) were in the bag rather than having a thorough look at what you had in your bag. I overheard one guy say "how did they get glass in....cruisers an' that?" as he pointed to some empty cruiser bottles on the crowd. His tone sounded less amazed and more so envious that he didn't bring his own drinks in!

For some individuals, the main purpose of pre-drinking was to 'bank' sufficient alcohol to get them through a social event without the need to spend money on drinks while out (Wells, Graham, & Purcell, 2009). Reaching a particular level of intoxication prior to going out meant that group members were primed and ready for the event as soon as they left the house.

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**Melissa, 21:** often when we're getting ready at someone's house ... that's when we drink a lot of alcopops because they're so cheap ... and then we get fairly drunk before we get in [to nightclub] so we don't have to spend so much in bars.

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For example, while Melissa emphasised cost as the reason for pre-drinking, she also tacitly referred to getting drunk as a social obligation for the evening.

### 5.3 Unplanned events and non-events

In contrast to the amount of long-term and deliberative planning and organisation required for some of the 'big' events young people valued highly, events that arose relatively spontaneously were also valued and played an important role in their social lives.

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**Jonathan, 21:** When you're at home and there's no real plan to it, you're just having a chat, and then, you know, you want a drink. "I'll have a drink" and then you just have a few drinks. It's nothing too ... not set out. Usually it's just ... it just pops up, really.

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**Michaela, 18:** Because some nights it's been the night after a big night and we've gone over for a barbeque and stuff so everyone's just like "yeah, just want a quiet one" sort of thing. But usually if there's a lot of people, someone decides "Oh let's go out afterwards" or something, and everyone thinks it's a good idea at the time.

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Some small informal social occasions spontaneously evolved into larger events. For example, Jonathan and Michaela described how a casual night turned into an unplanned social event. For some young people, part of the pleasure of a good night was the uncertainty and "just see where it goes" (Michaela, 18). In these cases, it is possible that having a few drinks was the catalyst to prompt the conversion of a quiet night into a big night out.

It was not always clear when an event began, or how it evolved from an unplanned ad hoc get-together into something larger, and more memorable. Alcohol was used to extend the definition of an event, thus blurring the boundaries of what constituted a special occasion and what was an ordinary get-together.

At times, the distinction between pre-drinking and a planned social activity was also blurred, as pre-drinking became the highlight or the main part of the night.

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**FG10, Female:** Sometimes pre-drinking is even more fun than going out ... have deep and meaningful conversations instead of going out.

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Not only was it difficult to determine where one finished and the other began, but, in some cases, planned drinking before an event ended up being the event itself, or surpassed the expected enjoyment of the main event. As such, pre-drinking was also about the social aspects of getting together, getting ready together and everyone starting at the same time, rather than the consumption of alcohol to reach a particular level of intoxication. Blurring the lines that distinguished events and non-events reflected the ease with which young people could easily move across them. This was due in part to the consumption of alcohol (pre-drinking – drinking – party/event). That is, alcohol is a defining element in the construction of an event, including those that are unplanned or unanticipated.

While young people put some effort into planning an event, which brought forth a certain level of expectations, their plans were not infallible and may at times be subject to change. In contrast to the organisational factors that may influence plans and expectations (as discussed earlier), there were situational and social factors that also impacted on how young people managed their leisure activities.

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**FG10, Female:** Once we were pre-drinking at my house till midnight and we'd drunk too much and didn't realise 'cause we were sitting down...and when we got up, we were too drunk so we went home.

---

The young female above described how she and her friends failed to adequately gauge their level of intoxication and as a result the planned evening never eventuated. However, her recollection of this occasion elevated it to something memorable. In this case, while alcohol served to prevent her and her friends' attendance at a planned event, it also nonetheless created a small 'event' in its own right. So, while unable to participate in the planned event as a result of a failure of self-regulation, the situation was not assessed as a total loss.

## 5.4 Rites of Passage

Drinking at celebrations and events, especially birthday parties (e.g. 18th and 21st birthdays), was commonly viewed as a 'rite of passage' for young people, as illustrated in the quotes below.

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**Jeanette, 18:** I can almost always expect there's going to be (quite a bit) of drinking at birthday parties, wrap parties, and graduation parties. So anything kind of (.) momentous. Like, milestone, I suppose, there's going to be a reason to drink.  
[Drinking] did feel sort of like an obligation otherwise you'd almost feel like stigmatised a bit. So oh you didn't do anything for your 18th – you're so boring.

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**FG01, INT:** When do people tend to drink shots? Would that be say at the start or...

**Female#1:** big celebrations.

**Female#2:** Yeah everyone's like "ok shot to this girl, it's her birthday".

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**FG01, INT:** Are there any other sort of similar things that mean it's a special occasion in terms of how you drink?

**Female#1:** Probably more on special occasions such as eighteenth or whatever of New Year's you're expected to get smashed. Or especially the eighteen year old.

**Female#2:** yeah.

**Female#3:** the person who's turning eighteen is gonna drink as much as they can.

---

Alcohol has symbolic value in marking milestones and clearly separates the 'event' from everyday life. However, ritual events are also marked by alcohol to be 'other worlds' in much the same way that alcohol is central to commodified events.

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**Rick, 23:** When there's so many people in your social group, there tends to be a birthday almost every weekend. So when there's a birthday every weekend – there's a social event; and when there's not a social event, then we make a social event.

---

Here Rick talked about social events as a regular, routine part of his leisure lifestyle; and Jeanette (above) inferred that it was “boring” and socially unacceptable not to celebrate an 18th birthday. Ironically, the presence of alcohol at these events meant that the events were not special or unique, but heavily ritualised celebrations that reproduced the centrality of alcohol in everyday life. This may partly explain how alcohol continues to be normalised in Australian culture. In many ways, ‘big’ events and the importance of alcohol in them have set the template for other aspects of ‘everyday life’ so that the ordinary becomes extraordinary – transformed to a more hedonistic leisure lifestyle. Other examples of this can be seen in the burgeoning industries surrounding special celebrations (e.g. party hire equipment, wedding/event planners), where party-goers have a high expectation of having fun and being entertained.

## **5.5 Marketing and consumerism**

As discussed in detail in the associated literature review (Roche et al., 2007), consumerism and the commodification of youth culture dominate the way young people seek meaning and construct their social identity. Alcohol carries cultural and symbolic value and young people shape their identities through their consumption practices (McCreanor, Greenaway, Moewaka Barnes, Borell, & Gregory, 2005). Therefore, by commodifying young people’s leisure lifestyles and co-opting youth culture, alcohol marketing has a substantial impact on the formation of social identity.

A key principle of consumerism is that it must always cultivate dissatisfaction and render products obsolete in order to promote future consumption. That is, consumerism depends on a continuous cycle of consumption, obsolescence, disillusionment, novelty-seeking and desire (Adorno, 1991). We are encouraged to seek satisfaction and happiness through consumption of goods. However, once attained, marketers create dissatisfaction with the goods by continuously introducing new variants and rendering past purchases obsolete. They do this by highlighting the novelty of a new product that is stylistically and emotionally in tune with the consumer’s values and creating the desire for the new product. Branding and marketing are critical aspects of the cycle of consumerism.

Public events are a fertile ground for marketers of culture industry products as they represent an example of the ideal leisure lifestyle that young people value.

### **5.5.1 Marketing at public events**

The conspicuous and pervasive presence of alcohol advertising at youth-oriented events is what boosts the event, both in terms of financial reward for the organisers and the symbolic meaning and importance of ‘being there’ for young people. This is exemplified in many of the big music festivals, which are popular with young people. These music events, which may be held throughout the year, extend the notion of the ‘summer leisure lifestyle’ and sell it back to the young consumer as a commodity. Successful marketing results in the brand being integrated within a culture as an experience or lifestyle, rather than a product or commodity (Klein, 2001).



**Field notes, Good Vibrations Festival:** It seemed the event organisers had successfully attracted their target demographic and youth culture – the young people they had featured on their event promotional material (website, etc) looked just like the young people we saw entering the event.

One observer reported that event organisers had been very successful at attracting their target demographic as the young people entering the event looked very similar to those featured on the Good Vibrations promotional material.

One of our observer researchers at public events noted the strong presence of branded materials and multiple examples of how branding co-opts the leisure lifestyle. An example of how event organisers appropriate youth culture was captured in the following field notes from one observer.

**Field notes, Good Vibrations Festival:** Interestingly, the GVB website contains a catch-phrase “see yourself at the good vibrations festival”.

There is a warning within the FAQs for the festival on the GVB website which responds to the question: will I be filmed or recorded while at the festival? The response is “You may be filmed/photographed at the festival and such footage/ images may be used by, replicated, reproduced and published by the promoters for any use including but not limited to marketing and promotional uses. By entering the site you consent to filming/ being photographed.”

The ‘warning’ on the GVB website that patrons may be photographed at the event was an example of how well the event organisers and marketers understand youth culture and their penchant for having a record of social events. This is also demonstrated in the popularity of on-line social networking sites, such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter and the common use of mobile phones with cameras to capture special moments. By purchasing a ticket and attending the GVB festival, young people implicitly agree to become an integral part of the festival itself. This includes relinquishing their privacy rights and becoming part of the branding for the festival. In this way, they align themselves with the event and identify publicly as a GVB festival-goer.

From observations at events, youth-oriented marketing was ubiquitous at public events, such as music (BDO, Good Vibrations, BoBfest) and sports events (Slam volleyball, cricket, Clipsal 500). While Red Bull and Coke Zero featured strongly at these events, so too did alcohol brands, such as Corona and Sol beer (Slam volleyball), Bacardi, Jagermeister and Pure Blonde (Good Vibrations), Jim Beam and XXXX gold (Clipsal 500), Coopers and Jagermeister (Schutzenfest), and Tooheys and Slate bourbon (BDO).

**Field notes, Good Vibrations Festival:** I first walked around the festival area to find the lay of the land. It seemed that most people were in groups of 3-5 people (mixed genders) and mostly carrying cans (Bacardi and cola or Breezers), some people had instead plastic cups (of beer?). The cans of Bacardi Breezers were small enough for people to carry two at a time in one hand, one on top of the other and I was struck by how many people did this. Many people also had a full plastic cup (of beer?) in each hand. Cups either had Bacardi, Jagermeister or Pure Blonde written on them. People also had Jagermeister ink stamps on their bodies (necks, arms, backs, hands, wrists)

...

As we enter the roots stage there is an elevated bar/drinking area called "Cloud 9", which is sponsored by Red Bull. Selling only Red Bull with mixers and is given out in Red Bull paper cups. ... Heaven imagery/theme stands in contrast to the effect of Red Bull – perhaps a play on the marketing slogan "Red Bull gives you wings".

At the Good Vibrations music festival, many young patrons had Jagermeister ink stamps on their necks, arms and other visible body parts. This 'branding' is very intimate and makes a strong statement about their identity as it was likely to endure for the term of the event itself and demonstrates a 'commitment to the party' – unlike a branded cup or hat that could be disposed of or easily removed.

**Field notes, Big Day Out (BDO), Adelaide:** I venture inside the pub and there are much fewer patrons inside the venue with a few more located in the opposite outdoor beer garden area. Inside, next to the bar, there are a few promo girls wearing skimpy outfits (tight top, short shorts and matching hats). I think they're promoting a type of alcoholic drink mixed with energy supplements. To do this, they're giving away free temporary tattoos, which some young men seem to have taken up.

Similar 'branding' tattoos were available at the BDO. These were distributed by young scantily-clad promotional girls and accepted primarily by young men. This is a clever type of viral marketing that taps into youth culture. Using the appeal of tattoos connected to the alcohol brand, marketers made the brand an essential part of the identity of those who wore the tattoo, albeit only temporarily. 'Branded' individuals then entered the BDO where it was likely that other event-goers would ask them what the unfamiliar symbol (tattoo) meant. In this way, the original purpose of the product was masked by the focus on lifestyle, fun and attractive promotional girls.

Organisers of the BDO accept sponsorship from companies on the proviso that they make the sponsorship campaign fun and create an association between their brand and the music (Cummings, 2008). As a result, a positive association is established between the fun experienced at an event and the alcohol brands sponsored there. Alcohol brands that are integrated into youth culture and accepted by young people on an emotional and cultural level may contribute to their social identity (Brain, 2000; McCreanor et al., 2005). Moreover, consumers' choices are based not only on their use value, but also on the symbolic meanings associated with the goods (Cummings, 2008). Paradoxically, while BDO festival-goers are attracted to the 'authenticity' of an indie music festival, the experience is manufactured by the event organisers and sponsors (see Grazian, 2004 in Cummings, 2008).

One event organiser who was encountered by a researcher in the field stated that many alcohol companies tried to associate or align themselves with a particular leisure/sport lifestyle. For example, this particular sports event, which was sponsored by a beer product, used a Mexican theme to represent a laidback leisure lifestyle that suited the summer sports beachside event. However, the event organiser had been approached by competitor alcohol companies that were keen to also align themselves with the event using similar images of a summer-laden leisure lifestyle.

Alcohol sponsorship and marketing were strongly represented at many public events that were attended by young people. The marketing of beer at a beachside sports event was a clear example of how the alcohol advertisers embed their product within a lifestyle that is highly valued by young people and by aligning their brand within a youth-oriented sport. The ultimate goal was for the product to be seen as an essential part of the leisure lifestyle.

Alcohol sponsorship was also evident at other sporting events, such as cricket and the Clipsal 500. Alcohol is closely aligned with sport and it is deeply embedded in Australian culture. This was exemplified at the Clipsal 500 in Adelaide where the most prominent flags were those advertising alcohol brands.

**Field notes, Clipsal 500:** We noted three flags (two Jim Beam and one XXXX beer) fully mast in the middle of this area. At previous events we've noted the presence of the Australian flag, at the Clipsal 500 the three flags mast in the centre were alcohol brands.

Though the 'size' of events typically play off nationalistic emblems, such as the display of national flags, in this event allegiance to alcohol brands was what helped construct the significance of the event.

**Field notes, Clipsal 500:** Spectators at the Clipsal 500 wore both Jim Beam and motorsport (Holden or Ford) branded clothing, the Jim Beam beverage sales tent was one of the most popular at the event, and consumption of Jim Beam RTDs was a common sight.

...

The environment was saturated with alcohol sponsorship and promotional material – both worn by people and on signage.

Alcohol branding is closely aligned to motorsports. For example, Jack Daniel's hats and T-shirts, which were designed to look like racing shirts, were worn by many young males at the Clipsal 500 (from field notes). In addition, young children under the age of 10 years were seen wearing the same branded clothing as their families. In this way, young children may be socialised to the idea that alcohol is a normal and established part of car racing. Ironically, when they are old enough to drive, they are taught the very opposite.

At Clipsal 500, everything within this event was highly commodified. For example, items that are meaningful for their functional utility (e.g. T-shirts, caps) were branded as symbolic items used to express other meanings, such as affiliation to the Holden team or membership of a particular group (e.g. Jack Daniel's), thus assuming a rightful place by being at the event.

**Field notes, One day International Cricket, Adelaide Oval:** We also observed that paraphernalia (T-shirts, hats, beach balls) from Australia's XXXX gold beach cricket (held in Adelaide the month prior to the one-day cricket) had been carried over to this cricket event.

As a commodity, cricket has large symbolic value. Beer advertising was common at events, including beach cricket, which is synonymous with the leisure summer lifestyle and alcohol consumption. Thus, the alcohol product becomes an integral part of the leisure activity, which is sold back to consumers as a commodity for passive consumption rather than active participation. This becomes part of a highly controlled and contained environment that is accepted by patrons and organisers as 'normal'.

**Field notes, One day International Cricket, Adelaide Oval:** There were other aspects of the crowd that reminded me of the crowd at the BDO – the most obvious link being the presence of BDO T-shirts. Summertime is the peak season for events in Adelaide, which more or less hibernates during winter. It seems that young people have a program of events, often of a celebratory nature, that they line up and plan for during the summer season, commencing with the end of school (Schoolies) or University in November.

The carryover of branded materials from one event to another, as described in the field notes above, is interesting. It is an overt statement that identifies the individual as a multiple event-goer and proof of their participation in another highly-valued event.

Branding has a strong effect not only on choice of drinks, but also on how a particular drink style becomes synonymous with the brand.

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**FG01, Female#1:** ... they mainly drink Cruisers [refers to friends]

**Female#2:** Or, they buy vodka and make it into Cruisers for a cheaper alternative.

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It is interesting to note how this young woman referred to making 'Cruisers' from vodka and demonstrates how strong the branding is even for a drink that her friends poured for themselves. This is an example of the symbolic power of alcohol brands in that the type of product is substituted by the brand in the same way that terms, such as Band-Aid and Panadol, are used to refer to a whole category of products.

For those who choose not to drink or opt to be the designated driver, Red Bull is a legitimate way for young people to feel part of a group and participate as a full member even if they are not drinking. For example, one young female interviewee spoke of being a "designated driver for five weeks in a row". She was happy to do this as she drank Red Bull all night and could "still dance and have fun" (Focus Group 02). This illustrates how it is possible for non-drinkers to still join in the leisure lifestyle where alcohol and intoxication is the 'ideal'. Red Bull and other energy drinks are packaged and marketed to resemble alcohol products (Rodgers, 2001). For example, the Red Bull advertisements and slogan – "Red Bull gives you wings" suggests that consumption of this product will lift the consumer to an altered state of consciousness (that parallels alcohol intoxication) or to a different world where anything is possible. Such imagery makes this type of beverage a more 'acceptable' alternative for non-drinking youth.

## 5.5.2 Marketers' and retailers' interpretation of youth-oriented marketing

Alcohol products are marketed to young people in subtle 'friendly' ways, reflecting their aspirations for freedom, independence and fun. Often, they are written "in a cheeky way" with a sense of humour, engaging the audience in lifestyle issues or problems that they can relate to. Steven (Marketing and Advertising manager) also talked about "authenticity" in advertising. He suggested that young people can readily identify (and dislike) advertising that tries too hard to sell to young people, unless it goes over the top and makes fun of advertising itself (e.g. Carlton's "Big Ad"). To connect to young people, he suggested that ads need to be relevant, irreverent, mischievous and/or, alternatively, as real as possible. One radio station expressly employed non-traditional radio personalities who were more self-deprecating; talked about their own life; and were not as 'polished' as traditional deep-voiced radio hosts, specifically to achieve this end.

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**Steven (Marketing and Advertising manager):** Ads to young people have huge connection with fun, travel and independence. Sense that "you can do what you like" [Marketers] exploit that to a large extent not just alcohol products, but also Virgin, Coca-cola, Red bull, Vodafone. ... Young people like to think they are savvy, independent and 'living for the moment'. ... The young consumer doesn't want to think they are being sold. They have a very alert radar for advertising. The moment it's sort of overdone or it's selling me too much then that's too cheesy. [Marketers] appeal to them by (.) to slip under their little radar, to slip under their 'that's an ad' radar and to make the products we're advertising just simple, plain and just there. ... We're aware that we're selling to you but we're kind of doing it in an unfairly way so that you won't mind us.

