# The men we want to be: Masculinity and alcohol consumption

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| **Author** | Jemima Turner |
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### Are the socially-constructed expectations of men fuelling their risky drinking behaviour?

“There’s a time for sloppy drinking. It’s called never.” Such reads the tagline of a DrinkWise [advertisement](https://drinkwise.org.au/wp-content/uploads/HTDP-schoolies-retail-cropped.png) launched in 2014 as part of their [*Drinking: Do It Properly*](https://drinkwise.org.au/our-work/drinking-do-it-properly/) campaign. Next to the tagline is a cartoon impression of a stereotypical 1950s gentlemen: perched in an armchair with whisky in hand, styled to the max. The central message? Traditional men – ‘real men’ – handle their alcohol. *Sloppy* drinking is denounced, *controlled* drinking is rendered sophisticated.

DrinkWise is a public relations body funded by the alcohol industry. Ostensibly, their ad seeks to use traditional masculine norms – about reputation, independence, and attractiveness – to shift the drinking behaviours of men away from risky drinking.

But what if traditional masculinity – the socially-constructed expectations of men – causes or reinforces risky drinking in the first place? Could appropriating and promoting the messages and images of traditional masculinity actually be part of the problem?

Recent research indeed suggests that traditional masculine norms – such as self-sufficiency, aggression, hypersexuality, and acting tough – are in fact entangled with high-risk alcohol consumption patterns.

The first comprehensive [study](https://jss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/The-Man-Box-A-study-on-being-a-young-man-in-Australia.pdf) of masculinity in Australia, released in 2018, revealed that men conforming to traditional definitions of manhood are more likely to regularly engage in binge drinking. More specifically, 38 per cent of men displaying higher-than-average agreement with traditional ideals drank to the point of getting drunk in the past month; compared with 22 per cent of those displaying no agreement.

Similarly, a VicHealth and Monash University [study](https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/-/media/ResourceCentre/PublicationsandResources/alcohol%20misuse/MensRiskyDrinking/Mens%20risky%20drinking%20final%20report.pdf), released in March 2019, found that Australian men aged 19-73 overwhelmingly view alcohol consumption as central to their social connections, indicating that masculine norms regarding male-male interaction shape consumption patterns.

Clearly, traditional masculine norms influence risky drinking. They are not the only factor at play, and they may not affect the behaviour of all men. But, they constitute one component of a network of interacting factors that impact upon drinking behaviours. If one wants to understand risky alcohol consumption, and develop interventions, then they cannot ignore the role of masculine norms.

However, these masculine norms do not necessarily track the thinking of men. Over the last couple of months, I conducted a survey of 107 undergraduates, seeking to understand how masculinity influences the alcohol-consumption behaviours of university students. My research revealed an even more complicated relationship between masculinity and alcohol among this subgroup. Very few students personally believed in traditional masculine norms themselves. Still, a significant number nevertheless believed that society expected these traits of them. Men who *perceived* that society values these norms are more likely to drink alcohol at high-risk levels, survey results showed. Granted, average drinking levels were troublingly high. But masculine social pressure exacerbated and reinforced risky drinking behaviours among those drinking *above* the average.

Public-health researchers Professor Wayne Hall and Dr Adrian Carter [reflected](https://theconversation.com/drinkwises-cynical-campaign-shouldnt-fool-anyone-23813) that the *Drinking: Do It Properly* campaign was fundamentally flawed because its underlying purpose was to promote alcohol consumption and make it look cool. As an industry campaign this is not surprising. But my research suggests the campaign was flawed in an additional way. By reinforcing traditional masculine norms, and suggesting that society values these traits, it could have further fuelled high-risk drinking.

Society has begun rethinking what it means to be a man. One effect of the #metoo movement was that it raised challenging and important questions about societal norms surrounding men’s behaviour. When thinking about the expectations we place on men, we need to re-evaluate traditional norms around alcohol consumption. My research also highlighted that there are better ways to combat risky drinking behaviours within this context.

One aspect of masculinity was overwhelmingly endorsed by students. 83.3% of men strongly agreed or agreed that, in their opinion, men should always look after their mates. With alcohol a leading cause of death among men, we should reframe what it means for men to care for one another. That is, letting men know that they cannot say they care about their mates while also encouraging risky drinking. We should let men be who they truly want to be – showing them new ways of embracing their solidarity with one another.

All of this means we need to communicate with young men differently. Perceived masculine norms may influence alcohol consumption. But these norms are not a reflection of what most men believe themselves. Awareness campaigns could tell men that the majority of their peers do not identify with traditional masculine norms, subverting their perception that society values these traits.

When building new norms around drinking, we must let men know that enabling and encouraging risky drinking actually acts in opposition to a belief that most of them hold dear. Perhaps alcohol-awareness campaigns could consider a new message: “There’s a time for looking after your mates. It’s called always.”

### Metadata

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