Safety, belonging and exploration: using mixed-methods latent class analysis to increase understanding of alcohol use in emerging adults experiencing severe mental ill-health

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Introduction: *Research shows alcohol use problems are common and negatively impact mental and physical health in people with Severe Mental Ill-health (SMI). Less is known about alcohol use in emerging adults experiencing SMI. Emerging adulthood is associated with exploration and strong social needs which may influence different patterns of alcohol and substance use compared to older people with SMI. This research examines the experience of alcohol use for emerging adults with SMI. We predicted that distinct latent groups would be found and membership of these would be related to both normative developmental needs and impacts of SMI.*

Methods: *Australians aged 16-25 experiencing SMI who had consumed any alcohol in the preceding six months were recruited via social media. Participants completed an online survey of demographic information, questionnaires and open text responses about their alcohol, other substance use, and mental health. Text responses were analysed to derive themes about alcohol use and function. These themes were recoded and combined with questionnaire responses in a Latent Class Analysis (LCA) to identify groups of participants.*

Results: *100 participants completed the survey (73% female, 34% psychosis spectrum disorder, 20% substance use disorder). Participants reported high levels of depressed mood and 86% used alcohol at a hazardous or high-risk level. Eleven themes were identified, the most endorsed being mood management and social confidence. LCA identified three groups– Social Management, Seeking Safety/Impaired Control, and Exploration. Differences were observed between groups on alcohol use, number of substances used, diagnoses, social anxiety/conformity, and depression.*

Discussions and Conclusions: *Findings suggest there are discrete patterns of drinking based on key needs of emerging adults experiencing SMI. Further research examining engagement and intervention strategies tailored towards social anxiety, emotional and cognitive regulation, and social identity and connectedness is recommended to address hazardous and harmful alcohol use in emerging adults with SMI.*

Implications for Practice or Policy (*optional*)**:** *Alcohol and other substance use is a normative experience of emerging adulthood that holds different risks and functions for young adults experiencing SMI. Recognising these differences without stigmatising use suggests intervention be based around need rather than a perceived deficit for people who already experience stigma.*

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Themes: alcohol, comorbidity, special populations