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**Nathan (Radio advertising and sales):** Give them the message, make it a bit funny and then get out and go back to music.... The more we can integrate the advertiser into the program, the more we can engage the listener with a relevant real message. Don't drag on. Don't go rah rah rah. Jingles and that sort of stuff don't work with this particular generation. ...just be real and don't try and fake it.

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Nathan and Steven also talked about 'under the radar' advertising that is embedded into the programming in such a way that the message is delivered without young people being overtly conscious of it. This type of advertising becomes a part of the social environment.

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**Keith (Radio advertising and sales):** Get in and get out.

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Keith commented that his station provided what he termed an "uncluttered environment" by using only "two ads in a row". In this way, ads were designed to engage the listener and products were integrated into the environment.

Marketers create an image of an 'ideal' lifestyle or experience with their client's product at its centre.

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**Adam (Market researcher):** It's reasonably straightforward. You try to find out what aspects of this brand people particularly like ... and you also try to find out what the category means to people. As in um – well if you look at say beer, the category of beer you find out often in research that it's about mateship and ah bonding between guys. That's why we often see on television ads where there is a bunch of guys and you know like they're playing beach cricket or something like that and they're bonding in that way. ... You find out how that particular class of drink (.) how people relate to it. And then you find out what makes your particular drink unique within that context. And then you make sure that your brand asserts its uniqueness within the idea of mateship. ... You might even say to them "What's an ideal moment involving this drink?" Then you hear what that ideal situation is and then you just replay it in advertising.

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Here, Adam related the process of creating an image of an ideal lifestyle, associating the product to the image, and selling the image to the consumer.

From her observations as a bar manager, Marilyn (quoted below) described how young, inexperienced drinkers were susceptible to the marketing ploys that they were exposed to in licensed venues. This point-of-sale advertising is a powerful strategy as it is the final point at which the consumer's decision is made (Isoline & Macomber, 2002)

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**Marilyn (Bar Manager):** It's a very visual thing. So whatever they [young people] see – they'll order. If there's lots of marketing or lots of advertising and you don't (.), or you haven't been out a lot and you're kind of younger and you don't know what you're ordering you know or you're not used to different options ... people don't want to seem naïve so they'll order what they can see.

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### 5.5.3 Young people's interpretation of marketing strategies

Marketers and advertisers we spoke to consistently described young people as knowledgeable or 'savvy' consumers that know how advertising works and, thus, advertisers used techniques to slip under their radar.

While it was evident that young people could recognise the strategies that marketers use, it was also apparent in our interviews that they were not always critical of them. This was illustrated in focus groups when participants were asked to design their ideal drink and an advertising campaign to launch it. The products that they designed met many of the criteria that target a leisure lifestyle and are used by alcohol advertising companies, including:

#### **Healthy or low calorie drink – appeals to young people's aspirations of beauty and vitality**

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**FG14, slogan for new alcohol product:** fun times in the summer time while keeping your waist in line.

**Female#1:** Anything that keeps you trim while drinking.

**Female#2:** If it has low fat in it you're like "why not, bonus".

**Female#3:** Guys choose the low carb choice too.

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**FG14, Female:** I've invented a low sugar, preservative free, hangover free, high strength, nice tasting, high in anti-oxidants, fortified with b vitamins.

**INT:** What's in it?

**FG14, Female:** Grapes, ethanol and fortified with vitamins. Tastes sort of like wine, sort of like apple juice but not as sweet. Guilt free, hang over free alcohol.

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### **High alcohol content – relates to the desire for rapid intoxication in order to access pleasure**

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**Female#2:** and it contains two standard drinks so it gets you more pissed but you don't have to drink as much.

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**FG06, Male:** If two things are the same price and one's got more percentage alcohol, (I'll go for the) more percentage alcohol.

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### **Linking alcohol with romance and sex – appeals to aspirations of sexual success**

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**FG01, Female#1:** What colour should we make the liquid?

**Female#2:** Umm pink? D'you reckon pink?

**Female#1:** thinking red.

**Female#2:** Red?

**Female#1:** Like love ... very passionate.

**Both:** Mmm (agreeing).

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**FG07, INT:** What's the name of your drink?

**Male:** 'Legs eleven' (laughter from other participants) (goes on to explain) I guess it's derogatory but a lot of people refer to mixers as leg spreaders.

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**FG10, Female:** Advert for Tropical flame has it being drunk by a "hot girl", guy comes up to her and says "hey that's a nice drink, do you want me to buy you another one" because it looks good. Included this because it would look like guys come up to you and buy you another one.

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### **Social identity – relates to the formation of young people's social identity**

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**FG02, Female:** They've all got like a distinctive picture so you can be like. and when you do the advertising...you could have like a certain type of girl drinking a certain type of (one) (referring to selection of drinks in a four-pack).

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**FG01, Female#1:** So like you know, when you look at UDL versus Cruiser - so it's like one's in a can, one's in a bottle it just seems like more sophisticated. Drinking from a can seems like it's got more soft drink or something into it. It doesn't seem as strong cause it resembles a soft drink. To me a Cruiser seems more like...

**Female#2:** Stylish.

**Female#1:** It's on a different level.

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**Leisure lifestyle (e.g. “Amazon” – Slogan is “Time to get wild”) – relates to young people’s desire to live an ideal lifestyle**

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**FG03, Female#1:** If you were an advertiser and you wanted to advertise to young people who want to party (then “time to get wild” would appeal to them).

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**FG16, Female:** the ad would be something beachy, something tropical, but still classy (.) a lot of young, elegant women and attractive men dancing and stuff, showing having a good time and showing they can have a good time and still drink this drink, which is very attractive - a lot like them.

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**FG02, Female#1:** you have like four girls...all different coloured hair, each drinking a certain drink.

**All:** yeahhh.

**Female#2:** and they’re like walking and they’re laughing and they **look** like they’re having fun ( )

**Female#3:** like “Sex in the City”.

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For one young participant below, alcohol marketing and advertising that targeted young girls was contemptible.

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**FG16, INT:** So you were saying earlier that you thought that they were specifically targeting 15 year old girls?

**Female#1:** I do. I used to get really angry cause I’d see, you know, the cardboard packaging on the front and they’d have these young figuring girls like dancing on the front of the thing and I’d be so angry cause I’d be the one driving all my friends home, throwing up and watching my younger friends, when I was 18 or 19, watching my younger friends throwing up. Doing things that they would not do at all if they hadn’t been drinking. And if it wasn’t lolly water they wouldn’t have gotten drunk because it’s like drinking cordial or soft drink. And that’s why they down them like cordial or soft drinks. And it is horrible to watch (voice gets quieter and more emotional here). And I get very angry.

---

This young female was an exception to the less critical views about alcohol advertisements expressed by most young people. She expressed anger at the way alcohol advertisers specifically target 15-year-old girls with iconic images of young girls having fun on packaging that appeals to youth.

During the focus group activity, participants also parodied many advertising and marketing methods. For example, one group discussed developing a new product that explicitly targeted children by including lollies and trading cards, shaping the bottle like a “chico” (type of lolly); “baked not fried”; “no artificial flavours and preservatives, sugar-free and 99% fat free”, and made from recycled materials (Mixed gender group, Focus Group16).

Young people’s comments and ridicule of advertising indicates that they are not passive consumers. They were good at actively interpreting advertising messages, but this does not imply that they were critical of them to any great extent or that they had the capacity to resist the messages (see the exception above). Their



comments were highly value-laden and showed that, for these young people, alcohol was symbolic of the leisure lifestyle. In contrast to the more traditional view of alcohol consumption as a transition marker from novice into adulthood, for these young people, alcohol operated as a transition marker into a fully fledged consumer citizen, with all the rights of a consumer, such as when, where, and how much they want to drink. This finding reflects a significant shift from the traditional meaning of rites of passage pertaining to alcohol.

Some participants suggested that their ideal drink should have health benefits (e.g. no fat, no sugar, no preservatives, high in antioxidants and fortified with vitamin B). Advertising the health benefits of products promotes not only their medical value, but also the cultural value attached to being healthy. In the current narcissistic age of Western society, much importance is placed on beauty and youth (Lasch, 1978). A beautiful, young and fit body is synonymous with a healthy body and the overt signs that represent health (e.g. youthful, slender, sun-tanned) are more important than the behaviour that represents health (e.g. good nutrition, physical activity). Products that are advertised and sold as 'healthy' promise:

1. Empowerment – to transform health into a commodity, which is accessible by consumption; to take control of own health
2. Freedom – to use products as symbolic markers to define social identity; from an unhealthy lifestyle (e.g. sugar-free, fat-free etc).

However, rather than being empowered and freed by consumption, young people are constrained by only one choice – consume or not consume. Those who fail to make a 'good' choice may be seen as incompetent (Bauman, 1998).

#### 5.5.4 Young people's response to the portrayal of youth in the media

When presented with images from the media, or when asked about the media and news stories, a common response from the young people in the interviews and focus groups was to indicate that they did not relate to what was depicted<sup>12</sup>. There were several reasons for this.

Firstly, the extreme negative consequences shown in many news stories or media campaigns were judged to lack a crucial authenticity that is required if messages are to succeed in reaching young people. The young people in our study were cynical about biases in the media, and saw the negative consequences in news stories and media ads as rare and exaggerated. Consequently, study participants dismissed them:

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**FG01, Female#1:** You know, society, what they want to hear.

**Female#2:** What they want to hear, yeah.

**Female#1:** like the young kids today, they don't care, they don't have any respect, they're violent, that's what sells.

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12 Images used in the focus groups depicted young people in various stages of intoxication, such as vomiting or passed out at a bus stop.

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**Melissa, 21:** Well, I think they sort of blow out of proportion some of the things that don't really happen. Cos I, you know, I don't know - I sort of only know one person who's actually had alcohol poisoning, cos - I don't really know anybody who's, you know, been assaulted or anything because they've had too much, or they've had an accident because they've been drink driving. Most, I only know a couple of people who have drunk and then driven. So all those sorts of things that seem to be the main like 'dangers' of drinking, I don't really know about.

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Here, Melissa was actually able to identify cases of alcohol poisoning and drink driving, yet insisted that these things "don't really happen". This suggests she was drawing on an ideal, rather than on reality. Hence, even the most relevant messages may be filtered out by young people reacting to the depictions as not relevant to their ideal.

As discussed in Chapter 7, sexism in the media, both in advertising campaigns and news stories, further alienated some young females, leading them to reject the message.

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**FG06, Female#1:** That's sexist. If guys can drink and not be portrayed like that then why are the girls portrayed that way?

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This finding also cautions against the stigmatisation of particular groups of young people in media campaigns and news stories. Not only is it likely to magnify public stigmatisation through such exposure, but it may have an unintended effect of alienating the target group. If media portrayal of the target group is not seen as fair and accurate, they may reject the message entirely.

In the following example, an experience with a local newspaper had jaded this young woman's views about the coverage of young people and drinking.

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**FG10, Female#1:** I just think it's funny, the Advertiser put some pictures up in the newspaper about people like binge drinking, people needing to be held up to walk and one of the girls, I knew them, and she'd just finished work, so she was just walking down Hindley Street, and they were like 'Friend helping another drunken friend or whatever, stumbling across the road' but she was sober. She was just looking at her phone walking down the road.

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This example demonstrates the need for authenticity in news stories or media campaigns if they are to be perceived as legitimate and relevant to young people. It also demonstrates the need to acknowledge young people's agency, and critical use of the media, which can lead to cynicism and rejection.

Secondly, the young people in our study resisted common media portrayals of them as a homogeneous group, and perceived that young people were referred to as 'other'.<sup>13</sup> Alcohol is seen largely as a youth problem, while statistics indicate that a large proportion of risky drinking occurs over the age of 20 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008). Young people are savvy consumers of media, and resent negative portrayal of youth by both the media and adults in general.

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13 Reference to 'other' young people indicated that the group of young participants did not feel that they related to the young people depicted in the media.

This was expressed in cynicism at adults' hypocrisy around alcohol use.

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**FG18, Female#1:** They don't give you the fact that 'yeah, adults do drink'. It also bothered me, like I hate it when parents say to their kids 'don't drink', when they drink. Like, it's sort of like "do as I say, not as I do".

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A strong, anti-authoritarian response to the criticism of young people was also seen in the earlier quote about what "society" wanted to hear about young people (Focus Group 01). When young people feel that they are criticised excessively by adults and other authority figures, they may be less receptive to preventive or safety messages from such a source.

What can be overlooked in designing prevention campaigns is that this sort of communication is a social process, and young people's involvement in this process is to interpret messages. If the message is seen to be irrelevant, lacking in authenticity, is overly critical, or fails to fit their ideal (even if it is relevant to their actual reality), then the message is likely to be rejected or resisted. Given the widespread normalisation of drinking, it also begs the question of whether adults are willing to change their own drinking behaviour as they act as such powerful role models. If not, then targeting and reproaching youth may have a limited effect as a strategy to minimise harm.

Thirdly, in the focus group analyses of media pictures of intoxicated youth, some participants expressed a strong belief that their friends would step in and help before a situation reached a crisis as typically illustrated. As discussed in Chapter 3, many of the young people in our study described pre-arranged systems or strategies whereby someone would be available to help them or their friends if they got into trouble. Such support mechanisms are rarely included in the portrayal of young people and alcohol in the media and, as a consequence, young people in this study dissociated themselves from the depictions, as they were confident that their friends would look after them.

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**FG14, Female#1:** When I see these ads I just don't think it applies to me because I'm always, like, yeah, I'm always with friends, and like, it just wouldn't happen.

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**FG02 Female#1:** Where's her friends?

**Female#2:** Yeah. ... Like if we saw any girls by themselves, we're like "where are their friends?"

**Female#1:** Mmm.

**INT:** So is that something that's really important for you guys when you go out, that you look out for one another?

**All:** Yeah.

---

This last example raises questions about what is ignored in media campaigns. That is, some of the strengths evident in young people's accounts of their drinking behaviour, and additional strategies that could complement these information-based strategies are often overlooked.

## 5.6 Conclusions

A substantial part of young people's leisure time is spent in activities related to social events. Apart from the more spontaneous activities that developed from casual socialising, a great deal of planning and preparation often took place before an event. Alcohol featured as a key ingredient in almost all significant social events attended by young people. Moreover, alcohol was often the catalyst that turned a non-event into an event.

Young participants in this study often reported pre-drinking at a friend's house prior to going out. This pre-event drinking served multiple purposes for the participants. It was part of the sociality of an event, providing an 'ice-breaker' and strengthening the bonding within a group of friends. Pre-drinking was also used by some to get primed for the main event, so that they could be at a desired level of intoxication as soon as the main event began. For others, it had financial rewards, whereby they could spend less to get intoxicated. For underage youth, pre-drinking was the easiest strategy to access alcohol and experience an event at a desired level of intoxication. However, the line between pre-drinking and drinking at the 'main event' was not clearly defined and, at times, pre-drinking became the event itself. The latter illustrates how alcohol has become fundamental to how an event is constructed.

Young participants frequently used terms, such as "big" or "massive" to indicate, not only the size and scale of a party or event, but also its symbolic importance. Participants associated drinking with expectations of fun and pleasure and alcohol was central to reaching this goal. Alcohol 'extended the night' and amplified the scale and importance events by enhancing young people's expectations of what should occur when drinking (e.g. fun, pleasure, excitement, spontaneity).

Organisational factors also contributed to young people's pattern of drinking at public events. The unintended consequences of organisational barriers to drinking (e.g. ticketing system at the BDO) may make it difficult for young people to find the 'middle ground' for drinking at such events (see also Chapter 3 Alcohol and Belonging).

Some participants in our study described how alcohol allowed them to escape from everyday routine and take them to another world that was filled with fun and pleasure. This notion of 'other worldliness', however, has been appropriated by alcohol companies, which often created special areas (e.g. tents at music festivals) with a carnival-like atmosphere and saturated with alcohol branding materials.

Alcohol marketing and sponsorship was a key element of events. Alcohol products were heavily advertised and marketed at events we attended. The most salient observations at these events were:

- *Prominent and pervasive alcohol branding and sponsorship at youth-attended music and sports events.* The ubiquitous presence of alcohol advertising and branding at public events strengthens the link between the leisure activity and alcohol consumption and normalises this connection.
- *Commercialisation of events.* Alcohol is heavily commercialised through branding and advertising. Large public events co-opt youth culture and sell it back to young people. For example, a pub close to the BDO venue in Adelaide created a leisure space for pre-event drinking that reproduced the atmosphere and style of the event itself.

- *Commodification of youth culture and leisure lifestyle.* Alcohol is a highly commodified product and marketers tap into the values and aspirations of youth; create images of an ideal lifestyle; embed the image with their products; and sell the image back to young people.
- *False promise of freedom.* Marketers encourage young people to exercise their consumer choice, yet, in reality, their freedom to choose is constrained by what the market provides - an idealised version of youth culture, with alcohol as a central component. In addition, events promise patrons freedom from their routine lives and escape to 'another world'. However, this freedom is often limited by the organisational and structural barriers at events; and young people's freedom to make decisions and choices is controlled by the event organisers and product marketers.

It was clear from our interviews with young people that, while they were aware of the techniques used by marketers to appeal to them as consumers, they were not always critical of these strategies; and the image of the young leisure lifestyle that had alcohol at its focus was highly valued by this group.



# 6 An 'Ideal' State of Intoxication?

In the previous chapters we addressed issues related to the need to belong and the integral role often played by alcohol in terms of a young person's social inclusion. This was then juxtaposed with the drive to achieve autonomy and to be able to exercise a degree of control over one's social world. To some extent this is facilitated through the creation of an 'other world' underpinned by alcohol. Achieving autonomy through alcohol, however, is a double-edged sword as it can both offer a mechanism by which to assert control but alcohol can also easily take away young people's control resulting in social exclusion and other negative consequences. This theme is developed in this chapter as the tension between freedom and control is played out in young people's attempts to attain particular feelings and levels of pleasure. By actively seeking out 'risky pleasures', young people aim to live up to dominant cultural ideals around intoxication. However, this chapter challenges this individualistic pursuit by highlighting the inherent contradictions between control and pleasure.

## 6.1 "That one good bit"

One of the desired outcomes of a drinking session is to attain a specific level of intoxication. Recent research has examined intoxication as an explicit goal of young people's leisure lifestyles. This is referred to in the literature as a form of 'determined drunkenness' in which the inherent aim of many young people's drinking was to get drunk (Measham & Brain, 2005, p. 37). What is not as apparent in the literature are the ways in which individuals engage with social relationships and social context that can both enable and inhibit this 'determined drunkenness'.

