

# Interrogating LBQ women's substance use: towards culturally responsive, community-informed approaches

Julie Mooney-Somers



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**Evidence**  
LBQ vs  
Heterosexual  
women



**Evidence**  
LBQ in LGBT  
research



**Case study:**  
How do mass media  
campaigns fail



**Evidence**  
Gender + sexuality  
and AOD use



**Case study**  
Learning from  
community-based  
campaigns



# Psychological, social and cultural influences on smoking among lesbian, bisexual and queer women

Ruby Grant<sup>1</sup>, Julie Mooney-Somers<sup>2</sup>, Ruth McNair<sup>3</sup>, Amy Pennay<sup>4</sup>, Catherine Segan<sup>5,6</sup>, Jennifer Power<sup>1</sup>, Adam Bourne<sup>1</sup>

Job Control: first

► Additional supplemental material is published online only. To view please visit the journal online (https://doi.org/10.1136/sex-2024-059339).

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for Alcohol

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## ABSTRACT

**Background** Smoking rates have declined markedly in Australia over time; however, lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) women continue to smoke at higher rates than heterosexual women. Understanding the factors influencing smoking in this population is crucial for developing targeted cessation interventions and other supports.

# Lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) women report disproportionately higher rates of alcohol use, smoking, and vaping...



International Journal of Drug Abuse Treatment

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## Queering vaping: A qualitative analysis of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women's E-cigarette use in Australia

Ruby Grant<sup>a,b</sup>, Adrian Farrugia<sup>a</sup>, Isabel Mudford<sup>b</sup>, Julie Mooney-Somers<sup>c</sup>, Jennifer Power<sup>a</sup>, Ruth McNair<sup>d</sup>, Amy Pennay<sup>e</sup>, Adam Bourne<sup>a,f</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:** E-cigarettes, Gender, Nicotine, Queer theory, Sexuality

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Vaping Australia. Despite it underexplored. This expression, and rest the aesthetic, social Methods: Sixty semi-structured interviews with LBQ women aged 18–70 explore participants' experiences. **Findings:** Participant community bonding stigma and youth access to normative public Conclusion: Vaping community, and age the queer socio-cult unintended harms



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Journal of Substance Use and Addiction Treatment

journal homepage: www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-substance-use-and-addiction-treatment



## Agency and queer solidarity: Help-seeking for alcohol and nicotine issues among lesbian, bisexual and queer women and non-binary people

Ruth McNair<sup>a,b</sup>, Ruby Grant<sup>b</sup>, Thanh Ly An<sup>b,1</sup>, Julie Mooney-Somers<sup>c</sup>, Amy Pennay<sup>d</sup>, Jennifer Power<sup>b</sup>, Adam Bourne<sup>b</sup>

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## 'All the dykes I know drink beer': Sexuality and gender performance through alcohol consumption among lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in Australia

Ruby Grant<sup>a,b</sup>, Jennifer Power<sup>a</sup>, Julie Mooney-Somers<sup>b</sup>, Amy Pennay<sup>c</sup>, Ruth McNair<sup>d</sup>, Adam Bourne<sup>a,b,e</sup>

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Sexuality  
Research  
and Social  
Policy

## ARTICLE INFO

**Background:** This article explores the relationship between gender, sexuality and alcohol consumption among lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) women in Australia. On average, LBQ women consume alcohol at a higher rate than heterosexual women, yet the use of alcohol and its gendered meanings in this population remains under-explored. **Methods:** We conducted semi-structured interviews with 42 cisgender women, 10 transgender women, and 9 non-binary people who identify as lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer. Participants were aged 18–72. Interviews explored participants' experiences with alcohol, gender, and sexuality. Interviews were thematically analysed, informed by intersectional and other drug scholarship lens. While 'minority stress' is often cited as a key factor in explaining LBQ women's high rates of alcohol consumption, our findings suggest a more complex relationship between gender, sexuality and alcohol. Drinking is gendered for LBQ women, enabling both performance of and resistance to gendered norms. Additionally, alcohol emerged as a tool for navigating gendered vulnerability in social spaces, with some participants shaping their alcohol intake to their environment. Our findings highlight the importance of approaches to LBQ women's health that recognise alcohol as a social tool that can facilitate connection, and community connection. Rather than focusing solely on risk and vulnerability, policies and prevention efforts should consider the diverse ways in which LBQ women use alcohol to navigate their personal and social environments.

