# Social meanings of alcohol misuse among young adults in recreational settings

## Researchers

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## Summary

The use of alcohol is a central feature of Australian society; however, while there are social and economic benefits associated with this use, there is also serious and substantial harm. Drinking can result in a range of acute harms—vehicle accidents and violence—and chronic harms, such as cirrhosis, cancer, and depression. Alcohol is a major contributing factor to mortality and morbidity among young Australians; with young adults 18 to 24 years being especially at risk with respect to alcohol use. There is a need to understand the socio-cultural determinants of alcohol consumption by young people and to identify strategies to foster safer drinking practices in this group, including strategies for young people to regulate their own consumption.

The study found that while there was widespread acceptance of a 'culture of intoxication' amongst young adults, the findings also suggested that they were well aware of alcohol-related harms, often on the basis of first-hand experience. This fundamentally experiential approach needs to be recognised in public health strategies, for messages that are discordant with the views of young adults are likely to be ineffective. It also suggests that peer education could be an effective public health approach.

## Outcomes

This study found that interventions aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm need to acknowledge pleasure and the other benefits of drinking and that calls for moderation and restraint are culturally at odds with the contemporary emphasis on deregulation and conspicuous consumption. Young adults negotiate these contradictions through what has been called 'calculated hedonism' or a 'controlled loss of control'. Young adults balance the desire for 'having fun', 'letting go' and 'taking risks' within the constraints imposed by study, work and family, and try to avoid risking their social and cultural credibility when drinking. The findings suggest that most young adults have developed strategies to ensure their own personal and social safety and that of their friends (even if they are not always effective).

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