Whilst the intent of drinking is often purposive and explicit, this intent is always bounded by the context in which alcohol is consumed. Since the aim of our research was to illuminate the cultural context of young people's drinking, it is important to privilege their subjective understandings of what constitutes an ideal state of intoxication. When discussing how they would prefer to consume alcohol, young people often refer to a very particular 'state of mind' that functions as a highly valued goal.

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**FG10, Female#1:** I kind of stop drinking when I'm at a good drunkenness. Like when I'm happy and just like feel a bit tipsy but I don't feel like I'm going to vomit. Then I might like have a water and then I might have a little more but -

**Female#2:** Yeah.

**Female#1:** Just when I feel good, I don't usually vomit. I don't really like doing that. And then like you can't do anything on the Sunday. Like it wrecks your whole next day.

---

In Focus Group 10, Female#1 begins by discussing her understanding of what constitutes a “good drunkenness” and the indicators used to determine when this state has been achieved. When we first glance over this excerpt, her description of this ideal state appears somewhat ill-defined as she quickly attempts to pin down what the experience is like. Looking more closely, it becomes clear that this impression comes about because the young person is framing her experience according to what doesn’t happen. The absence of negative consequences (e.g. ‘vomit’, ‘wrecking the next day’) that would otherwise curtail her pleasure is used in this way to clarify what a “good drunkenness” feels like.

The enjoyment of alcohol is therefore defined not just through the accompanying affective state but by the absence of undesirable outcomes. In these instances, the ideal state is discussed as a transient experience that is only recognised once the young person has passed through the ideal state into a more untenable feeling of intoxication. The use of negation here demonstrates the ambiguity associated with demarcating the boundaries of an ideal state of intoxication. Paradoxically, it is only by pointing out what lies beyond the elusive parameters of a “good drunkenness” that the ideal state can be identified.

The ideal state, whilst valued by young people, also marks the imminent downside to drinking. If we were to locate where the ideal state sits according to many young people, it would be at the utmost limit of where a good time turns into a bad one. In the focus groups, participants were shown a collage of young people lying (presumably) unconscious in various public settings. The response from one focus group reiterates young people’s recognition of closeness of the ideal state to the outer fringes of intoxication.

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**FG05, Female#1:** Most people our age have been there.

**Female#2:** At least once.

**Female#1:** At least once or at least when their mates have done it. You realise coming up to that time you were probably having a good time until that moment.

---

In other examples, the difficulty of holding back from crossing this threshold looms large in the following accounts of the ideal state.

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**Laura, 21:** When people sort of get to the point where they’re tipsy and then they want to have a lot more and then they end up having too many. Because once they’re already drunk they want to keep drunk. It’s sort of hard to maintain that tipsiness without, you know, getting sober or going completely over the top.

---

**Jonathan, 21:** I’m one of those people that - I’ll feel fine, fine, fine and then half a drink later and then I feel absolutely terrible and that’s the end of it for me. So it’s weird ‘cause you don’t think you’re doing it - you know, you’re in excess - until you just tip over the edge and then you realise that you’re way over. And then that’s the end of it and then you’re not going to feel very good in the morning.

---



Deploying the term 'tip' in the above examples is telling as it emphasises the transience of the experience of intoxication. For Laura and Jonathan, their ideal state was most readily identifiable on the fringes or a hazily defined 'tipping point'. It signified a progressive movement away from where they would prefer to be as they "tip over the edge" into a less desired state. The desire to reach a tipsy state is a given that underpins the difficulty in maintaining 'tipsiness'. In examples such as these, the attainment of an ideal state is a driving imperative. For Laura and Jonathan, the self-management of intoxication revolves around the difficulty in maintaining the desired state of drunkenness. When control of this is lost by the individual, then the ideal state no longer functions as an endpoint but as a space that is traversed and left behind. For the participants of focus group four, this typical trajectory was rationalised and served to legitimate the subsequent downside of drinking to excess.

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**FG04, Male#1:** I've been willing to take a risk (of) having a shit night.

**Female#1:** =Just to have that good bit at least. That one good bit.

**Female#1:** If I'm drinking, I'd rather have too much to drink than not enough. Like I'd rather get paro than just ( )

**Male#1:** =have nothing and be completely sober.

**Female#1:** Yeah.

---

The consensus amongst this group was that the feeling of being drunk was "pretty good" and that people would still want to experience that in spite of knowing the risks involved. When the participants of focus group four assessed that the benefits of the ideal state outweighed the risks of "having a shit night", they engaged in a form of "calculated hedonism" (Brain, 2000; Featherstone, 1987; Szmigin et al., 2008). Whilst the intent of determined drunkenness may appear to be irrational, it is reframed by these participants as instrumentally rational since the goal of intoxication is more highly valued over less desired outcomes such as hangovers, the break up of social relationships, or not having a 'good night out.' That is, there may have been a degree of exaggerated support or endorsement for intoxication beyond their individually held views.

What is not discussed as much in the literature is the stigma attached to being sober. When the group agrees that they'd "rather have too much to drink than not enough" it is clear that sobriety is valued even less than the potentially negative consequences of intoxication. It is important to note here, however, that these comments were given by the participants in the context of a focus group situation. That is, there may have been a degree of exaggerated endorsement for intoxication and adherence to a 'party lifestyle' beyond what their individual views may have been. However, this kind of impression management cannot be overstated when young people's identities are being discussed through their orientation towards alcohol consumption.

Parker and Stanworth (2005) explain that representations of risk serve to form social relationships whilst at the same time reaffirm particular moral commitments to the self and the group. Following this, our findings suggest that young people actively engage in risk-taking in order to manoeuvre through social space. By presenting themselves as risk-takers, or as someone who appears willing to lose control, many young people are reaffirming the moral value of alcohol. This has the effect of simultaneously inviting evaluation of the risk-taker's socially relevant virtues and commitment to the group, whilst bolstering their social identity in the group context.

What is really at risk then is young people's social recognition and esteem. The search for the ideal space, as well as the public proclamation of such a search, therefore impacts upon how these young people construct their social identities. Ultimately, the narrow ideal space of intoxication is often seen as worth pursuing in spite of negative consequences. Rather than undermine the value of the ideal state, the elusiveness of reaching and maintaining "that one good bit" contributes to the value of the ideal state. The negative consequences of intoxication can therefore reinforce the value of pushing oneself to the edge.

## 6.2 Going too far: 'Is it really that worth it?'

For young people in our study, the ideal state lies close to the edge. Consequently, when we asked young people about the characteristics of a good level of drunkenness, the response often also included the negative experience that immediately followed the ideal state. This notion of going too far or drinking to excess is common in the literature, but it is only research that takes into account young people's subjective meanings that gives this experience some legitimacy (Brain, 2000; Jarvinen & Gundelach, 2007; Jorgensen et al., 2006). As with previous research, the young people in our study also defined drinking to excess by using references to feeling sick or vomiting – one of the universal markers of excess.

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**INT:** What's the morning after effect?

**FG10, Female#1:** Depends what you're drinking but like bad, bad headaches that won't go away for a whole day.

**Female#2:** Burning in the throat.

**Female#1:** Yeah vomit.

**INT:** Is this something you've experienced?

**Female#1:** Yeah, I have experienced it.

**INT:** Did something like that, you know, having that morning after feeling or vomiting...does that want to cause you to drink differently or?

**Female#2:** Yeah, kind of. When I drink a lot of wine I get a really bad thumping headache the next day so I kind of don't drink wine as much anymore.

**INT:** So now you would be less likely to drink wine because you'd be thinking about such a negative -

**Female#2:** - Yeah and vodka as well, can't really drink that anymore either (laughs).

---

However, what was most significant for the participants of this study was that vomiting and feeling ill signified an inevitable withdrawal from the rest of the group. This leads young people such as Phil to question whether attaining such a level of intoxication was "worth it?"

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**Phil, 20:** I mean I'd never actually understood why people would drink to get drunk, because I'd see my friends when they were first experimenting, or we all were, fifteen, sixteen years old, and they'd just drink as much as possible, skulling cheap vodka which tasted awful and then getting the lemonade or something to try and wash it all down and then they ... fifteen minutes later they'd be on the front lawn or something, vomit coming out of their mouths, and I'm thinking "is it really that worth it"? People just miss out on their whole night.

---

A key dimension of going too far was articulated through the level of participation the intoxicated person was able to maintain with the rest of the group. This is best encapsulated in young people's use of the adjective 'gone' to describe an advanced level of intoxication. In its deployment, 'gone' emphasises the heightened sense of otherworldliness that immediately precedes a stage where drinking is deemed to have 'gone too far'.

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**INT:** Passed out? My friend uses that word. Is that a word you use for being drunk?

**Selma, 20:** What, passed out? Yeah 'cause you just literally pass out. Not literally, but you just like - if you lay down, you're gone.

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Crossing the line into an incapacitated state meant that the young person could no longer communicate and socialise.

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**FG03, Female:** Everyone's having a good time and then that one person got really bad and then like kind of messed it up for everyone else. Cause everyone else has to kind of like leave and help them.

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**Phil, 20:** Later on in the night, you can't talk to anyone because they're smashed out of their minds.

---

As the above examples demonstrate, intoxication to the point where one can no longer communicate impinges not just on the individual but on the rest of the group. In these typical settings, social participation is paramount and therefore even one group member passing out can alter the social dynamic. There was clearly some negative feeling here towards those that did pass out as it interfered with how the time should ideally be spent socialising with one another. This was expanded on by the participants in Focus Group 12, who clarified differing levels of drunkenness for the facilitator.

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**INT:** So what's the difference between 'pissed' and 'paro'?

**FG12, Female#1:** Pissed you can have fun with and paro you can...

**Female#2:** You can't.

**Female#1:** You're f\*\*ked. Like you're just gotta lay down or something, something like that...

**INT:** What do you think about the difference between 'pissed' and 'paro'?

**Female#2:** Paro's when you're like can't do anything. And then pissed is when you're like just past tipsy.

**INT:** Which one is fun?

**Female#1:** Drunk's fun. Just being drunk=Sometimes you can be paro and it's fun like if people are like holding you up or you're walking fine. (You can still laugh).

---

For the young women in Focus Group 12, being 'f\*\*ked' meant having to exclude oneself from the social setting because of their level of intoxication. However, when one female of Focus Group 12 extended the definition of fun to include 'paro' it became apparent that the line between the ideal state and going too far is contextual and therefore changeable. In this type of social context, the ideal state signified a social relationship. Exclusion from the group, and thus from the ideal state, depends on the individual's position in relation to the group. Rather

than just an area of intoxication that is bound by the physiological idiosyncrasies of the individual, the ideal state is tied into the level of sociality that is produced through group membership (see Chapter 3). For these young people, becoming drunk is enjoyable up to the point where they can no longer participate with the rest of their group. Thus, these examples support not only how young people understand drinking to excess but also help define what constitutes an ideal state of intoxication. One aspect of an ideal state of drunkenness then, is to retain the capacity to socialise.

The role of alcohol therefore is clearly multifaceted and wrought with internal contradictions. Most commonly, alcohol is regarded as an enabler of social interaction (see Chapter 3), a social lubricant that has become necessary in novel situations that young people often find themselves. However, alcohol can also serve to exclude young people from their social group once a particular level of intoxication has been surpassed. Consequently, the relationship young people form with alcohol changes over time. Early in their drinking careers, alcohol appeals for its capacity to enable the young person in social situations. However, this is tempered by experiences where young people miss out on social interactions as a consequence of intoxication.

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**Laura, 17:** People just miss out on their whole night. Like one of my friends on Saturday night, he was passed out vomiting by 5pm. And he couldn't go out or anything. And it's hard for his friends as well because they're kind of stuck like trying to make a decision – "Should I stay with him be a good mate?" - cause they spent a lot of money to go to schoolies and stuff - or like to go out. Yeah it's really hard.

---

For Laura, this contradiction is experienced in a situation where the group struggles to decide the extent to which they should accommodate the intoxicated individual. When she refers to it as "really hard", she speaks to the financial and emotional investment that the group has made to the party. Ironically, it is the effect of alcohol that threatens to undermine their enjoyment of the event.

### 6.2.1 Going too far is not a deterrent

The shaping of the ideal state according to the limits of intoxication means that there is a distinguishable phase whereby young people in this study felt that they had gone too far. However, there is nothing inherent in the physiological reactions to alcohol that determines how such reactions are perceived by young people. Although we may believe that vomiting, violence, or acting obnoxiously could function as sufficient deterrents, such a position mistakenly assumes that these effects are negatively valued by young people. This is not necessarily the case.

Not all instances of 'going too far' were interpreted by young people as a learning experience. In the following field note, it is evident that particular signs of going too far did not inherently function as deterrents to all those in the same social space.

**Field note, One day International Cricket:** Just after 8pm another young woman who had fallen asleep on her side woke up and vomited. Those around her expressed signs of distaste and moved away a bit. The young woman's friend (male) helped her clean up and covered the vomit with a pizza box, and stayed in the same area. Later a young male kicked the pizza box aside, laughing, and his female friend took a photo of the vomit. This hints at the sometimes comical way drinking to intoxication is perceived by some young people.

Set in a crowded area of spectators this field note also speaks to the way that vomit may have perhaps lost the stigmatising power it once carried. Similarly, notions of shame are conspicuously absent as Laura recounts a story of her friend 'bragging' about a drunken experience at schoolies.

---

**Laura:** One of my friends - on Friday night schoolies, she was just so drunk like she can't remember anything. She didn't even think she went to the actual festival.

**INT:** Oh really?

**Laura:** Like the next day she was like 'what?' And she got like an ambulance note saying that she's got priority on the ambulance if she needs it.

**INT:** Oh is that what they do? What's that about? So they...

**Laura:** Cause there's tents like at schoolies, like at Victor. I never went to it so I don't know heaps about it but she went there and got checked out and stuff. And she was real bad. They write you a note so then you get preference on the ambulance if you need it..

**INT:** So is that something - how do you know it? She's told you about that has she?

**Laura:** Yeah she was bragging about it. She was like - she asked me the other day what happened to the note because she wants to frame it.

---

In this example, the ambulance note works as a memento of the night, a keepsake to be treasured rather than a cautionary reminder. Although it may take on the latter meaning in time, the key point here is that it was an incident deemed worth bragging about. In the past, stories of intoxication that are token badges of honour have most commonly been associated as a part of male bonding. In this case, the story was told between two females. However, Laura's tone here is somewhat incredulous as she does not agree with her friend's apparent pride in documenting her intoxication. This indicates that this form of bragging does not necessarily translate so smoothly across gender lines.

### 6.2.1.1 *Seeking risky pleasures*

Cultural meanings of alcohol can therefore be employed as an excuse for 'irrational' or 'risky' behaviour, meaning that such behaviours may only be cursorily sanctioned. Alternately, a growing body of research has found that young people negotiate risk to the point whereby drinking alcohol is actively sought out and managed as a 'risky pleasure' (Bancroft & Wilson, 2007; Lupton & Tulloch, 2002; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Mythen, 2007; Parker & Stanworth, 2005; Rolfe, Orford, & Dalton, 2009; Szmigin et al., 2008). In the case of focus group 10, negotiating risk amounted to little more than discerning between specific types of alcohol whilst the 'risky pleasure' of intoxication remained unchanged.

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**INT:** In what you've heard, is there anything there that would cause you to want to stop drinking or avoid drinking or change?

**FG10, Female#1:** Not stop drinking just not.

**Female#2:** get as drunk yeah.

**INT:** Cause (Female#2) you mentioned about the red wine, is there anything like that?

**Female#1:** Oh yeah like if I vomit on something I might not drink that particular drink. Like I vomited off Vodka Double Black once so I just didn't have that for a couple of months.

**Female#3:** Yeah after you vomit it's like the drink just tastes like vomit. Like you just remember the feeling of vomiting that drink.

---

For the participants of Focus Group 10, vomiting was a deterrent for a particular drink type rather than drinking per se as a leisure pursuit. When female#3 states that "after you vomit it's like the drink just tastes like vomit" the 'risky pleasure' is recognised but is not enough to devalue the significance of intoxication as part of her leisure lifestyle. The negative aspects of drinking are thus accounted for but managed which leads the young female to engage in a form of 'calculated hedonism' (Brain, 2000; Featherstone, 1991b).

In this manner, drinking preferences were affected but the pursuit of intoxication was not. Why then is this the case? Why do we not find more young people who ask, as Phil puts it, "is it really that worth it"? Young people pursue the ideal space as an almost sacred journey involving sacrifice, discipline and commitment. Although an element of uncertainty is always present with risk, risk-taking can also be ordinary and necessary (Parker & Stanworth, 2005). In the following section, the ritualistic importance of overstepping the ideal space and going too far is explained.

#### 6.2.1.2 Finding limits by testing limits

Østergaard (2009) argues that we need to understand how the feeling of pleasure from alcohol intoxication is something that must be learned. In particular, the management of risk is key for young people embarking upon 'drinking careers' as they must negotiate and learn from drinking experiences the point at which control is lost. In researching Danish young people, her findings indicate that:

*"Perhaps the most significant explanation of the high number of risk-taking actions among the regular users is the general belief among both parents and adolescents that learning to become an alcohol user requires experimenting with losing control as the premise for learning to gain control" (Østergaard, 2009, pp.42-43).*

This apparent contradiction, where control is only attainable through "losing control", is reflected in the lives of the participants of our study. As reported by Østergaard (2009, p. 37) there is an entrenched belief that "the only true way of learning to master alcohol is by "trial and error". Jeremy, an 18 year-old participant in our study, echoed this belief in the following statement.

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**INT:** How do you learn how much you can drink before you get to that point ((of being passed out))?

**Jeremy, 18:** Well it's pretty much trial and error really and it's quite difficult, like it changes a lot depending on how much you've been going out. Your tolerance gets much higher after a while. Like I'll take it easy if I know I haven't been out for like six or eight weeks or something...I won't have a huge night 'cos I know I won't be as used to it...You sort of just get a general idea of the feelings leading up to it.

---

The young people we spoke to emphasised that people use 'trial and error' in order to find their own ideal space of intoxication. However, what this space looks and feels like can be unique and variable according to the idiosyncrasies of the individual.

### 6.2.1.3 Demystifying the liminal zone

The experience of 'travelling' different drinking styles and learning from the 'errors' renders the markers of the ideal space as ambiguous. Defined as a 'liminal' zone, this space maintains its mystique through its fuzzy boundaries and indeterminate and variable limits. The concept of liminality was popularised by anthropologist Victor Turner, who considered it a stage of transition that was integral to cultural rites of passage:

*"Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions"* (Turner, 1969, p.95).

Consequently, the limits of where this zone begins and ends are left to be self-defined.

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**Evvie, 22:** You just sort of know. Like just from the way you're feeling and that.