# Alcohol use/problematic use differences are well documented

**National/probability studies from US:** 3-7 times higher odds of past year alcohol dependence; less likely to abstain; more likely to report heavy episodic drinking, drinking to intoxication, drinking related problems; more likely to report lifetime and past year treatment; more likely to have co-occurring alcohol use and drug use disorders

**National/probability studies from Australia:** higher rates of high risk drinking and daily drinking; higher rates of treatment seeking; earlier initiation

**Meta analysis of studies from North America, Europe and Australasia:** risk of alcohol dependence 4 x higher

## Smoking differences are well documented

**National/probability studies from US:** higher rates of smoking, higher rates of daily smoking; 2 times higher odds of smoking; smoking regularly at a younger age; higher past month dependence (age variations)

**National/probability studies from Australia:** more likely to report past year and ever smoked; 3 times more likely to currently smoke; earlier initiation

## Other drug use/problematic use are well documented

**National/probability studies from US:** 3-5 times higher odds of past-year marijuana use; 2-3 times higher odds of illicit drug; great risk of drug dependence or any substance use disorder;

**National/probability studies from Australia:** more likely to have used marijuana (3x) and to report weekly or more frequent marijuana use; significantly higher odds of using illicit drugs ; more likely to have ever injected drug (1/10)

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# What does LGB(T) research tell us about LBQ women's AOD use?

The screenshot shows the AIHW website with the following structure:

- Header:** Australian Government Australian Institute of Health and Welfare | AIHW | Search bar
- Navigation:** Home, Reports & data, About our data, Our services, Newsroom, About us
- Breadcrumbs:** Home > Reports & data > LGBTIQ+ communities > LGBT people's use of alcohol, tobacco, e-cigarettes and other drugs
- Share button:** Share <
- Section Header:** National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2022-2023: **LGBT people's use of alcohol, tobacco, e-cigarettes and other drugs**
- Metadata:** Web article | Last updated: 29 Feb 2024 | Topic: LGBTIQ+ communities | Part of National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2022-2023 | 95
- On this page:**
  - ✓ Daily smoking among gay, lesbian, and bisexual people continued to decline
  - ✓ Use of vapes and e-cigarettes among gay, lesbian, and bisexual people more than doubled
  - ✓ Long term declines in risky drinking among gay, lesbian and bisexual people continued
  - ✓ Increases in illicit drug use among gay, lesbian, and bisexual people
  - ✓ Tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use among trans and gender diverse people
- Related articles:**
  - Alcohol, tobacco and other drug use among people with CALD backgrounds > 29 Feb 2024
  - First Nations people's use of alcohol, tobacco, e-cigarettes and other drugs > 29 Feb 2024
- Explore articles:**
  - Alcohol consumption
    - > Alcohol related harms and risks in the NDSHS
    - > Risky alcohol consumption in the

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- ✓ Increases in illicit drug use among gay, lesbian, and bisexual people
- ✓ Tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use among trans and gender diverse people

**LGBT people in the National Drug Strategy Household Survey**

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people can be at an increased risk of alcohol, tobacco and other drug problems (Department of Health and Aged Care 2017). These increased risks may come from many sources, including stigma and discrimination, familial issues, and lack of support.

It is difficult to estimate the number of people in Australia who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or gender diverse, intersex or queer. This is due to a few factors including an absence of questions in population-based surveys around sex, gender and identity and that most studies to date focus on gay, lesbian, and bisexual people (AIHW 2023).

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) includes questions on gender and sex recorded at birth.

