

Understanding Impactful Use: How LGBTQ+ People Make Sense of Their Alcohol and Drug (AOD) Use

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Introduction: Disproportionately high levels of AOD use and related harms are observed among LGBTQ+ populations. Examining how LGBTQ+ people understand and recognise AOD use as harmful or 'impactful' is crucial for harm reduction efforts.

Methods: 40 life history interviews with LGBTQ+ people in Victoria with experiences of impactful AOD.

Key Findings: LGBTQ+ populations hold specific cultural perspectives of AOD use, and Impactful use is understood as distinct from—but ultimately tied to—AOD-related harms. Narratives about impactful use are integral to participants' experiences and are described as being a casual factor in perceived losses of agency in everyday life, misalignments between one's values and actions, health concerns and changes in drug effects over time. Understandings of impactful use derive from a mix of cultural narratives and personal experiences. Understanding one's use as impactful prompts help-seeking among participants, forms an important framework for managing substance use practices and provides a means of sense-making for both past and ongoing experiences with AOD use.

Discussions and Conclusions: Understandings of impactful AOD use are subject to cultural interpretation, shaped by prevailing narratives around morality, self-control, identity, and recovery. These narratives are shaped by the specific history of and relationship to AOD use for LGBTQ+ individuals, informing consumption practices and treatment access by delineating who is understood as being at risk and as needing care. Understandings of impactful use therefore function as an interpretive framework through which individuals navigate decisions relating to help-seeking.

Implications for Practice or Policy: AOD treatment needs to build on and be responsive to the culturally specific understandings of impactful use that inform LGBTQ+ consumption practices. Bolstering LGBTQ+ people's understandings of what impactful use looks like for them may support more meaningful, self-directed approaches to care, enabling individuals to articulate their own thresholds for concern, treatment outcomes, and strategies for change.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

This project was funded by the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA), under the Alcohol and Drug Research Innovation Agenda (ADRIA) initiative (Grant ID: #110). AF was supported by a Discovery Early Career Research Award (DE220100028).