---

**Michaela, 18:** I know my like limitations, I can get to the point where I'm like "Right this is enough" like "I should probably stop drinking by now" or - the money - if I do remember how much money I came with and I realise how much I've gone through then I'm thinking, you know, I should stop. Yeah usually I'm still got some bit of my mind left that's telling me to either stop or slow down or something like that.

---

In the preceding statements, the criteria for what constitutes the need to slow down or stop drinking are hazily defined. This self-management of intoxication was described by Evvie and Michaela as an intuitive process in which the limits of intoxication are only recognised once they are felt. The liminality here refers to the boundaries beyond which the experience of alcohol consumption is either not pleasurable enough or overconsumption detracts from enjoyment. However, if we look at the responses as a whole, a pattern emerges that belies the mystique of this journey of self-discovery. The pathway to finding the ideal state is in reality well established and centres upon trial and error. Although the limits for each person may be regarded as being relatively stable, the problematic trial and error approach encourages the young person to surpass their limits in order to find them.

---

**INT:** So why do you think your group doesn't tend to get into that state very often.

**Vince, 22:** I don't know. I'd say because of our previous experiences with alcohol. We sort of know our limits and on top of that we're reasonably sensible.

**INT:** So how do you get to know your limits in the first place?

**Vince, 22:** I suppose pushing the boundaries.

**INT:** So when did that happen if it's not happening now?

**Vince, 22:** I suppose earlier on. Maybe around age 18 or something like that.

---

The ambiguity of the boundaries of the ideal state are thus characterised by its connection to "pushing the boundaries". Østergaard (2009) believes that this process of trial and error is one based on demystification. That is, young people learn to allay their own underlying fears and anxieties over the immediate risks associated with intoxication. In her study, these fear levels were highest among abstainers and novice drinkers. This was replicated to some degree by some of the anxiety demonstrated by the participants in our study who did not classify themselves as heavy drinkers.

---

**INT:** Was there any point where you made a decision and said 'I'm not going to drink in the way that everyone else drinks'? How did you arrive at this approach to alcohol?

**Jeanette:** Oh well, I don't think it was any conscious decision, it wasn't like this - I can't pinpoint it because - I think I've inherited a lot of all the people's fears about youth. That, you know, we are not to be trusted when we're drunk. So I've just always - umm it's almost been a natural thing that I've always known not to let it get too far.

**INT:** When you say you've inherited that, is that from your parents or some sort of other older authority figure? Where are you inheriting that from?

**Jeanette:** Well parents, and also any kind of media outlet because the media outlet is usually the voice of a lot of adults.

---

In these types of statements, a mystique is built around the personal search for one's own sense of pleasure through the consumption of alcohol. It was often discussed as a type of journey that required self-management, reflection, and self-learning.

With the case of Jeanette, the fear and anxiety created by her social relationships with parents and media left her unwilling to test the limits of intoxication. For those who do embark upon a 'trial and error' path, the learning curve can be steep and rocky, particularly given the predictable ambiguities in what can be expected. For Evvie, a collective and shared duty of care is available to give advice to the person drinking, but it is a form of 'peer pressure' that can be easily rejected.

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**Evvie, 22:** Or the other thing too is like with my friends like we sort of look out for each other and say you know "oh I think you've had enough" or "maybe you should have some water" and that type of thing. So we're always looking out for each other in that sense.

**INT:** Do you usually listen to one another when you say you've had enough?

**Evvie, 22:** Sometimes. Sometimes we don't (laughs).

---



Likewise, the learning component of the trial and error approach is not always integrated into the consequences of drinking. In the following example, the ideal of learning is maintained even if the actuality of behaviour change does not follow.

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**INT:** What do you think are the bad things about drinking?

**Selma, 20:** Just the fact that some people don't know their - know like - don't realise the way they act and stuff like that when they're drunk and sometimes that's what gets them in trouble. I've been in that stage before and, you know, learnt from it but a lot of people don't learn from it and yeah it gets a lot of people into trouble.

---

Taken together, the above quotes from Selma and Evvie reveal the fallibility of the trial and error approach in instigating behaviour change. Although it is predicated on the assumption of reflexive learning, the participants in our study show that in reality it is mediated by their own desire to seek out risky behaviours. Another mediating factor is revealed when some young people, like Jeanette, conflate self-regulation with personal responsibility.

---

**Jeanette, 18:** I'm the one that has to know my limit, and I'm the one that will have another drink if I feel like it, or just stop if I know that I'm starting to feel affected.

---

Harnett et al. (2000) found similar evidence of self-management when constructing their model of a 'safe drinking style'. In their research, this way of drinking was typified by self-monitoring in order to avoid or manage potentially risky situations. However, Jeanette's emphasis on personal responsibility was not the norm in our study. For most young people, drinking most often occurred in a social context in which drinking is not only monitored by the self but also by the individual's peers. In the following section, other young people are quick to point out the ways in which their drinking is regulated by those around them.

## 6.2.2 Social management of drinking

The regulation of the ideal state through a trial and error approach is also socially sanctioned by peers as acceptable and legitimate. As part of a social process, finding limits by testing limits reaffirms acceptance of the negative consequences of exceeding one's own limits as a necessary hurdle that young people must go through in order to find pleasure. However, this did not preclude friends from sanctioning behaviour that was deemed 'going too far'. In this example, Stefanos is told by his friends that he has crossed a threshold of acceptability when it comes to drinking.

---

**INT:** How do you know when you're 'drunker than drunk'?

**Stefanos, 20:** Drunker than drunk ((thinking)) – I suppose if I throw up haha but that's not too often. And I guess my friends will tell me "I think you've had enough sunshine".

---

What is implicit in this excerpt is that Stefanos' friends have not negatively sanctioned his behaviour up to that point. Within this social relationship, young people have scope to seek out their own desire. In the following example, Nikki describes how pleasure is attenuated to differing levels of intoxication and desire.

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**INT:** Is there anything else you do to prevent bad things happening on nights out?

**Nikki, 20:** Umm just make sure that we keep an eye on each other when we go out. And usually before we go out we tell each other like what kind of night we want to have. Like say to my partner if I want to get drunk or if I wanna not really get drunk, just a little bit tipsy or our other friends tell us if they wanna meet a person while they're out or if they don't so then we know if someone's harassing them or if they're OK with certain things like that.

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There is an interesting dynamic operating here as the individualistic pursuit of the ideal state is clarified to the group before going out. This discussion entails a form of care that requires the surveillance of friends to monitor and manage. Importantly, the implication here is that self-management or self-control is less possible when one is drinking, and so the intervention of others is recognised as necessary and is therefore pre-arranged.

Although the influence of peers on young people's drinking (eg Borsari & Carey, 2001; Bot, Engels, Knibbe, & Meeus, 2005; Jaccard, Blanton, & Dodge, 2005; Schulenberg, Maggs, Dielman et al., 1999; Urberg, Deirmenciolu, & Pilgrim, 1997; Weitzman, Nelson, & Wechsler, 2003) and the impact of young people's perception of social norms is well established (eg Kypri & Langlely, 2003; Lintonen & Konu, 2004; Martens, Page, Mowry et al., 2006; Neighbors, Dillard, Lewis, Bergstrom, & Neil, 2006; Neighbors, Oster-Aaland, Bergstrom, & Lewis, 2006; Perkins, Haines, & Rice, 2005; Thombs, Wolcott, & Farkash, 1997) what the participants in our study are able to shed light on is the complexity in which these types of norms are modified according to their own desires, existing cultural norms, and varying social contexts. This fluidity means that the social management of what qualifies as unacceptable is changeable and not solely determined by the individual. Nikki describes this in the previous excerpt when she outlines the mutual relationship between intoxication and sanctionable behaviour.

### 6.3 Conclusion

What we found amongst the participants of this study is that the self-management of intoxication cannot always be fully explained by the end state of intoxication. Though the dominant imperative is oriented towards a fluid notion of an ideal state of drunkenness, young people negotiate and rationalise their drinking so that other outcomes of drinking are subsumed under the pursuit of the ideal state.

Drinking to excess is a commonly used term when talking about alcohol consumption. Typically, these parameters are employed by health professionals to demarcate safe levels of drinking. What is lacking in these definitions are the subjective meanings of 'excess' that often drive behaviour. This chapter demonstrates that there can be a fuzzy line drawn around 'excess' as judgments and understandings of appropriateness and intolerance are negotiated by young

people on a contextual basis. It is the complexity of lived experience that we have teased out here and that requires further consideration if more relevant measures to understand young people's drinking is desired.

In the following chapter, we analyse drinking behaviours that are negatively sanctioned along gender lines. In a similar fashion to this chapter, judgements are made about drinking that focus on notions of control and the ambiguities of 'going too far.'



# 7 Soft' guys and 'bad' girls: Alcohol and gender

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## 7.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter examined young people's conceptions of an 'ideal state' of intoxication. In the process of achieving this 'ideal state', young people negotiate a complex array of cultural and social norms that give meaning to their experiences with alcohol. These meanings go on to both produce and reproduce subsequent drinking behaviours. In this chapter, we again draw attention to the central role that cultural norms play in relation to young people's drinking behaviours. Here, we examine how gendered power relations also inform the tensions between freedom and control that have been a constant theme throughout this report. In addition, we highlight the way traditional cultural norms surrounding gender work in conjunction with many of the previously identified beliefs and assumptions associated with alcohol to produce problematic discourses on sexual assault.

Alcohol consumption is gendered. This is informed by socio-historical and cultural factors as well as those seemingly unique to the context in which drinking occurs. In Australia, we have a long history of associating so-called 'hard drinking' with the 'Aussie bloke'. Women, on the other hand, traditionally, were compelled to stay as far away from alcohol as possible in order to maintain their 'femininity' and social respectability. It has only been in relatively recent years that this cultural norm has changed – and this change has been both relatively swift and substantial.

Historically, we see evidence of highly dichotomised views about males and females reinforced in the laws that prevented women from having access to the 'front bar' (the domain of hard drinking) (Wright, 2003), and in the marketing of alcohol products over the years (e.g. Vic Bitter - 'for a hard days thirst'). Increasingly, however, this dichotomy has been challenged, and continues to be challenged, and in many ways young people are at the forefront of this shift and the tensions that underpin it.

Drinking to the point of intoxication is valued by both young men and young women in Australian culture. For young men, drinking in a manner other than to excess carries with it the risk of being labelled 'soft'. The term 'soft', whilst it can similarly be levied against both young men and young women, has clear gendered connotations. As such, it acts as a discursive mechanism to reinforce particular cultural norms surrounding masculinity and alcohol consumption.

For young women, we found that they applied substantial effort to maintain strict boundaries between being a 'good' and 'bad' girl whilst drinking. This explicit role demarcation was used as a way of monitoring appropriate feminine behaviour,

and censoring alcohol-related behaviour that was deemed inappropriate. Similarly, particular drinking styles and products were found to be associated more strongly with the 'masculine'. We also found evidence of the processes and mechanisms used by young people to reinforce such gender norms throughout the data.

In our research, young people spoke of perceived benefits that alcohol afforded them in terms of alleviating problems or concerns, such as lack of confidence and insecurities, which may arise from beliefs and assumptions related to gender. At the same time, it was also clear from our data that fairly rigid rules or gender norms were still at play when it comes to drinking. Such gendered cultural norms persist today, in spite of the emergence of the so-called 'ladette' culture in which young women are portrayed as 'acting like men', specifically in relation to their use of alcohol (Brooks, 2008; Day, Gough, & McFadden, 2004; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007).

Another key finding was how young people in our sample dealt with sexual violence. We found, for instance, that young people were acutely aware of the possibility of sexual assault. Many considered alcohol consumption, especially excessive alcohol consumption, to contribute to an increased likelihood of unwanted sexual activity. In addition, they noted that alcohol was often used as an 'excuse' for such behaviour. Despite this, the young people we spoke with displayed a preference for a discourse that avoided naming sexual violence, instead they reframed such events as 'regrettable sexual conduct'. Many young people also identified alcohol as the principal actor/agent in such instances, thereby removing or making invisible the choices and actions of the individuals involved, especially the instigator or perpetrator (e.g. in the cases of assault) and potentially absolving that party from responsibility.

We found links between this discourse and the constructions noted above of the 'good' and 'bad' girl. Here, a 'bad' girl was more likely to be deemed to be responsible for sexual assault/violence. A 'bad' girl was negatively constructed as a sexual aggressor who exhibited a high degree of public visibility in her drinking behaviour that bore a strong resemblance to the now infamous 'ladette'.

## 7.2 Alcohol as an excuse and gender transgression

Throughout the data, both young males and young females referred to getting drunk, or at least being perceived as being under the influence of alcohol, as allowing them to act in ways that they may not otherwise have felt comfortable to do so.

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**FG19, Male:** It's gonna sound pretty gay but like ((hesitation)) its like this girl and I like we like each other before and then just both got drunk whatever (.) and that sort of like broke that barrier whatever and then it was just like 'do you wanna go out?' whatever and we sort of did.

---

Using alcohol in this way was usually reflected upon in a positive fashion. For example, if you said something stupid then you could say you were drunk and no one would care. Peralta examined how alcohol-related excuses can "...counteract deviance associated with gender norm violation and ease the shame associated with inappropriate gender displays" (Peralta, 2008, p.373).

In this manner, young people can 'try out' subversive gender roles with the assurance that alcohol will go some way toward distancing them from any risk to their on-going stable gender identity. Social construction theory refers to this as the 'doing' of gender. Safe places to practice and perhaps reconstruct and resist gender norms are crucial to young people. As Peralta pointed out "[f]ailure to do gender appropriately can result in threats to identity, embarrassment, stigma and other negative sanctions" (Peralta, 2008, p.375).

There are limits to this, of course. Popular culture has seen the emergence of the so-called 'ladette' phenomena, where young women who exhibit gender violating behaviour are scrutinised and 'reformed' (Day et al., 2004). All of the young men and women in our focus groups were familiar with this phenomenon, and a few identified what they saw as a double standard being applied to the young women labelled in this way.

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**FG06, Female#1:** That's sexist (.) if guys can drink and not be portrayed like that then why are the girls portrayed that way?

**FG06, Female#2:** If a guy did the exact same thing it's not going to be as blown out of proportion like it is for a girl.

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**FG05, male:** It's more socially accepted for men to behave like idiots when they are drunk than it is for women (.) which is stupid.

---

Peralta found that "[i]f women or men begin to exhibit gender practices that do not correspond with their assigned gender, the use of alcohol appears to provide an effective and legitimate excuse for gender deviation" (2008, p.379). In our data, more often than not it was young women, rather than young men, who utilised alcohol in this way.

There are a few possible explanations for this. Firstly, our heteronormative culture is more accommodating of young women displaying masculine behaviours than young men displaying feminine behaviour, as long as they don't 'take it too far' (e.g. stop being sexually available to men or carry this behaviour outside the drinking setting).

Secondly, and perhaps more crucially, young women have grown up amongst the so-called third wave of feminism where the 'double act' of combining the extremes of femininity and masculinity has been presented as the achievement of power and equality (Parkins, 1999). Women are encouraged to be sexually aggressive (just like men), yet hyper feminine in their appearance while doing so. We find examples of this in the emergence of 'raunch culture' for young women (Levy, 2005). This is new and risky territory for young women. Indeed, as Lyons and Willott (Lyons & Willott, 2008) found in their research with young men and women in New Zealand, the 'permission' for women to subvert norms surrounding women's drinking does not cover all women. "Notably, older women, attractive women who are out in public very drunk (and combinations of these groups) are condemned for their drinking" (Lyons & Willott, 2008, p. 704). Young women who fall outside the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable also tend to be the target of serious negative social sanctions from their peers.

Peralta (2008) distinguishes between purposeful and accidental gender deviation. Young women talk about how alcohol gives them the courage to initiate a conversation with young men when ordinarily this is the responsibility of the male. Sexually assertive women, however, were almost uniformly condemned by the young people in our research. Alcohol did not seem to provide an adequate excuse when it came to this. In one of our focus groups, for instance, the story of a young girl 'mounting everything in sight' is relayed by a somewhat incredulous young man who pointed out the most confusing aspect to this was that she 'was hot'.

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**FG20, Male#1:** At this party there was a girl (.) she was like trying to mount ((hesitation)) it was incredible! She's pretty hot but um (.)

**Male#2:** ((interjecting)) Nobody was going for it.

**Male#1:** Yeah, she just got worse and worse and worse.

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Similarly, a focus group conducted with female peers of the young boys in the above group relayed their version of this same incident. Whilst, they note that indeed young men were 'going for it', they too found her attractiveness noteworthy:

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**FG19, Female#1:** There was this one girl, she got with about 50 guys (.) she was sooo drunk there were guys touching her everywhere (.) .She was like a different person (.) she was actually jumping on guys and they were pushing her off and guys don't usually push girls off.

**FG19, All:** She's really pretty as well.

---

Here, the gender transgression was too extreme to be excused or accommodated. Clearly, a 'hot girl' doesn't need to be sexually aggressive because she is already highly valued amongst the gender hierarchy in which physical beauty in women is associated with a high degree of sexual attractiveness to men. The scope for young women to use alcohol as a means for empowerment via the transgression of gender boundaries is undermined by this very real reassertion of gender norms.

### 7.2.1 'Ladettes' by any other name....

Alcohol may be seen as a way of 'doing gender' (Lyons & Willott, 2008). Young women in particular are required to negotiate a complex set of competing and often contradictory discourses when it comes to alcohol. This includes a desire to enact a decidedly 'post-feminist' utopia represented by a woman who is (amongst other things) strong, in control of her sexuality, powerful and, most importantly, not a victim.<sup>14</sup>

Alcohol can therefore be used both to reinforce traditional gendered relations and at the same time to challenge and undermine these relations. For many young women, alcohol has become a key resource for gender identity construction and negotiation. It provides a means by which to access new-found freedoms that were previously restricted to young men. Clare Wright describes this in the following way:

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14 For discussions of post-feminism see (Parkins, 1999), Lumby (1997), McRobbie (2004) and Coppock (1995).



*"By taking a self- and group-affirming place in a male-dominated social order, by being able to negotiate a legitimate space for themselves within the masculinist territory of public leisure, certain women were able to avoid the feelings which are so often associated with female subordination: oppression, inadequacy, anxiety and lack of confidence as women"* (Wright, 2003, pp 15-16).

The experience of charting this new path to freedom has, however, been a complex one. We can see evidence of this in the popular debates that have arisen in recent times concerning the so-called 'ladette' phenomenon. The term 'ladette' started to appear in the media around 1995 (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007). Alcohol is central to the popular construction of the 'ladette'. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary a ladette is a "young woman who behaves in a boisterously assertive or crude manner and engages in heavy drinking sessions" (cited in Jackson and Tinkler, 2007, p. 254). She is generally viewed negatively and in need of reform or modification. As Jackson and Tinkler observe "...[p]ortraits of the ladette are almost invariable critical, and frequently hostile" (2007, p. 253).