**Related articles**

- Alcohol, tobacco and other drug use among people with CALD backgrounds > 29 Feb 2024
- First Nations people's use of alcohol, tobacco, e-cigarettes and other drugs > 29 Feb 2024

**Explore articles**

- Alcohol consumption
  - > Alcohol related harms and risks in the NDSHS
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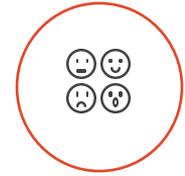
**FEEDBACK**

## LBQ women varying from normative gendered patterns of substance use, whereas GBMSM are not

Research consistently shows that LBQ women have distinct and elevated patterns of alcohol use compared to heterosexual women, while differences between heterosexual and gay/bisexual men are inconsistent.

*“The effects of sexual minority status on substance use and substance dependence were consistently larger for women than for men .... unlike findings from general population studies in which rates of substance use and substance dependence are typically higher among men, in this study rates of substance use and substance dependence for sexual minority women not only exceeded those of heterosexual women, but in some cases also exceeded those of sexual minority men” McCabe 2009*

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This report provides an unparalleled insight into the health and wellbeing of LBQ women...

Over the last four iterations of the SWASH survey (2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012), a total of 3764 lesbian, bisexual and queer women engaged with Sydney LBQ0 communities have been surveyed. The lack of comparable surveys within Australia (and to the authors' knowledge, internationally) highlights the importance of SWASH. This report provides an unparalleled insight into the health and wellbeing of LBQ women, and also indicates findings of particular salience and urgency for those interested in improving the health and wellbeing of this population. Little has changed since the 2010 survey and as a result, our recommendations remain largely the same.

5.1. Tobacco use

A third (33%) of LBQ women reported smoking. This is more than twice the rate (14%) among women in the general population in New South Wales.<sup>118</sup> The vast majority were daily smokers (86%); with 22% of LBQ women smoking daily this is again considerably higher than the general population (8%).<sup>119</sup> Of considerable concern is the rate of smoking among younger women: 42% of 15-24 year old SWASH respondents smoked. The 2011/12 Australian Health Survey found 17% of similar aged women in the general population smoked.<sup>120</sup> Some ten years ago the Australian Lung Cancer Study of Women's Health found a similar level of disparity: 46% of LBQ women aged 22-27 years were smokers, compared to 25% of heterosexual women.<sup>121</sup> This suggests that the finding that LBQ women smoke at twice the rate of women in the general community is consistent and robust.

Tobacco use is a significant public health issue facing LBQ women and their communities. Widespread government initiatives have been introduced since the 2006 survey, including graphic pictures on all tobacco products and, in 2007, a ban on smoking in all indoor areas in pubs and nightclubs. Several hard-hitting campaigns in popular media have also appeared. These initiatives have had a considerable impact on smoking rates. The 2011/12 AHS rates that "decreasing smoking rates have occurred across all age groups, and particularly among people aged under 45 years"<sup>122</sup> And yes, rates among LBQ women have fallen only slightly from 35% to 33% since 2006. Among young LBQ women smoking has fallen at a similarly slow rate from 45% to 42%.

- The rate of smoking among LBQ women remains at twice the rate of women in the general population; this demands urgent public health action.
- Detailed exploration is required to understand why progressively successful, mainstream anti-smoking campaigns and programs are not proving successful within this group of women. Targeted interventions to prevent young LBQ women taking up smoking may be needed.
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- Examination of the role and efficacy of smoking cessation programs for LBQ women is necessary.

