

“What do you replace it with?”: Using gendered leisure to understand women’s drinking practices and potential alternatives

Gabriella Sims¹, Belinda Lunnay¹, Catherine Palmer¹, Kristen Foley¹.

¹Torrens University Australia, Adelaide.

Presenter’s email: Gabriella.Sims@Student.Torrens.edu.au

Introduction

Midlife Australian women’s access to leisure is often negotiated amidst multiple co-existing gendered pressures. Mainstream narratives which push individual responsibility for maintaining wellbeing fail to recognise the social, environmental and commercial influences shaping midlife women’s leisure opportunities. Where leisure is shaped by these forces, alcohol consumption may act as a form of leisure, raising the question of how access to leisure alternatives might promote alcohol reduction. Alcohol consumption is a public health concern, with national data highlighting that alcohol consumption is not decreasing among midlife women, unlike for other age groups.

Method

27 women aged 45-64 took part in semi-structured qualitative interviews in Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney, Australia. This secondary thematic analysis interprets midlife women’s personal accounts of their alcohol consumption through a lens of gendered leisure to explore how perceptions of leisure (time, space) might connect with sober curious futures and facilitate alcohol reduction.

Key Findings

Women’s stories demonstrate that in taking time out for ‘serious leisure’, women risk transgressing social norms and expectations. Access, or lack of, to leisure influenced drinking for themselves and others, particularly where alcohol offered convenience. Some women desired more agency over both their drinking and leisure; for drinking to be a part of, but not dominate, leisure settings.

Discussions and Conclusions

Women’s narratives of leisure and drinking stories demonstrate a paradox for public health where practices can be health harming and pleasurable. These findings highlight a need for less alcohol-centric leisure environments. Any attempt to reduce women’s drinking must be supported by social change to address gendered social pressures which restrict access to leisure. While our data concerns women’s drinking stories, these findings potentially hold relevance for other substance-related practices, highlighting that efforts to reduce substance use must consider leisure (or its absence).

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