Motivated purely by a desire to party and have fun, ladettes have been criticised for their hedonistic lifestyle:

*"The ladette is...presented as a pleasure seeker and popular explanations for her 'hedonistic tendencies' refer to women's increased financial independence and lack of family commitments"* (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007).

In other words, the 'ladette' is constructed as being the result of women's increased equality with men. Indeed, as it has become increasingly feasible for women to live their lives in ways that more closely resemble the traditional male, terms such as 'ladette' have appeared in the popular vernacular. In their analysis of media coverage of women's drinking in the UK, Day, Gough and McFadden found that the 'ladette' discourse presents women as aspiring to be like men, competing with men at their own game (Day et al., 2004, p.171). As Day et al. go on to observe:

*"[i]t would seem that women are without words then to describe and frame their identities and actions in non-masculine ways, which in turn denies femininities and independence of active voice"* (Day et al., 2004, p. 172).

So, a 'ladette' is a young woman acting like a young man. Hence, the term 'ladette'. The term itself functions to highlight the violation of gender norms that the behaviour represents. Throughout this study, young people commented on the phenomenon of 'girls acting like boys'.

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**INT:** How do you guys feel when you see these kinds of reports? ((media depictions of 'ladettes')).

**FG02, Female:** ((long pause)) Um (.) the whole thing about girls acting like men when they drink it's true. Cos you go out and you see girls acting all feral when they drink. I've seen girls and they're so drunk and they just act, I mean, their clothes are falling off.

---

Such behaviour was generally viewed negatively as it fell outside traditional or expected gender norms. In one focus group, for instance, a young man commented that he thought it "disgusting" to see women engaging in behaviour that men engaged in, like fighting. He prefaced this comment with:

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**FG06, Male:** I don't want to be sexist but ((hesitation))

**FG06, Male:** I don't wanna be sexist here but (.) it is pretty disgusting seeing women in that kind of ((hesitation)) I mean like with the males, it's sort of like a normal thing.

---

Whilst it is not new for women to be criticised for engaging in what is understood as 'self interested' and hence selfish pursuits, what is new is the public visibility of the 'ladettes' behaviour. The public domain, previously the arena of the bad boy,<sup>15</sup> is now increasingly available to the bad *girl*. The advent of the internet, the use of mobile phones (particularly camera equipped) and the phenomenon of reality TV have provided both the means for publicising one's activities, and the incentive to do so. As a result, images of 'girls behaving badly' are increasingly common-place.

Many of the young people in our research were aware of the contradictions and assumptions that come with the discourses surrounding the 'ladette' culture.

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**FG15, Female#1:** There's a whole perception that it's accepted for boys. It's like, oh they do a nudie run oh that's just the guys being, you know, um (.) but if a you see a naked woman running down the street it's like, oh my god, she's got a vagina what's she doing?

**FG15, Female#2:** She's a slut or an idiot.

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Similarly, in another focus group:

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**FG06, Female:** Because if guys can drink like that ((to intoxication)) and not be portrayed in the media like that, why do girls have to be portrayed like that?

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Here, group participants outlined the exact nature of the gender norms that exist around drunken behaviour. To say, for instance, that the only available discourse within which to place a woman who does a 'nudie run' is a 'slut or an idiot' demonstrates a high degree of awareness that if you are a woman your behaviour while drunk will most likely be interpreted along quite strict (dominant) gender lines.

While there is no question that there has been a convergence in the patterns of male and female drinking (Roche & Deehan, 2002), many have also argued that the current focus on women's drinking is more a 'moral panic' than an accurate reflection of problematic alcohol consumption patterns among women today (Day et al., 2004; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Rolfe et al., 2009). This moral panic, it is argued, stems from the threat that women's drinking is seen to pose to dominant constructions of femininity (Day et al, 2004).

If young women wish to take up some of the roles traditionally associated with intoxicated men in the party setting, such as that of a prankster, risk taker or in any way otherwise 'fun' and 'rebellious', there appears to be very little room to do so. For a woman to attempt to engage in these activities, is to risk her behaviour being assessed through the gender lens which dictates that negative sanctions will apply in these circumstances i.e. "she's a slut or an idiot". However, young women's increasing and persistent participation in these types of activities may signal attempts to re-write some of these traditional scripts and, in so doing, represent

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15 We only have to refer to the almost constant flow of stories in the media of footballers and other high-profile male celebrities and sports people behaving badly in public when under the influence of alcohol.

endeavours to increase the legitimate 'spaces' available to women in Australia's drinking culture.

Whilst more and more young women have appropriated certain highly valued masculine behaviours associated with alcohol consumption (as exemplified by the 'ladette'), what nonetheless remains in place is the gender hierarchy itself (Lyons & Willott, 2008). So-called 'male' or 'masculine' behaviours remain those most highly valued within drinking contexts. In this way, it could be argued that young women have been co-opted into reproducing highly gendered norms surrounding alcohol consumption and leisure, and are not as free to behave in alcohol-involved settings as they might choose to, or at least without risk of social opprobrium.

This would not be the full story, however. The young people we spoke with clearly valued alcohol for its ability to allow them to act outside the norm or to violate the 'rules'. Young people may use alcohol as a means to escape or to move away from limitations and restrictions dictated by a range of factors such as age, personality, socio-economic status, and gender. One example of this would be the norms or expectations surrounding sexual behaviour for young men and women.

## 7.2.2 "Like, you're not gonna find a nice boyfriend being like that"

(Laura, 17 yrs)

Young women engaging in sexually assertive ways attracted the most severe of negative social sanctions in our study. The data were replete with examples of young people relating their disapproval of young women who behaved in ways that did not display a traditional feminine sensibility – i.e. subtle, resistant to men's advances, contained and most importantly, sexually inexperienced. As in the earlier example of the young girl described as 'mounting everything' at a party, young men and women alike expressed disdain for such behaviour in young women. Importantly, most of the young people in our research expressed a desire for such women to be more 'contained' or 'controlled' in some way.

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**INT:** Can you give me an example of something that you've seen at a party that's totally turned you off?

**Laura, 17:** Oh there's one girl, she's a bit (.) ok she's like 15, 14 or something, and she sleeps around a bit.

**INT:** OK.

**Laura:** I saw her once at a party. She was so drunk (.) like she's really nice. It's just she makes a few bad decisions. And she couldn't stand up, like she was falling onto the stairs and I was like "((name's young woman)) love go home".

**INT:** Yeah OK.

**Laura:** And a guy just went up to her and like she'd just flirt with them like fall on top of them like "oh no". I don't really know her that well but it just gives a bad image. Like *you're not gonna find a nice boyfriend being like that*. (emphasis added)

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In the quote above, the young woman struggled in her assessment of the behaviour of the young girl she is described. She attempted to reconcile the fact that while the girl was "really nice", is nonetheless engaging with young men in an overtly sexual way. The "bad image" that she refers to is somehow linked with the view that "you're not gonna find a nice boyfriend like that". Here we found evidence of the tension between young women's desire to use alcohol as a vehicle

to transcend either self-perceived limitations (i.e. lack of confidence) or structural constraints (women should be 'nice' and 'ladylike', act in certain ways) and the ability for these very same restrictions to be reinforced via negative social sanctions directed at young women.

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**FG18, Female#1:** I think I find a lot of my friends that are girls get really skanky when they're drunk, like one girls been known for getting drunk and doing stuff she shouldn't do with guys she shouldn't do stuff with and she was really drunk.(.) a lot of girls are really skanky when they're drunk and don't realise it. Even my friend who has a boyfriend, who she isn't even that skanky at all when she's sober but she gets really, really flirty when she's drunk.

**Female#2:** When girls take their shirts off around guys then they'll get "this girls really easy, I'm gunna get to bone 'er", like, gives guys the wrong idea.

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Whereas in the previous quote the young woman referred to a "bad image" here we find reference to young women presenting the "wrong idea" to young men. In both cases, the young women provided a strong indication of the importance of how one is perceived according to gender norms in these settings<sup>16</sup>. It is noteworthy that many of the negative appraisals of 'ladette-like' behaviour came from young women. Moreover, it was always 'another girl' that acted in this way. So, whilst it seemed quite common-place for the young people in our research to witness such behaviour by young women, the fact that it still had such negative connotations (i.e. "skanky") meant that few (if any) young women could self-identify as being one of 'those girls'. Although in all likelihood they may well have engaged in such behaviour.

Young men, on the other hand, are still rewarded for (hetero)sexually assertive or aggressive behaviour. One young male, for instance, noted a distinct difference in the way sexual conduct is assessed, based upon the gender of the person involved:

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**Kurt, 18:** A lot of girls get paid out cos they got drunk and hooked up with this guy and um he wasn't very attractive and its kinda...girls get a lot of schtick about that (.)

**INT:** Is that the same for the guys if they hook up with someone that's not attractive?

**Kurt:** Um....well, it's sorta like "well done mate at least you hooked up"...I mean for girls it's a bit different they get called names and stuff.

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It seems little room is left for young women to re-interpret the 'ladette' according to the notions of freedom and 'girls will be boys' that we are led to believe is the case by much of the popular media. There is no equivalent to the sexually derogatory term 'skanky' for young men, for instance. So what appears to be a wave of new free young women partying on an equal footing with their male counterparts seems only to be that when we look at the media interpretations of the young women rather than their lived experiences. Whilst young women are clearly drinking, sometimes as much as their male peers, they still remain restricted by the gender norms that demarcate the 'bad' girl from the 'good' girl. In other words, she is not a free young woman on equal footing with her male counterparts.

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16 See also, the related issue of 'managing the presentation of oneself' discussed in Chapter 4 Autonomy & Control.

## 7.3 Vulnerability and Sexual Assault

### 7.3.1 'Taking advantage' and taking responsibility

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**FG17, Female:** It's kind of ironic cos I think girls drink to lose, um like, insecurities but then it causes them cos when they're at parties and they're drinking and stuff they get so trashed that they just get felt up constantly or taken photos of. So many times this happens, it's just sad.

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Early on in the data collection it became clear that a theme surrounding sexual assault was emerging from the conversations in both the focus groups and the interviews. Young people, however, rarely named such instances as 'sexual assault'. Research on young people and sexual violence reveals that:

*"young people themselves rarely use the terms "sexual assault", "rape" or "sexual abuse" to describe unwanted sexual experiences and that they can have difficulty naming the incident as sexual assault" (Quadara, 2008).*

When alcohol is added to the mix it becomes even more difficult for young people to name what they are experiencing as either a violation or assault. Instead, we found a preference for a discourse that located sexual violence as a direct result of alcohol consumption within the realm of 'regrettable or embarrassing sexual conduct' rather than anything to do with gender, power or related concepts. Young women, in particular, spoke of alcohol in a way that located it as an agent, an actor in the behaviours. In the quote above, for instance, the equation is [girl + alcohol = 'you get felt up']. In other instances, the same idea was expressed via the phrase, (you get) 'taken advantage of'.

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**FG12, Female#1:** People can *take advantage of you* when you're really drunk.

**INT:** Is that something that seems like it could happen?

**Female,#2:** Well it does happen.

**INT:** What does that mean - "taken advantage of"?

**Female,#1:** It means they make you do things you don't wanna do but you do them anyway.

**Female,#2:** You think it's gunna be ok (emphasis added).

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Here the speaker (and her peers in this group) shared a belief that bad sexual things 'just happen' to girls when they drink. This is expressed here in gender neutral terms; 'people' take advantage of 'you' when 'you' are really drunk. This point is underscored in the following quote from another focus group:

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**FG17, Female#1:** There's this girl from school , she just got really, really, ridiculously drunk and some guy *took advantage* of that....It was her first time...

**Female,#2:** Out the front of the house, in the driveway.

**Female,#1:** yeah, and she came to school on Monday with grazes on her knees and stuff and the guy was just bragging about it.

**Female#2:** There's so many stories like that (emphasis added).

---

So in this instance, it was made clear that the person who was doing the 'advantage taking' was male and the person being taken advantage of was female. Furthermore, the speaker points out that this was not an unusual or unfamiliar scenario – "there's so many stories like that". This is, perhaps, unsurprising

given the relative frequency of sexual assault in Australia.<sup>17</sup> What is apparent is the way responsibility was allocated in these stories about sexual encounters.

From these narratives, responsibility is firstly located with alcohol itself, closely followed by attribution of responsibility to the (intoxicated) young woman. Young men are exempt from allocation of responsibility, and are perceived as merely *taking advantage* of a set of circumstances that serendipitously presents itself. The role of the male is apparently both benign and passive, designed to be nothing more than an innocent bystander in the first instance who subsequently behaves according to pre-ordained cultural norms of male dominance, power and exploitation.

So, it seems, for young men alcohol consumption makes them *invisible* in relation to responsibility for their actions/behaviours, whereas for young women the more she drinks the more *visible* she becomes in terms of attribution of responsibility (especially around anything of a sexual nature). This point was well illustrated by a young female interviewee who described a situation which involved her waking up to find a male friend 'having sex' with her after she had decided to sleep at his house instead of driving home after drinking. In admonishing herself, she concluded:

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**Julia, 20:** Staying in that house in a particular room was a bad choice cos I was pissed and woke up and things were happening that shouldn't have... and I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been drinking and I wouldn't have done it had I not been at that house.

---

So here, again, the young woman assumed responsibility for what had happened while simultaneously exonerating the male of any 'inappropriate' behaviour. In the narratives typically presented here, young men were exempted from responsibility for unwanted sexual contact when alcohol was present. They became invisible, the alcohol was the actor. On the other hand, young women (and in some cases, her friends) were constructed as increasingly responsible for anything of a sexual nature when alcohol was consumed.

In one of the focus groups held with young South Australian high school women (aged 14-17), the following story was relayed:

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**FG12, Female:** I went out one night with my friend and she (.) we went to some guy's house and I was drinking but not as much as her. She was vomiting everywhere and I was helping her and she was sitting there on the bed with a bucket, she was vomiting and there's like two guys there that wants to get with her. So (.) and I was like "I wanna go home now", I'm like "are you coming with me or what?", and then I had to walk home at like three in the morning and she wouldn't come with me and she was like so paro and she just went in this room and like f\*\*ked these guys cos she was so pissed.

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Again, young women's vulnerability to unwanted sexual contact and sexual assault was highlighted. The willingness of some young men to 'take advantage' of the intoxicated status of young women in their company was rarely identified as an issue warranting comment or attention by the young people we spoke with. The males in these scenarios were merely complying with and enacting well established cultural norms in relation to both alcohol and sexual encounters.

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17 The most recent Australian estimates are that nearly 1 in 5 women and 1 in 20 men have experienced sexual violence (Morrison, 2006).

There were however a few notable exceptions. In one instance, a young male TAFE student studying in Adelaide's Western suburbs stated:

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**FG07, Male:** You see a drunk chick who can hardly talk and a dude whose pretty sober and he decides to take her home...I mean, things like that, personally, that really annoys me, seeing that kind of thing.

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Likewise, some young women expressed frustration that young men did not take responsibility for their behaviour.

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**FG19, Female:** I hate it when they use it as an excuse, like this one guy who was coming onto a friend of mine who was saying "I'm not interested" and pushing him away and he's like the next day "oh, I was drunk"...I mean it's such a bad excuse.

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It is clear from the examples above that unwanted sexual encounters, to the point of assault, were relatively common occurrences for young people. Moreover, this was something that they associated inexorably with the consumption of alcohol.

The vast majority of young people we spoke with, however, either avoided speaking of such matters altogether or used language other than 'rape' or 'sexual assault' to describe what had occurred. This reluctance could be attributed to many things. Young people find it difficult to talk about sex, let alone unwanted sexual contact. Sexual assault still remains a 'taboo' topic and therefore it remains difficult to discuss. A focus group or interview of relatively short duration did not create adequate 'safety' for participants to feel comfortable to raise such issues (however, one could argue that many other 'taboo' topics were raised in the discussions).

The strong association of alcohol consumption with the cultural ideals of freedom and 'fun' provides little space for the mention of sexual assault (and related conduct). In addition, the post-feminist desire for women not to be perceived as 'victims' can also contribute to a climate that restricts opportunities to discuss, let alone raise a voice against, alcohol-related sexual assault.

At the same time, there exists a wide range of discourses that reinforce the idea that if something *does* happen it is the fault of the alcohol first and the young woman second. Young men, on the other hand, may 'take advantage' of any intoxicated young woman because in doing so they are simply conforming to a well established set of cultural understandings and norms that provide social license for such behaviour – 'boys will be boys' and girls will suffer the consequences.

Certainly, it appears that despite the advent of a 'post-feminist utopia', many of the young men and women in our research behaved, and perhaps most importantly, were *expected* to behave, in ways that replicated quite traditional (and in some instances, fairly conservative) gender norms. This finding highlights both the perilous path encountered by young women attempting to exercise freedom and equality, and the need for a major confrontation and revision of Australia's cultural norms in this area.

### 7.3.2 Gendered Behaviours – ‘duty of care’

‘Duty of care’, in the form of helping/supporting your intoxicated friend/s, emerged as a highly valued, yet gendered norm amongst the young people we spoke with. Young women spoke of an often extended series of actions that they had taken on previous occasions to look after their intoxicated friends. In contrast, young men were more circumspect about their engagement in such activities and referred more generally to ‘looking out’ for a mate, which may have entailed calling a cab or stepping in if he got into a fight.

One stakeholder, a bar worker, observed the following:

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**Stakeholder (bar worker, female):** Girls would say “oh lets go get some fresh air” but guys tend to pay them [drunk friends] out, you know?

**INT:** At what point do young men step in?

**Stakeholder (bar worker, female):** When they’re blind drunk, almost passing out, that’s the only time I’ve ever seen a guy give another guy a drink of water. If he’s almost like gagging in the gutter (.) almost like falling asleep at the bar and then it’s more likely that um (.) one of the bar staff will get them water.

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Here, we see the active distinction made between the duty of care that is appropriate for an intoxicated male versus an intoxicated female:

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**FG20, Male#1:** I reckon it’s pretty funny when you see a guy that’s like really, really drunk (.) even can’t move, I mean like, it’s pretty funny. It makes me feel better cos I’m not like that and everyone’s laughing at him not me but when I see a girl like that I hate seeing it for some reason I don’t know why (.) .

**Male#2:** Why?

**Male#3:** You feel sorry for them.

**Male#1:** Yeah, I mean (inaudible comments by other participants) like someone has to look after her and stuff. When it’s a guy he can just sober up and he’ll be fine in a few hours but when it’s a girl you just don’t know what’s gonna happen.