5.2. Alcohol use

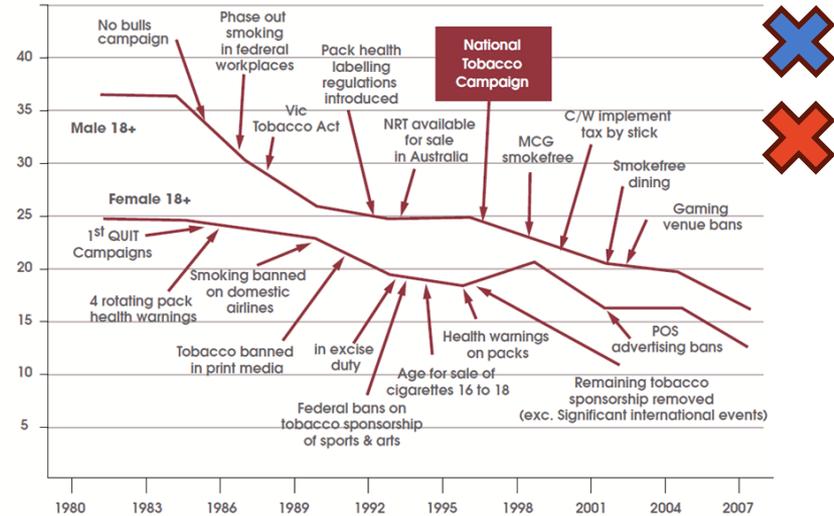
The vast majority of LBQ women drink alcohol, most doing so frequently. In a day when they drink alcohol, 53% of women reported usually drinking at levels that, according to NHMRC recommendations, put them at a lifetime risk of alcohol-related disease or injury.<sup>123</sup> Among younger women, 70% drank at these levels. One in five LBQ women reported drinking at levels that, according to NHMRC recommendations, put them at risk of alcohol-related injury. However, a quarter of women who drank – 36% of young women – reported drinking at these levels at least weekly.

- LBQ women are at high risk of lifetime risk of alcohol-related disease or injury, and are often drinking at levels that put them at risk of acohol-related injury on a single drinking occasion.
- Further research is needed to understand the social and cultural context of alcohol use among LBQ women; this knowledge can inform targeted interventions.
- Levels of risky drinking among younger LBQ women demonstrates an urgent need for early interventions. Messages about responsible drinking should be integrated into existing programs delivered by LBQ0 community organisations, and community events that co-

# in Australia

Figure 1.4:

Milestones in reducing smoking in Australia 1980–2007



Source: The Cancer Council of Victoria 2009

## LBQ women not seeing themselves in anti-smoking mass media

*P1: A lot of the commercials, usually it's a parent or someone that might potentially leave their kids behind or I don't like using the word burden but being a burden to their family 'cause they're sick and you look after them, like whether that's what happens or not like the commercial is trying to say this is what will happen. Yeah*

*P2: You should quit for people that care about you*

*P1: For your family, yeah*

*I'm not very close with my family, so when they bring stuff like that up it doesn't speak to me. The whole family – there's always a huge family and then it's like the birthday and then you're coughing and I'm like, well, I'll never be in that situation*

## LBQ women not seeing themselves in anti-smoking mass media

*L1: she was smoking and the little child came out and saw her and asked her for something.*

*Q: How did that make you feel in terms of your own smoking?*

*L1: I wouldn't – **luckily I don't have children.***

*L2: That's what I was thinking. I saw it too and I thought, oh, I don't have kids*

*Oh my God, please don't make it about our kids and our fucking husbands*

# LBQ women not seeing themselves in anti-smoking mass media

*R1: I think part of the reason I'm resistant to quitting right now, like sure I want to get healthy and stuff but that image of the healthy woman makes me so angry like that – do you know what I'm talking about? Yeah like drinking kale juice and running in the pure sunshine and like perfectly toned and like feeling so fucking happy all the time. [...]*

*[...]*

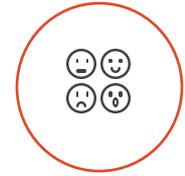
*R2: What's marketed is ridiculous, it's like there's no alternative message besides you're either a middle-class beacon of health who's never, ever done anything wrong in her life or you're a trash. Yep. But I don't aspire to her. I don't aspire to be anyone like her. So that's why it doesn't work for me.*

## How would LBQ women like campaigns to engage them?

*L1: Someone at a dance party; I love dancing and I go to dance parties, and if I gave up smoking I know I can dance longer and more actively, so for me it would be me going crazy on the dance floor going, gees, I'm glad I gave up because now I can dance all night and do all these things without worrying that I'm - - - [...]*

*L2: Or now I can really laugh. Because when you smoke a lot – now, sometimes when I really want a big laugh, it's, oh, I'm going to risk dying of laughing. Now, I can have a good laugh without running out of breath; things like that. That's what I'd like to see.*

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# How do we explain differences between LBQ and heterosexual women?

Stigma-related stressors -> substance use is a response to – a way for women to cope with or escape – psychological distress or social isolation produced through the experience of discrimination and marginalisation related to their sexuality.

Substance use as an embedded social practice

Social bonding

Identity expression

# Psychological, social and cultural influences on smoking among lesbian, bisexual and queer women

Ruby Grant<sup>1</sup>,<sup>\*</sup> Julie Mooney-Somers,<sup>2</sup> Ruth McNair,<sup>3</sup> Amy Pennay,<sup>4</sup> Catherine Segan,<sup>5,6</sup> Jennifer Power,<sup>1</sup> Adam Bourne<sup>1,7</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Canberra

## ABSTRACT

**Background** Smoking rates have declined markedly in Australia over time; however, lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) women continue to smoke at higher rates than heterosexual women. Understanding the factors influencing smoking in this population is crucial for developing targeted cessation interventions and other supports.

## WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

⇒ Previous, largely quantitative research has noted high smoking rates among lesbian, bisexual and queer (LBQ) women, often attributed to minority stress.

## WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

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180 (2024) 209813

## ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
E-cigarettes  
Gender  
Nicotine  
Queer theory  
Sexuality

## ABSTRACT

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

## ARTICLE INFO

**Background:** This study explores the relationship between gender, sexuality and alcohol consumption among lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) women in Australia. On average, LBQ women consume alcohol at a higher rate than heterosexual women, yet the use of alcohol and its gendered meanings in this population remains under-explored. Methods: We conducted semi-structured interviews with 42 cisgender women, 10 transgender women, and 9 non-binary people who identify as lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer. Participants were aged 18–72. Interviews explored participants' experiences with alcohol, gender, and sexuality. Interviews were thematically analysed, informed by a conceptual framework of minority stress. Findings: Interviews were thematically analysed, informed by a conceptual framework of minority stress. Findings suggest a more complex relationship between alcohol, gender, and sexuality. Drinking is gendered for LBQ women, enabling both performance of and resistance to gendered norms. Additionally, alcohol emerged as a tool for navigating gendered vulnerability in social settings, with some participants shaping their alcohol intake to their environment. Our findings highlight the need for approaches to LBQ women's health that recognise alcohol as a social tool that can facilitate connection, and community connection. Rather than focusing solely on risk and vulnerability, policies and prevention efforts should consider the diverse ways in which LBQ women use alcohol to navigate their social environments.

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## Smoking as an expression of gender

Well-established gendered expressions facilitated by **smoking**

*Smoking often makes me feel tough, particularly if I'm on the street wearing all black, my Blundstones [work boots], having a ciggy, maybe wearing a flanno [flannel shirt]. That expresses a certain kind of femininity which is like 'Don't fuck with me' and I feel powerful doing that.*

*I love smoking cigarettes. There are these under the counter European cigarettes that are long and skinny. They make me feel elegant. It makes me want to buy one of those Audrey Hepburn long cigarette holders. It's so classy.*

# Vaping as an expression of gender

Gendered performance of **vaping** less clear

- A feminine practice, associated with fun, colourful, linked with stereotypical expressions of femininity (especially for trans women)
- Sweet and fruity flavours seen as feminine, while strong or savoury flavours were seen as masculine

*this comic book-esque beautiful woman emerging from a cloud that smells like cotton candy. It's something that would only exist in a dream*

## Drinking as an expression of gender

*Beers that are associated traditionally with men. If I saw a woman drinking that in a bar I might question if she was queer. So maybe things like VB or Fosters, and especially the way that you drink it like in a can versus in a glass or just like chugging it, like in a very masculine-coded way.*

*A lot of dykes will be drinking beers, you're not going to find a lot of masc-presenting lesbian or bisexual women who have the fun fruity cocktails.*

*I think it's also about the glass, the shape of the glass. Like a cocktail glass is just such a feminine shape, you know [...] I drink beer. I like whiskey. I like the glassware associated with those drinks.*