**Male#2:** You wanna be a gentleman.

**Male#3:** But ya can’t be f\*\*ked ((laughter)).

**Male#1:** Yeah, I usually can’t be f\*\*ked ((hesitation)) sometimes I can (emphasis added).

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Again, there was reference made to the proverbial ‘elephant in the corner’ (sexual assault) which was seemingly present at every occasion a young women became intoxicated in the company of men. The inevitability and predictability of the relationship and its potential consequences is highlighted by the comment “you just don’t know what’s gonna happen”. Although it is clear from the next few comments what the young men were referring to “you wanna be a gentleman” and then “but ya can’t be f\*\*ked” (i.e. be bothered exercising the effort of restraint).

Young men and women spoke very differently about the risks associated with being intoxicated. In the absence of young men being held responsible for unwanted sexual contact, it appears as if young women step into this role to become responsible for preventing anything ‘bad’ happening to their friends.



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**FG02, Female#1:** It's kind of annoying, yeah, cause it kind of ruins the night.  
**Female#2:** When I was ( ) at New Year's and one of my friends got really drunk down the bay. She was vomiting in the toilets and I had to stay there in there with her for two hours. But I mean it was horrible but cause it was new year's and I wanted to go out and have fun but I wasn't going to leave her in a public toilet, you know. I just had to stay there with her (.) you just have to do it. Because if anything happened to them, you'd never forgive yourself ((trails off))  
**Female#3:** Yeah but it works both ways though, they'd do it for you.  
**Female#2:** Yeah they'd do it for you too.  
**Female#1:** I don't know it's not that much ( )  
**Female#2:** It's annoying though. You can't be like "oh this is fun" but you do it for them because they'd do it for you.

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The vexed position of being a young woman trying to 'have fun' when alcohol is involved is clear in the exchange above. Tellingly, the young woman finally concluded that despite the fact that it (i.e. looking after your female friends) "ruins the night", it was deemed to be worth it because you did not know when you might be next in the vulnerability stakes, and you needed to know that "they'd do it for you". The principle of reciprocity proved to be a powerful shaper of behaviour and a strong element of female friendship.

## 7.4 Reinforcing gender norms – 'that's soft'

### 7.4.1 Excessive alcohol consumption and gender hierarchies

Drinking to excess is highly valued, especially among young men. Young men who drink heavily often do so in ways that both reproduce and reinforce cultural norms surrounding dominant masculinity. Their drinking may, for instance, involve an element of competition or risk. The social context of drinking is, once again, central here. Young people referred to those who did not live up to this highly masculinised ideal of drinking as being 'soft'.

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**INT:** What does "you're soft" mean?  
**Female#1:** You're a sissy like (.)  
**Female#2:** You're not ((hesitation))  
**FG10,(whole group):** Hardcore ((all laughing)).  
**INT:** What would "hardcore" people do?  
**Female#1:** Like the boys -it's mainly the boys who say it - they'll be like "lets see who can have the most Jagers tonight lets try and have like fifteen or like lets get like if they had a \$50 drink voucher or something they'd like get \$50 worth at the one time and like you know, sit there and drink it all or -

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The use of the word 'soft' has many relevant (gendered) connotations. It is no accident, therefore, that we find a highly dichotomised value structure here, i.e. 'soft' versus 'hardcore'. In this schema, one cannot be both 'soft' and masculine. Many authors have noted links between excessive alcohol consumption and masculinity (Mullen, Watson, Swift, & Black, 2007). This is not a stable or fixed relationship. There have been significant shifts, note for example the area of masculinity and drink choice (see the discussion of gendered drinks in the next section).

In regard to risking the epitaph of 'soft', there appears to be more room for young women to blur the gender lines here. They can either drink 'like the boys' and therefore avoid the label 'soft' or if they do drink less or not at all the label 'soft' does not seem to have the same impact.

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**FG02, Female:** None of my girl friends would ever come up to me and be like "oh you're so gay, you're not drinking" but if it was like my guy friends they'd be like "oh you're so soft, you're not drinking" and everything, but none of girl friends would ever do that.

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In another focus group, the importance of being *perceived* in a particular way was again pointed out. In this case, it was the centrality of being seen as a 'big' drinker if you were male:

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**FG19, Female#1:** Boys can't be lightweights, girls can.  
**Female#2:** Yeah, they always say they had like 20 beers.

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Elsewhere, a young woman noted that particular strategies may be utilised by young men to enable them to 'pass' as bigger drinkers than the girls:

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**FG01, Female:** It's [beer] a bit weaker than what the girls drink so they can drink more and show off to their friends (.) it's like an achievement.

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The young woman above showed a level of awareness of what was at stake here - the way the young men were perceived by their peers (i.e. as 'big' drinkers) was more important than the objective 'facts' i.e. have they consumed as much (measured by alcohol content and standard drinks) as the girls? This idea - that young men have more pressure on them to at least appear to be 'big' drinkers in their peer groups came up throughout our research.

Again, the normalised ideal 'hardcore' is one that is coded masculine. This is a form of gender power as a label that is primarily used to construct and reproduce manhood/masculinity is at the same time used to marginalise/label women as inadequate. Its labelling power comes from the idea that it is more acceptable (or expected) for young women to not be able to drink as much. Hence, if you are a man who is 'soft', the inference is that you 'drink like a woman'.

Whilst consuming to the point of intoxication (and the attendant results like vomiting, passing out etc) is highly tolerated in young men, the same is not yet the case for young women, despite the number of young women who appear to be doing just that.

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**FG20, Male:** Girls who you might respect or something like that and then you see them like really drunk, it's funny but then like afterwards it's like, oh yeah (.) it changes your opinion of them.

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So, again we find reference to the importance of the image or opinion that is formed of the young person in relation to appropriate behaviour for their gender.

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**INT:** Do you think it's ok for girls to be drunk in the same way as it is for guys to be drunk? Is there any difference between when a guy is drunk and a girl is drunk?

**Kate, 17:** I think there's more social stigma on the fact that a girl is. If a girl is, it's like "Oh, my god!" but if a guy is it's "Yeah, and?" sort of thing, like

**INT:** Mmmm...OK. How do you tell that?

**Kate:** Oh, just by the way people react when they see it. It's like "whoah she's drunk.." but then it's like, "oh, he's drunk...that's pretty cool!"

**INT:** So for a girl to get drunk it's not as cool?

**Kate:** Pretty much.

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The young people in our research clearly considered young men to both be under greater pressure to drink to excess, but also to be rewarded more for doing so. These mutually reinforcing social mechanisms related to drinking remain despite the considerable shifts in the social context of male drinking over the years (Mullen et al., 2007).

## 7.4.2 Gendered drinks

Another clear mechanism reinforcing and reproducing gender norms was drink choice. Whilst the young people we spoke with tended to demonstrate a convergence of preferences and tastes when it came to their choice of alcoholic beverages, there remained a clear demonstration of gender norms associated with this. In general, beer and 'hard' spirits remained coded as masculine.

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**FG02, Female#1:** You don't get a lotta girls who drink Bourbon, it's pretty rare, or beer..like if you see somebody out and their drinking beer it's like arghh!?! That's pretty strange (.)

**INT:** If you were out and did see a girl drinking beer or whatever what would you be thinking if you saw that?

**Female#1:** Sometimes girls do it to impress boys and like the boys see it and it's like "oh, you drink beer that's so cool" (.)

**Female#2:** Or, they're really drunk and they don't know what they're drinking.

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In the narrative above, there is no room for young women's agency – she cannot simply choose to consume a drink because she likes it. The idea that young men will be impressed with young women drinking in ways that subvert gender norms surrounding women's drinking was mentioned by some of the young people interviewed. At the same time, however, many young people spoke of the negative evaluations made of young women who drank in ways that 'went too far' in relation to codes of 'appropriate' (gendered) cultural norms for girls, as is evident from the previous section on gender transgression.

For the young women, this is a very contradictory and confusing landscape that is increasingly difficult to navigate and negotiate. This complexity is reflected in the comments made by one of the marketing stakeholders we interviewed who commented:

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**Stakeholder (marketer, male):** We advertise to a more stereotyped old version of what blokes are, especially in Australia, you know, that blokey, matey type thing ah....so you pander a little bit to the stereotype there whereas females are a different ballgame...trying to get the young females who are...you know, they're young and they're bubbly and they're trying to live for the moment and they don't want to be probably stereotyped....I mean it's much easier to get a bloke to feel good about buying a Coopers beer than it is to get a chick to buy a Vodka Cruiser cos of fitting into a group stereotype.

**INT:** So the females are more difficult to market to?

**Stakeholder (marketer, male):** Yep (.) more fickle.

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Interestingly, the stakeholder above located the difficulty here in females that are "fickle" instead of the disjunction between the maintenance of a stereotyped male, a "blokey, matey type thing" at the same time as marketing to females who "don't want to be stereotyped".

The so-called 'ready-to-drink' (RTD) alcoholic beverages were the most 'gender flexible' of the choices that young people could make. Depending on the setting, young people of either gender could drink these drinks in a somewhat gender-neutral manner. In some instances, the use of RTD drinks seemed to replace drinks traditionally coded masculine. This was observed in field notes at a 'Schoolies' event in South Australia where the researcher observed young men drinking 'beer bongz' with premixed "Vodka Pulses" rather than the traditionally more masculine beer.

Despite this, however, we found much debate among young people regarding the gendered meanings of RTD or 'alco-pops' (as they are sometimes known). In the following two instances, the young people involved associated consuming such drinks as related to sexuality.

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**INT:** What do you mean by alco-pops being gay?

**FG20, Male:** Um (.) if a guy like drinks them (.) people might think he was.

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Here, the young man simply refers to drinks that aren't "manly":

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**INT:** When you say that if you don't know the people you might get judged, what kind of judgments would they be making?

**FG04, Male#1:** "you're gay" or something.

**Male#2:** yeah I was about to say "he's gay, let's bash him" (laughs.)

**Male#3:** If you're drinking something that isn't manly then they question your sexuality straight away.

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In the following discussion, the young women in the focus group debated the notion that 'Jager Bombs' were a 'gay' drink:

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**FG05, Female#1:** I did not realise that guys drank Jager Bombs.

**Female#2:** Yeah.

**Female#1:** Not as their favourite drink.

**Female# 2:** That's cos we hang out with fags.

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In continuing the above discussion about 'Jager Bombs' and guys drinking them, one of the participants attempted to provide 'evidence' to contradict the suggestion that "fags" drink 'Jager Bombs' by stating:

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**FG05, Female:** All my brother's mates, they all drink Jager Bombs and they're all macho, macho men!

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Clearly, the young people in our research were aware of the contradictions and the shifting nature of the gender norms applied to drinking. It is no surprise that they were negotiating such territory, given the context in which young people consume these drinks. In another stakeholder interview, another marketer talked about the benefits of so-called 'gender neutral' drinks. He talked about the pub being a 'prelude to sex' for many and the need for men to maintain their sexual attractiveness to women in this setting. He concluded:

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**Stakeholder (marketer, male):** A drink that makes them look gay is not helpful.

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Whilst it is clear that a gendering of alcoholic beverages exists and indeed, it is expected and utilised by those responsible for marketing the products to consumers, young people in our research also displayed a resistance to such fixed notions of gendered consumption. Many of the young people would concede a gender division in areas such as drink type, but were often quick to point out the instability of this division.

## 7.5 Conclusion

Our research indicates that gender remains a central factor informing the experiences young people have with alcohol. The gendered nature of alcohol consumption pervades almost all aspects of young peoples drinking. Importantly, the *meanings* young people make of alcohol consumption and related behaviours are filtered through the lens of gender.

In particular, we found a significant tension for young women in negotiating between the freedom that the 'ladette' culture promises and the realities of gender power relations in their social settings. This is an important finding as there is limited research detailing this from women's own accounts of their drinking (Rolfe et al., 2009).

The prevalence of sexual assault and the increased vulnerability that young women still experience in the context of alcohol consumption when in the company of men was revealed as a key aspect of this tension. We found that young people tended to allocate agency and power to alcohol when sexual assault occurred, preferring to view such instances 'regrettable sexual conduct' as a *result* of the alcohol. In this way, young men became the invisible participant in these encounters. It appears as though young people lack power to name such behaviour as a violation, whilst alcohol has been allocated such a high degree of autonomy and agency.

Overall, the young people in our research struggled to resolve such tensions especially those involving gender transgressions. In many instances, young people resorted to the safety of reinforcing the more traditional norms around gender, judging what is appropriate in behaviour by the gender of the person involved.

Most importantly, this research identifies some of the key discursive and embodied practices that young people, in particular, young women, have adopted in order to negotiate the complex terrain of alcohol consumption and gender identity formation in Australia today. Young women seem to have developed a safety net mechanism involving a strict 'duty of care' responsibility toward other young

women in their friendship groups in order to facilitate (safe) access to the perceived benefits of both the leisure lifestyle and the 'ladette' culture combined. Rigid notions of what is a 'masculine' or 'manly' drink have shifted and young men are not restricted to beer or 'hard' spirits in order to maintain or assert their masculinity. It is, however, clear from the accounts in our report that there still remains significant social pressure for young men to drink to excess no matter what they are consuming. Young people's use of the term 'soft' as a negative social sanction against non or light drinkers has gendered connotations and is mainly used against young men. The young people we spoke with, however, indicated the ability for the gender lines to be blurred in relation to excessive drinking requirement and increasingly young women are also being called 'soft'.

# 8 Summary & Discussion

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The previous five chapters have presented the synthesised findings from the various sources of data collected for this large qualitative project that examined socio-cultural factors impacting on young people and alcohol. This chapter provides a concise summary and overview of the key findings and issues that emerged from the data. The practical implications of this research for policy-makers, researchers, health professionals, and others involved with young people are highlighted. The next and final chapter briefly outlines the scope for future research in relation to young people and alcohol.

This study involved an examination and analysis of the socio-cultural contexts which impact on drinking among 14-24 year olds in Australia. Our findings were derived from 50 interviews and 20 focus groups with young people aged 14-24 years, together with field observations of 12 events where alcohol featured prominently, and interviews with 50 key stakeholders. The report presented here has synthesised findings from this wide array of data sources, and in concert with findings from Phase One of this project, identified several dominant themes. The findings help provide new insights into the ways young people view alcohol, the meaning that it has for them in their lives, and strategies that might be used to help reduce associated risks.

In dealing with alcohol and the socio-cultural context in which it is located, young people are required to negotiate highly ambiguous cultural messages. On the one hand, our cultural norms around alcohol, and other highly commodified consumer products in general, endorsed excess (in the form of successful consumerism). But, on the other hand, a set of expectations operate (sometimes explicit, but at other times implicit) that required restraint (in terms of performing as low risk drinkers). Overall, we found young people to be confronted with strongly contradictory and competing cultural messages about alcohol.

## 8.1 Alcohol and the leisure lifestyle

The challenges that these mixed and conflicting cultural messages pose for young people were found to be played out in a variety of different contexts. Most of these contexts were centred around or shaped by a leisure lifestyle that has become a strong cultural imperative. Alcohol underpins this leisure lifestyle and is central to a wide array of everyday life social situations. This sharply impacts upon young people who are encouraged to uphold a leisure lifestyle in which they form and express their identity. Compared to the realms of work or study, the elevation and increasing emphasis on this leisure lifestyle means that alcohol is more significant in young people's lives than in previous times.

Given the strength and complexity of these conflicting socio-cultural messages, it was not surprising to find numerous tensions with which young people were grappling. These tensions can best be characterised as largely those between the ideals of independence versus social constraint. Perhaps one of the most important underlying tensions identified was that between the cultural ideals of freedom and liberty on the one hand, contrasted with the reality of the need for control on the other. This struggle is navigated by young people in relation to alcohol, often with explicit public coverage and exposure.

Nonetheless, for many young people, alcohol was highly valued as a resource used to achieve social inclusion and to confer pleasure, as elusive and as transient as the latter often proved to be. Young people had to learn how to reconcile the role of alcohol as an enabler, and also manage how alcohol could subsequently take control.

The findings from this study also clearly highlight the difficulties and challenges encountered by young people who either choose not to drink (at all, or on a given occasion) or who drink in a manner that is not consonant with their peer group at any given point in time. The socio-cultural imperatives that provide alcohol with such a dominant and potentially transforming role in the lives of young people is indeed difficult to counter-act. The struggle to find a legitimate non-drinking or moderate drinking identity is of paramount importance. This report sheds some light on potential strategies that could be developed to help young people achieve this.

## **8.2 Understanding young people's alcohol-related behaviour**

To-date, there has been very little socio-cultural research<sup>18</sup> on the context of young people's risky drinking and alcohol-related risk taking behaviours. Assumptions about motivations for risk taking behaviour are often grounded in psychological theories, which are limited in terms of their potential to address social and cultural norms.

As outlined below, we identified several important socio-cultural factors that influence young people's involvement in alcohol-related risky behaviour. These factors go some way towards helping us to understand this phenomenon. Moreover, it also tempers enthusiasm for strategies that rely solely on the dissemination of warnings that relate to negative consequences. The complexity of the cultural context in which young people drink means that such approaches need to acknowledge the way young people move between conflicting and contradictory imperatives.

### **8.2.1 Alcohol and Sociality**

Young people were clear that alcohol was often an important aspect of their social lives. Social situations involving alcohol extended beyond the drinking occasion, as there are multiple phases of sociality related to drinking.

1. as a central part of the planning process for an occasion and may include 'pre-drinking'
2. alcohol is typically consumed during the event in groups

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<sup>18</sup> The NHMRC publishes definitions of risky consumption, and much of the public debate and discussion around alcohol use concerns reducing risky drinking, and risky behaviour, such as driving and unprotected sex, associated with drinking.



3. young people discuss alcohol-related activities after the event in order to create further social opportunities out of the one experience, and also re-write the experience to align it with the ideal of the fun, carefree, party lifestyle.

Not only does alcohol feature in the actual drinking behaviours of young people, but it also influences social interactions outside of the immediate drinking context. There are many instances before and after the drinking event in which young people talk about alcohol to their friends. This can come in the form of planning the night's events around alcohol and thus adjusting expectations accordingly. Additionally, the discussion after an event, where young people recollect what happened the night before, reconfirms and further consolidates the centrality of alcohol to their leisure activities.

### **8.2.2 Belonging, inclusion and exclusion**

This study highlights how many young people view alcohol as a resource used to attempt to gain a sense of belonging and camaraderie in their social groups. However, using alcohol to achieve inclusion was more complicated than simply drinking to belong. To achieve inclusion and the sense that one belonged among their peers, several things need to occur.

Firstly, young people need to *drink in sync* with the rest of the group. That is, young people who do drink less than the rest of the group, or drink more than the rest of the group may face exclusion and social sanctions. Drinking less than the group may also result in being labelled 'soft', or as a 'spy' undermining the group's pursuit of enjoyment and liberation. Drinking more than the group may result in being a burden to the rest of the group, and being excluded through being incapable of contributing to the social enjoyment of the occasion.

Secondly, to demonstrate strong group cohesion, risky behaviours will often be engaged in or traditional boundaries transgressed. As Parker and Stanworth (2005) argue, without risk there is no proof of commitment. Hence, by consuming alcohol in a risky manner, such as through rapid or excessive ingestion and/or the consumption of more problematic drinks like shots and alcoholic energy drinks, young people are demonstrating a commitment to the party atmosphere and acting to ensure their inclusion in the fun and enjoyment of the event.

One's preparedness to commit to such group endeavours demonstrates one's willingness to support the group and show that you both wish to belong and can exhibit requisite behaviours that warrant belonging. We have termed this form of engagement as one's 'commitment to the party'. The concept of commitment to the party goes some way towards explaining young people's risky alcohol consumption and risk taking behaviour.

### **8.2.3 The importance of friends and peers**

The challenges young people face in achieving inclusion and belonging, with or without alcohol, need to be seen in the broader social context in which young people grow up and function. For young people today, significant differences exist in their family structures and dynamics compared to previous generations. As noted in the Phase One report from this program of work, approximately one in six people under the age of 15 grow up in single parent households compared to the 1970's where the comparable figure was one in 17. Families are smaller, with

extended family structures less common. Young people spend more time with their friends than with family members and have more unsupervised and 'free' time than previously. They also have wider exposure to other socio-cultural forces such as advertising, marketing and media through their ready access to the internet, and other online means of communication such as Facebook and Myspace. In this way, their norms of reference are heavily shaped by friends and associates compared to traditional family structures and contacts.

As illustrated in our examination of the large events attended by young people, together with their descriptions of parties or 'just hanging out', it was evident that 'being together' held greatest salience for them. There are important implications here for alternative strategies whereby options are provided for young people that serve this significant need to be together while at the same time not involving, or minimising exposure to, alcohol.

### **8.2.4 Alcohol and Confidence**

A clear and consistent theme that emerged from this body of work was that many young people reported that they used alcohol to provide them with confidence to be able to interact in social settings with relative ease. The role of alcohol as a means of building up one's confidence, and/or its role in alleviating anxiety, was commonplace.

While the imperative to socialise and to establish one's self as a competent social entity was important; so too, was the development of strategies to make this less difficult than it sometimes seemed to be. Many young people had multiple social groups to which they belonged or aspired to belong, and these groups and their memberships were continually changing. The malleable and fluid nature of group membership represented a constant challenge. As a result, there was considerable pressure on young people to constantly assert themselves and/or reinvent themselves to ensure a place in various desired social settings.

This challenge is further compounded as young people today are more likely to be constantly moving amongst a variety of social groups earlier in life than previously. This means that younger age groups are exposed to the trials of testing out their social acceptability without the benefits of either experience or maturation to assist them, or even the safety net of large family, community or church<sup>19</sup> functions (that often acted as de facto training grounds for social skill development). In addition, younger groups are also using alcohol at earlier ages. Hence, there is a confluence of events that conspire against young people and make their task of seeking out and achieving social acceptance harder than it might otherwise be.

### **8.2.5 When alcohol was a low priority**

Our data also identified contexts where alcohol held less prominence. This included some music and entertainment events where young people were clear that they were there to listen and enjoy the music and did not wish to mar the event by drinking so much that they ran the risk of blurring or obliterating the memory of it. Some dancing events also fell into this category where the emphasis again was

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19 The Phase 1 findings noted that young people today are less religious than previous generations. While religiosity is protective for alcohol and drug problems amongst young people for reasons that are not explicitly clear, it also provides alternative sources of social interaction.

on dancing rather than drinking. In addition, it was noted that one strategy used to avoid pressure to drink excessively was to join the party spirit and demonstrate one's 'commitment to the party' through dancing. Although, this was also risky, as young people could be accused of being 'fakers.'

Another successful strategy used was the selection of non-alcoholic beverages, such as Red Bull, that carried similar social cache as alcohol, but none of the negative effects. Similarly, other 'energy' drinks may also help fulfil this role, but would need to be selected carefully to avoid any negative consequences associated with such beverage types.

### 8.2.6 Seeking the 'Ideal' Point of Intoxication

Many young people were also found to be searching for an ideal state of intoxication. Achieving an ideal state of intoxication was often pursued through trial and error. A process which usually involved going too far and experiencing negative social, emotional, and physical consequences, in order to ascertain where the illusive ideal state might be located. In the chapter titled 'An Ideal State of Intoxication?', we found that when they drank many young people were seeking an ideal state of intoxication that maximised their pleasure. This ideal state was believed by young people to be learned through a trial and error approach of testing and exceeding their personal limits. The experience of 'going too far' was considered by many to be simply a necessary part of the process. For many there was a view that it was only after they had drunk too much and experienced negative consequences that they would learn what their limit was. Young people argued that it was worth the risk and any potential negative consequences to achieve just that "one good bit" - that transient time of ideal intoxication that they passed through.

### 8.2.7 Risk as pleasure

Not only was an ideal state of intoxication sought as the pinnacle of pleasure for young people, we also found that drinking alcohol (especially to excess) was actively engaged in as a form of risky pleasure. Risk in this context was voluntarily sought out as a source of pleasure in and of itself. Thus, risk was managed as a form of calculated hedonism. This was epitomised by the young male in the following example who described how he liked the feeling of fearlessness when drinking, and that this was a source of pleasure. He also conveyed an exhilarated sense of invulnerability.

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**FG20, Male#1:** You lose, ah, everything that you fear. Like, you lose that. You're not scared of anything. So that's one of the positives, one of the main positives, you're not scared of anything.

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It is also important to note that some symptoms of intoxication, such as vomiting, violence, or acting obnoxiously, may not necessarily be negatively valued by young people, and as such do not function as sufficient deterrents. Other attributes of excessive drinking, particularly those relating to sociality, were also viewed positively by many young people who believed they outweighed these more common and predictable negative consequences.

### **8.2.8 Gender, alcohol and risk taking**

We found that young women increasingly matched their male counterparts in risky patterns of drinking, and risk-taking behaviour in general. However, the freedom for young women to fully participate in the leisure and party lifestyle was more complex than it initially appeared. While current cultural norms implicitly condone, if not explicitly encourage, women embodying the ideal of gender equality and sexual liberation (marketed to young women through shows such as *Sex and the City*, as noted by several study participants), they were often severely sanctioned if they attempted to do so.

One of the most important findings in regard to gender and alcohol was that where there was an adverse outcome (e.g. often in the form of sexual assault against women), attribution of responsibility was initially placed with the alcohol itself. Secondly, women bore the brunt of social disapproval (either being critical of themselves or other women). It was rare for males (the usual perpetrators) to be attributed with responsibility for alcohol-fuelled sexual assaults, or other forms of inappropriate behaviour. Thus, distancing and exonerating those involved from the behaviours in question. There is a clear and evident need to achieve a major shift in cultural values in terms of male responsibility in regard to sexual misconduct, and even more so when alcohol is involved.

The fact that young people also become sexually active at increasingly young ages, corresponding with the earlier ages at which they begin to consume alcohol, further highlights the need for caution to be applied in this area and the need for strategies to be developed to both safeguard the wellbeing of young women while engendering new cultural norms in regard to male behaviour. It is acknowledged that managing the emerging sexuality of young males and females is indeed challenging, especially when alcohol may be involved. Alcohol, as noted above, is highly valued by young people for its capacity to function as a social lubricant. However, its ability to also act as a disinhibitor, facilitate social transgressions, mixed with its power to impair judgement and enhance risk taking in general makes for a very volatile combination.

### **8.2.9 Critiquing the Media**

Young people clearly could recognise some of the strategies that the media used in relation to alcohol, but it was also clear that they were not always able to critically engage with such strategies. While the behaviour of young people was influenced by media and marketing forces, many of them exhibited high levels of cynicism towards the media while also considering themselves to be knowledgeable or savvy consumers who knew how the media worked.

This cynicism stemmed in part from a perceived lack of concordance of media depictions of young people and alcohol with their own subjective views and experiences. Nevertheless, this cynicism may be a strength that could be built on by developing resources that enable young people to critically read and evaluate media, advertising, and other sources of discourse and persuasion around alcohol. However, young people often had few options available to them to allow them to critically and meaningfully engage with some of the negative influences, such as media stigmatisation and consumerist co-option of youth culture. There is room, therefore, to undertake future initiatives to effectively support young people to enable them to develop skills to critique media and marketing forces.

## 8.2.10 The Drinker vs Non-drinker Dichotomy

An additional area that may be beneficial to explore for its potential scope for intervention is breaking down the dichotomy of drinkers versus non-drinkers. The rules of inclusion and exclusion that young people apply to people who are drinking and showing commitment to the party, versus young people who are not drinking or not showing commitment to the party, rely on this dichotomy. However, these informal rules of inclusion and exclusion mask the actual continuum of drinking levels and drinking behaviours that exist. While there are some young people for whom non-drinking is a stable identity, it was more common in our study for the drinking behaviour of the young people to be fluid, variable and contextual. For example, several young people who opted not to drink at a particular event, even though they may drink at other times, found it difficult to establish even temporarily a non-drinking identity.

Deconstructing the dichotomy of drinking involves moving away from classifications of young people into heavy drinkers, moderate drinkers and non-drinkers. Drawing attention to the different patterns and degrees of consumption and intoxication, may create a more ambiguous role for alcohol in group membership, and allow space for alternative, authentic and legitimate identities that are not as alcohol-centric. To-date, there has been no cohesive approach to these alternative identities, and this may enable young people to establish identities and negotiate belongingness in ways that do not revolve as heavily around alcohol. It was evident that it may be unrealistic to expect most young people to simply cease participating in drinking altogether. Other alternative means to establish their identity therefore need to be established, and strategies put in place to negotiate belongingness without alcohol.

## 8.3 Strategies to minimise risk

This study identified a number of strategies that young people currently employ to reduce the risks that they, or their friends, might be exposed to when they drink, or are in an environment where alcohol is used. Many of these strategies were highly effective and responsible, and warrant widescale endorsement and emulation. Scope also exists for some of these strategies to be built on. There is considerable merit in using risk-management/avoidance strategies currently used by young people as the jumping off point for further initiatives in this area.

### 8.3.1 Duty of Care

Many young people, and especially young women, demonstrated a strong commitment to a duty of care shown to their friends in settings where alcohol was involved. This existing practice opens a great number of opportunities for health promotion. Examples include the Red Cross' Save-A-Mate program, where first aid officers teach young people how to provide first aid to friends who have passed out or hurt themselves. But there is room for expansion into other means of care giving for intoxicated peers, which could potentially include strategies to prevent accidents and injuries, potential sexual violence, and other negative consequences. An additional strategy may be to support cultural change in

perceptions of duty of care among male friends. This duty of care also needs to be considered in the formulation of policy and laws.<sup>20</sup>

### **8.3.2 Social Management of Intoxication**

A further area of strength highlighted in our study was the social management of intoxication, including the group pre-planning that sometimes occurred before drinking occasions. Some groups of young people in our study indicated how they engaged in detailed and precise discussion regarding expectations and planning before drinking occasions. These discussions addressed issues related to how much alcohol would be consumed by the group, often expressed in terms such as how 'big' a night they collectively agreed upon having. Having identified the parameters for the evening or occasion, they then established other risk reduction mechanisms such as designated drivers or alternative travel arrangements. The young people in our study were clear that they also factored in other considerations, such as school or work responsibilities the next day.

The benefits of this type of planning are clear – it provides young people in this group with the resources to provide care and look out for each other which could have a strong protective effect against potential alcohol-related harm. Again, this needs to be qualified with the findings that not all groups pre-planned in this way, and that the planning can be discarded once the drinking occasion is underway, for example, if the designated driver feels too excluded by this role, or if the 'event' spontaneously expanded to make it a special occasion, as was often reported to be the case. However, these qualifications provide more scope to encourage and support such planning amongst groups of young people.

## **8.4 Conclusion**

The findings from this study aid our understanding of the experience of being a young person and dealing with the issue of alcohol. Young people were found to be confronted by a range of competing and contradictory cultural norms around the use of alcohol. They are required to navigate their way through this difficult territory and somehow develop socially appropriate ways to deal with conflicting cultural imperatives. This study has attempted to untangle and highlight the complexity of the type of engagement that young people form within this kind of social environment.

One of the most important tensions was found to occur in relation to efforts and strategies used to achieve group inclusion and a sense of belongingness and a feeling of group membership, while still maintaining a sense of independence and autonomy. There were clear challenges posed by young people's aspirations to operate as active agents, and the pressure on them from peers, cultural influences, and the demands of a consumer society. Young people were required to navigate all of these pressures, while at the same time establish their own identity, and try to meet their other commitments such as work and study.

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<sup>20</sup> For example; restricting the number of passengers a P plate driver can transport in some states illustrates this dilemma. While this law may have positive effects on youth deaths in road accidents, alternative strategies may need to be implemented to counter the impact on young people's capacity to provide a duty of care.

Our findings highlight the need to move beyond rigid categories which merely identify young people who drink at risky levels, towards an examination and understanding of the fluid and contextual nature of young people's choices around alcohol. In line with sociologists documenting young people's social groups as "neo-tribes" (Bennett, 1999; Maffesoli, 1996), the young people in our study were members of multiple groups. Young people therefore had multiple, complex, and sometimes contradictory identities that were fluid and constantly changing. Efforts to address risky drinking, however that might be defined, need to be pitched against this dynamic backdrop.

There are clear implications here for the development of alternative strategies to assist young people by gaining a more relevant and appropriate understanding of how they engage with a social and cultural context in which alcohol features heavily. Taking context into account is challenging, but as this study demonstrates, young people are active rather than passive agents. This means that they are willing to act upon and make changes to their world. At the same time, this study also emphasises the need to move away from simplistic and individualising approaches that locate alcohol issues as a problem that is somehow inherent within the current generation of young people. Instead, strategies need to be developed that are cognisant of how the individual drinks or does not drink amongst multiple levels of interaction. At the most immediate level, these interactions include forms of self-management and self-control. Moving up from this level would include: enhancing young people's confidence and autonomy in social situations; increasing opportunities for events where alcohol is not a pre-requisite; and, addressing parental involvement and parent-child relationships. At the broadest level, strategies are needed that consider wider cultural notions of consumerism and gender. How these levels should impact upon young people's drinking or non-drinking behaviour is certainly changeable.

Understanding the multiple levels of interaction and how they shape drinking and non-drinking contexts is vital if we are to create policy responses and environments that benefit young people. By taking this approach we are better placed to ensure that we respond to young people in a way that is useful to them, that supports their health and wellbeing, and acknowledges their agency, situation, and needs.





# 9 Implications and Future Research

## 9.1 Further research

This study has important implications for future research on young people and alcohol. Our research has highlighted the need to understand the viewpoint of young people, rather than adopting adult conceptions and understanding of notions such as risk and excess. Until concepts like risk and excess are understood from the point of view of young people, we will be limited in our ability to understand what factors and influences contribute to current patterns of drinking.

Points of difference between some young people and typical adult viewpoints include how the relationship between intoxication and pleasure is perceived. For many young people, intoxication is idealised as a successful endpoint that is actively sought out. This is in contrast to views that regard intoxication as an impairment indicating a failure to drink 'appropriately'. The 'de-stigmatisation' of drinking behaviour means that pre-conceived notions of the consequences of drinking do not always correspond with young people's views or experiences.

If these viewpoints are ignored or rejected, then research and public health may be limited in their efforts to progress reductions in harms attached to young people's drinking. The findings of our study therefore suggest avenues of more innovative research and intervention that account for the subjective experiences of young people's drinking. As well as capturing and refining the negative associations with alcohol, this type of approach can also highlight potentially valuable harm minimisation strategies around drinking that young people already employ, some of which are noted in this report. In identifying areas for future research, there is also scope for work that encourages the translation and expansion of these naturalistic harm minimisation strategies to groups of young people that have as yet been largely neglected in the literature.

Other areas for possible future investigation that arise from the current study include a need for more research with Indigenous young people, and homeless young people. We included in the research a focus group with young Indigenous people, and a further interview with a young Indigenous male. The focus group in particular highlighted different issues faced by young Indigenous people that need to be explored to ensure that Indigenous young people receive comparable benefit from alcohol-related research. Discussions in this focus group suggested quite a different role for alcohol in some Indigenous groups than typical mainstream roles. For example, it was more common for these Indigenous young people to drink with family members rather than friends – the opposite finding to most of the other young people we talked to. This has important implications for modelling, group

membership, what alcohol is being used to enable or negotiate, and potential gender and other social norms at play. Although most surveys show that Indigenous people are less likely than the general population to drink, those who do drink are more likely than non-Indigenous drinkers to consume at risky or high risk levels for long term harm (Pink & Allbon, 2008). Hence, exploring the socio-cultural context of Indigenous young people's alcohol use needs to be a priority to contribute to the reduction of this harm. Maggie Brady (2005, 2007, 2008) has outlined a comprehensive cultural and historical document of Indigenous alcohol use, but there is little yet published on young Indigenous people's social or cultural context of drinking.

We included one interview with a young homeless person. While there were similarities with other young people in our study, in her interview, she drew on different norms and stories than the other young people, emphasising her use of alcohol as an enabler, and an escape that became destructive and intertwined with mental health issues. A stakeholder interviewee (police officer) also argued that there were substantial differences between homeless young people and other young people, including that homeless young people tend to drink at younger ages, and drink for different reasons. This is an understudied area that warrants more investigation in order to support homeless young people and reduce the amount of alcohol-related harm they may experience.

By addressing these issues with an approach that accounts for subjective cultural experiences and meanings, researchers and workers in the field will then be able to more seriously consider the voices and agency of young people as a resource for social change.

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## Appendix A Focus Group Comment Sheet

Code:

Date:

Time:

Facilitator:

Place:

Notetaker:

### **PARTICIPANT DETAILS**

Number (turned up):

Gender:

Age:

How do participants know each other?

---

### **COMMENTS**

*Body language, dynamics, emotional tone*

*Insights & reflections: eg new areas of interest? (please list with time on recording)*

*Any questions asked by participants, anything unclear in schedule?*

*Any problems with the interview schedule eg qns, ordering, length, obsolete etc*

*Methodological difficulties eg venue issues*

*Facilitation issues eg too guided/structured? Too unfocused?*

*Anything facilitator did particularly well?*

## Appendix B Focus Group Schedule

### Key questions

- What makes for a 'good night out'?
  - What kind of things would you be doing?
  - Who would you be with?
  - Where would you be?
- When do you tend to drink the most?
  - Where would you be?
  - Are you with friends?
  - What are you feeling?
- How do you know when you've drunk too much?
  - Can you remember the last time this happened?
  - Where were you?
  - Can you remember how much you drank?
  - Did you plan to drink that much before you started drinking/ went out?
  - What happened when you stopped drinking?
- In which situations would you drink a little or not at all?
  - What happens when you don't drink a lot, or don't drink at all?
  - How did you feel?
  - How did other people react to you?
- What do you like about drinking?
  - Is there anything that has the same effect that doesn't involve drinking?
- What don't you like about drinking?
  - How do the negative effects affect your behaviour?
  - Has there been anything that's made you drink less or stop drinking say over a short time?
  - Is there anything you could imagine that would cause you to drink less?

# Appendix C Observation Guide

who — what — when — how

## Setting Log

Name of event:	_____	Date:	_____
Name of venue:	_____	Day	_____
Setting location:	_____		
Location category:	<input type="checkbox"/> city	<input type="checkbox"/> coast	
	<input type="checkbox"/> inner suburbs	<input type="checkbox"/> outer suburbs	
	<input type="checkbox"/> regional/ rural		
Event type:	<input type="checkbox"/> cultural festival	<input type="checkbox"/> food & wine festival	
	<input type="checkbox"/> music festival	<input type="checkbox"/> sport	
		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify) _____	
Regularity:	<input type="checkbox"/> weekly	<input type="checkbox"/> monthly	
	<input type="checkbox"/> yearly	<input type="checkbox"/> once off	
		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify) _____	
Event duration:	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> am	_____ <input type="checkbox"/> am
	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> pm	_____ <input type="checkbox"/> pm
Time in setting:	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> am	_____ <input type="checkbox"/> am
	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> pm	_____ <input type="checkbox"/> pm

## Demographics

### Demographics

#### Age

- How old? Diverse? Homogenous? (proportions age groups) Who is the target audience?

#### Gender

- How many m/f? Interaction between sexes? Gender differences in drinking/ non-drinking?

## Group

- How many in groups? Type of activity x group size? heterogeneity vs homogeneity within/across friendship groups? How are group similar, different?
- Which people within the group appear to have status? Why? Who doesn't have status?
- How is group composed (mixed gender? Mixed age?)? People alone, pairs, couples, large groups? Changes in group composition over time? Strangers, gatecrashers?
- What types of interactions occur between different age, gender, cultural groups?

## Drinking

- Type of drinks consumed?
- Price of drinks?
- Range of alternative drinks? Eg water
- Consumption of food? Food availability?
- Changes in activities over time: type, duration, intensity etc
- Self-regulation? When people stop/not drink?

## Lifestyle

- Preference of free time vs organised events? Attendance organised vs unorganised?
- What promotional materials, advertising, educational campaigns are targeted at youth? How do they situate, position youth in terms of content & style? How is the event constructed, defined? What are the main discourses (harm minimisation, pleasure etc & their contradictions)? How does this differ from young ppl definitions?
- Presence of alcohol advertising, display of advertising/ brands in event and patrons?
- Restrictions, forms social control (informal & formal, structural & subjective)? What aren't young ppl allowed to do (e.g. alcohol free)? Where aren't they allowed to go? What do organised events enable that otherwise wouldn't be able to do (e.g. food, safety)?
- Where do young people prefer to hang out (surveillance vs agency)?
- Who/what determines what they do? How do they find out about what to do (technology)?
- Who is/ isn't allowed into settings?
- How do young ppl choose to represent themselves? Does clothing change according to setting? Why? How does behaviour differ?

## Rituals, celebratory events

- What's the role of alcohol? How central is alcohol to leisure activities? Is there anything that replaces its 'function'?
- Use of other substances? How normative is the use of AOD? Appear normal, is it discussed, unquestioned?

- How do they get alcohol? What type of alcohol do they drink (brands, heterogeneity, status)?
- How much/ how quickly young ppl drink? When do young ppl drink (groups, evening, day)? Duration of drinking – when do young ppl stop drinking?
- Is drinking the end goal or means towards other goal? How purposive, deliberate is drinking?
- What barriers are there to getting drunk? Friends, events, place? How is getting drunk perceived (what are the reactions to signs of drunkenness eg vomiting)
- Gender differences in how men/women drink, celebrate, have fun etc?
- Is drinking paired with other key milestones or symbolic events? (e.g. sexual initiation/activity)

#### Outdoor events/ festivals

- Degree of organisation/ structure
  - what events are scheduled, planned? Do they run concurrently?
  - Are first aid, organisers, information people: present (how many), visible, mobile (walking through crowd, info booths)
  - Where are drinks sold? How many areas sell drinks? How are these areas regulated (wrist bands, security)? Ease or difficulty in accessing them? Type of drinks sold (degree of choice including non-alcoholic)? How is alcohol served (glass, plastic, tin, size etc)?
  - Is food sold, given free? By whom? Who is buying food? When do they buy?
- Identity, status, representation
  - What are people wearing? What forms of identity are signified (nationalistic, cultural – youth subculture, music, sport)
- Marketing:
  - How has event been promoted? (family, youth, pleasure, music, drink etc)
  - In what form is sponsorship present at event? (location of signage – stages, bars, tents, flyers, guides, distribution promo material as giveaways etc)
  - Are there promo people within the event? Outside the event?



# Appendix D Observation Protocol

## What do you look for?

Check the 'participant observations guide' for a list of areas/questions that will direct what you are observing. These questions are generated from the literature review and so they are not a definitive list. Indeed, the most potentially fruitful data may come from what that list excludes and so you should pay careful attention to what isn't addressed by those questions, or to what isn't explained in the literature. This will help provide more useful data to inform the subsequent research stages.

More broadly, Janesick<sup>21</sup> (1994, p.213) discusses her observational format:

1. Look for the meaning and perspectives of the participants in the study.
2. Look for relationships regarding the structure, occurrence, and distribution of events over time.
3. Look for point of tension: What does not fit? What are the conflicting points of evidence in the case?

## What to Include

1. Descriptions of people, events, conversations
  - Include people's gestures, non-verbal communications, tone of voice, speech patterns etc.
2. Changes within the setting: interactions, conversations, movements, activities etc.  
E.g. do people's status change over time?
3. Observations of own actions and feelings in the field as well as hunches, working hypotheses, what you don't understand e.g. what role did you take in the setting? Where did you fit in?
4. Sequence and duration of events recorded in precise manner
5. Diagram of setting, people within it (explained below)

## Observers' comments

Your own feelings:

- Were you sympathetic or not?
- What made you want/not want to be there?

Methodological considerations:

- How difficult was it analysing and observing in the setting?
- How did you decide what to observe?
- What kinds of observations were difficult to make? (e.g. access issues)

Meta-research questions:

- Interpretations, hunches, preconceptions, and memos for future inquiries.

21 Janesick, V.J. (1994). The dance of qualitative research design. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 209-219). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

# Appendix E Stakeholder Interview Comment Sheet

Name of interviewee:

Code (3 digit code + initials interviewee):

Date:

Time, place:

Interviewer:

## **PARTICIPANT DETAILS**

Gender:

Age:

Occupation

---

## **COMMENTS**

*Emotional tone of interviewee*

*Own feelings during/about experience*

*Insights and reflections e.g. new areas of interest? (please list with time on recording)*

*Any questions asked by interviewee? E.g. anything unclear in schedule?*

*Any problems with the interview schedule? E.g. questions, ordering, length, obsolete etc.*

*Methodological difficulties?*

*Snowballing: willingness to be contacted again as key informant for other contacts?*

## Appendix F Interview Guide for Stakeholders

### Basic info

- Can you tell us a little about the context or setting where you come into contact with young people? eg where, when, how often contact with youth

### Demographics of Young People

- Is there a particular age range of young people that you have contact with?
- What about the proportion of young people in terms of gender - males and females?
- How would you describe the young people you come into contact with?
  - EG what groups would they identify with? Do they take on a particular role when you're with them? *Student, employee, etc*
- In your particular role, do you identify different groups of young people according to their age? Why/ why not?
  - For example, people often use the terms generation X & Y? Do you think these kind of labels are useful? Why/why not?
- In your experience, how do young people differentiate themselves from one another/their peers?
  - What kind of things do they use to show that they're different or similar to their peers?

### Youth transitions

- Traditionally, young people have been expected to get an education, find employment, and then settle down as an adult by getting married or buying a house. However, much of the research is telling us that this pathway of youth into adulthood has changed.
- As someone who can see how wider social changes affect individual young people, could you give us a picture of how the experience of youth has changed since you've been involved with young people?
  - Do you think there are new pressures young people face today that weren't around 20 years ago?

### Drinking & Culture

- As I mentioned earlier, our project's looking at young people and alcohol. In particular, we want to know more about the role of culture on young people's drinking.
  - What do terms such as 'drinking culture' mean to you?
  - Do you think they're relevant or useful in understanding young people's drinking?

- Medical researchers often use terms like 'risky drinking' to talk about the harmful physiological effects of drinking on the body. In your experience with young people, what kind of things would qualify as 'risky drinking'?
- What kind of information do young people seek from you with regard to alcohol?
- Are there forms of misinformation that you've seen young people take on board? Examples? Where do these ideas come from?
- What are some of the challenges in talking to young people about alcohol?
  - Are there differences in what young women talk about with regard to alcohol compared to young men?
- Is there a difference in terms of how young women drink compared to young men?
  - In your experience, has this changed over time? *Probe change in female drinking patterns*
  - Do males tend to drink with males and females with females or is it mixed? (If it depends) when do they tend to drink in mixed groups? When do guys tend to only drink with guys? When do girls tend to only drink with girls?
- Do you notice any differences when young people drink in large versus small groups or by themselves?
  - So do you think young people's peers have an impact on how young people drink? (If yes) What kind of impact do they have? How do you think it changes their behaviour? *Probe role modelling of peers*
  - Can you think of any other people, apart from peers, who influence young people's drinking? What impact do they have?
  - Again, from what you've seen, is this something that has changed over time?
- What are the main issues associated with young people and alcohol? What do you think works best in trying to address these issues?
  - How do you see your role in trying to address such issues?
- What's the main message that you try and get across to young people about drinking?
  - What kind of resources do you rely upon to help you communicate this?

### **Leisure, Lifestyle → Identity**

- What kind of activities do young people do when they're drinking heavily? Where do they tend to drink heavily? *Determined drinking, leisure lifestyle*
  - What would you identify as the key factors in determining whether young people consume alcohol?
- Why do you think alcohol plays such a central role in young people's leisure activities?

- It's possible you've witnessed a lot of the negative effects of alcohol on young people who continue to drink. Why do you think the appeal of drinking persists in light of such negative consequences?
- We've found in our research that alcohol is deeply entrenched in society. Are there any places or events you've come across where it's ok for young people **not** to drink?
  - What makes these places so different from places where young people do consume large amounts of alcohol?
- Do you come across young people who try to go against their peers by not drinking?
  - How is that person treated by the rest of the group? What are some of the challenges that that person faces?
  - What kind of advice would you give to someone in that situation?

### Role of alcohol

- From what you've experienced, why do you think drinking alcohol is so important to young people?
- Are there particular types of places where alcohol is consumed more heavily? *Probe location of drinking*
  - Are there particular times where alcohol is consumed more heavily? Eg days of week, time in the day/night
- From what you've seen, how do you think young people organise and manage their drinking? Eg what kind of things do they do to make sure they can drink?
  - What about the opposite - have you seen any examples of young people organising and planning ways to make sure that they don't get too drunk? *Probe for 'determined drunkenness'*
- We've found in our research that alcohol is very widespread in society. Are there any places or events you've come across where you've been surprised at how little young people are drinking?
  - What makes these places so different from places where young people do consume large amounts of alcohol?
  - Do you come across groups of young people where one person goes against the rest of the group by not drinking? How is that person treated by the rest of the group?
- I'm interested in the amount that young people spend on alcohol – have you noticed any changes? Eg have the amounts of money which young people take out with them on a 'night out' changed? (If increased) If young people are spending more money on alcohol – would you say that's because of the price of drinks or is because they're drinking more? *Probe disposable income*
  - Do you think that young people find it difficult to get access to alcohol? Tell me about any examples. *Probe access & availability*

## Drinking & Market Forces

- A lot of research discusses how young people have become key targets for marketing companies, and the alcohol industry in particular. How well-equipped do you think young people are in resisting advertising messages?
  - What kind of tools do you feel you can provide to help young people counter such influences?

## Changes

We've covered a range of topics today, thinking back over them, are there any important changes in relation to young people and alcohol that you've noticed? Any changes that stand out? *Prompt: changes in how much/what/\$ spent/ who(age, gender)/where YP drink?*

## Participant details

Gender:

Age:

Occupation



Any questions?

Thanks

## Snowballing

Thanks again for participating – Part of our project also involves focus groups and interviews and YP. Are there any groups of young people that you have access to that you think we could speak to?

## Appendix G Young People Interview Comment Sheet

Code:

(# + age code [A=14-17, B=18-21, C=22-24] + gender[M,F] + initials interviewer)

Date:

Time, place:

---

### Demographics

Gender: \_\_ M \_\_ F                      Age: \_\_\_\_

Home suburb: \_\_\_\_\_

Education: \_\_\_\_\_

Private/public schooling: \_\_\_\_\_

Employment: \_\_\_\_\_

### Comments

*Emotional tone of interviewee*

*Own feelings during/ about experience*

*Insights & reflections eg new areas of interest? (please list with time on recording)*

*Any qns asked by interviewee eg anything unclear in schedule?*

*Any problems with the interview schedule eg questions, ordering, length, obsolete etc*

*Methodological difficulties*

*Snowballing: willingness to pass on contact details of friends for further interviews?*

## Appendix H Young People Interview Schedule

### Demographics

Gender: \_\_M \_\_F Age: \_\_\_\_  
 Home suburb: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Education: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Private/public schooling: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Employment: \_\_\_\_\_

### Prompts

### Social Groups

Most of what we're discussing – drinking, going out – is done with friends. So first, can I ask **who you ten to hang out with?** Who **you spend free time with?**

- eg **Friends, siblings, family, workmates?**
- Probe gender: **Males, females, mix?**

### Lifestyle

What do you and you \_\_\_\_\_ **like doing** when you get **together?**

- Do you go out much? Go to house parties? →

Did you used to?

- Do you prefer staying in?
- **What/who decides** what you do?
- How **plan/ organise** this?
- Anything you'd **like to do**, but **can't afford?**

Where does **alcohol fit into the picture?**

- If **NO** → use non-drinker schedule

- How about your friends?
- Particular drink of choice?
- Friends drink same/different?

Do you **drink** alcohol?

- **Pre-mixes** eg Bacardi Breezers?

(if necessary) What do you usually **do on the weekend?** Or is there **another night** of the week you usually go out?

- **Wine?**

- **Beer?** What **brand** – VB? Crown lager?

\* For next questions, pick one of these activities that you like doing (or choose one more relevant to alcohol)



### Going out/staying in

Can you take us through a **typical night** where you go out **or stay in**?

What makes for a **good, enjoyable** night?

Say you've got **\$80** for this weekend. **How would you spend it**?

(if not covered) Do you go to **parties**? E.g. house parties, get together

- When does it **start**?
- Do you **drink before** go out?
- What would you usually be doing **when drinking** with your friends?
- How does **drinking change** over night? Eg type drink, how much, where you drink?
- What makes **X so good/bad** night?
- What lessens **enjoyment**?
- How much **spend on alcohol**?
- Do you plan your drinking **around how much \$** you have?
- How much **normally spend** on weekend?
- How **often**? or Have you **ever** (involving alcohol)?
- What do you **do** at parties?
- **Who else goes** to these parties?
- **Gatecrashers**?
- **Who gatecrashes**?
- What do they **do**?

### Drinking

What are some things you **like about drinking**?

Are there any **key events** that **got you into drinking**?

How do people your age **get alcohol**?

- How does **drinking affect** how you **interact** with people?
- Does it change what you'd **normally be like**?
- Probe for **first drink, family/siblings** (if experienced) Do you **drink differently now** than when you first started drinking?
- Probe **what, with who** (group vs couple), **how often, how much, where** (going out vs staying in)
- Any **key events changed** how you drink?
- What do you think **caused changes**?

## Drinking continued...

Have you heard of 'standard drinks'?

The media focuses on what they think are the **downsides of drinking**, but these aren't always the same as what young people think. So can you tell me what **you** think are the downsides to drinking?

## Not drinking

How do people **react to** people **not drinking**? (e.g. at parties)

Can you tell me about the **last time you weren't drinking**, but other people around you were?

## Getting Drunk

What are the **different ways of saying** that someone "got drunk" or that they're getting drunk?

Have you ever been **drunk**?

### • Is it difficult?

- What makes it **difficult to get** or drink alcohol?
- How much **planning** goes into it?
- If you go out drinking, do you get asked for **ID**?

Eg Try to get the **most alcohol for your \$?**

- Know **how much in drinks you like**?
- **Take into account** when **buying** drinking?

- Any **bad things happen** at parties / drinking? Eg looking after friends, fights, harassed
- Do anything to **try to prevent** this stuff?
- Drinking ever **affected school/work**? Can your teacher / employer tell? If yes, what happened?

(if no) Have you **ever tried** not to / to say no? Was it **difficult**?

- Do you have friends that don't drink?
- What was this like?
- What **things stop you from drinking**? / (esp. if no) When **don't you drink**?
- When would you **choose not** to drink?
- Do ppl/ friends try to get you to drink? What happens then?
- When do you find people accept that you're not drinking?
- Can not drinking be seen as a good thing by people you know?

### • Specific words?

- When is it talked about **negatively**?
- When is it talked about **positively**?
- **Different** for **men & women**?

Tell me about the **last time got drunk**?

- Were you **planning** on getting drunk?
- What were your **friends doing**?
- How'd you **get home**?
- When do you **stop drinking**? When could you tell you've **had enough** or **when others** have had enough?

## Events

What are the **main celebrations or events** you **look forward to** in the year? (prompt, e.g., Australia Day, end of school, sporting events, other festivals)

Or is there something that **you and your friends celebrate** every year?

What did you / are you planning to do to celebrate the end of school?

We've been going to some youth events like music festivals and have a couple of questions about these.

Do you got to any big music events or festivals? (prompt eg Big Day Out, Good Vibrations ...)

We've talked about what you're looking forward to this year. What about **later in your life**, what are you **looking forward to** in the future? (prompt eg travel, university, moving out)

## Wrap up

Demographics

Further info / snowballing?

Any questions?

**THANK YOU!**

- Are **birthday parties** something you look forward to?
- Looking forward to **18th** ?
- What will you **do for next birthday**?

- Muck up day?
- Schoolies?

IF PAST

- Did they **go**?
- **How was it**?

IF IN FUTURE

- Do they **want to go**?
- What **appeals/ doesn't appeal**?

- (if NO) Any you'd **like to go to**?

- (if YES) Do you **drink** at these events?

- Anyone you know **taken alcohol into** these events?

- What did you **do after** event?

- **Why** these things **important**?