## Drinking as an expression of gender

*It was so much more important to me in maybe my first 18 months of transitioning that I wasn't going to drink certain things anymore, because I was like 'men drink that, that's a thing that a guy would drink', like beer or whiskey or like brown liquors. I associate that with my brothers and my dad because they love to drink scotch, they're always drinking beers and craft beer especially.*

*...but when I drink wine I feel like quite a sexy, sultry woman, so yeah I guess in some way it does make me express my gender to an extent.*

# Vaping as an expression of (queer) sexuality

Vapes offer lots of opportunities for identity expression:

*Like sometimes I see the queerest fashion and without a doubt there will be a cloud of vapour like following this person, right? Because they're strutting and vaping*

*Smoking and vaping [...] it's kind of part of people's aesthetic, I guess. There's a particular vape flavour that is very queer coded, very much associated with, especially bi women, I think, but the queer community in general. I think it's watermelon*

## Vaping as queer sociability

*The first time I had a vape, I was on the dance floor at [gay nightclub] on Oxford Street and a drag queen handed me a vape. You don't say no in that situation, you say thank you*

*When [my girlfriend and I] are sharing the vape we are often kissing, so that's why we vape a lot together. It's kind of like flirting or something. By sharing the smell, smelling the same, it's kind of like a space only for us.*

*I would try other people's vapes, even during COVID times. I mean, you can bum [ask for] a cigarette from a workmate, but you're not going to use their vape. That's a bit more kind of personal. that's more reserved for friends. Yeah, there's definitely an intimacy to it.*

# QSOX briefing papers



## Briefing Paper 1: LBQ Women and Alcohol

Ruby Grant, Julie Mooney-Somers, Amy Penney, Ruth McNair,  
Jennifer Power, Jami Jones, Adam Bourne

## Briefing Paper 2: LBQ Women and Smoking

Ruby Grant, Julie Mooney-Somers, Amy Penney, Ruth McNair,  
Jennifer Power, Jami Jones, Adam Bourne

## Briefing Paper 3: LBQ Women and Vaping

Ruby Grant, Julie Mooney-Somers, Amy Penney, Ruth McNair,  
Jennifer Power, Jami Jones, Adam Bourne

## Practice Guide: Supporting LBQ Women and Non-Binary People with Alcohol, Tobacco and Nicotine Use

Ruby Grant, Julie Mooney-Somers, Amy Penney, Ruth McNair,  
Jennifer Power, Jami Jones, Adam Bourne



# Interrogating LBQ women's substance use: towards culturally responsive, community-informed approaches



**Evidence**  
LBQ vs  
Heterosexual  
women

**Evidence**  
LBQ in LGBT  
research

**Case study:**  
How do mass media  
campaigns fail

**Evidence**  
Gender + sexuality  
and AOD use

**Case study**  
Learning from  
community-based  
campaigns

# Rethink the Drink (Thorne Harbour Health)



Share your story at [rethinkthedrink.org.au](http://rethinkthedrink.org.au)

thorne  
harbour  
health



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thorne  
harbour  
health

## Quit Flicks (Quit Vic and Thorne Harbour Health)



# Smoke Free Still Fierce (ACON)

## You can be smoke free and still fierce

We spoke to seven fierce women in our community about their relationship – and break-up – with cigarettes. Their unique stories will make you smile, inspire you and remind you that no matter your relationship with smoking, quitting is possible!

Check out their stories below.

Janenne



Kelly



Desley



Arca



Michelle

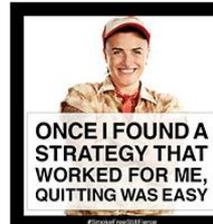


Michelle and Drift



**Currently quitting?** Download a quote below from one of our fierce women, so if you find yourself reaching for a cigarette, you can read some words of inspiration to help you stay **#SmokeFreeStillFierce**.

Music: Stay Monkey - [Julie Ruin](#) | Cinematography and Editing: [Amanda Austin](#)



# Smoke Free Still Fierce (ACON)



# What do all these campaigns have in common?

Community-focused approach

Culturally relevant imagery, music, experiences, identity

Lived experience, peer stories, solidarity

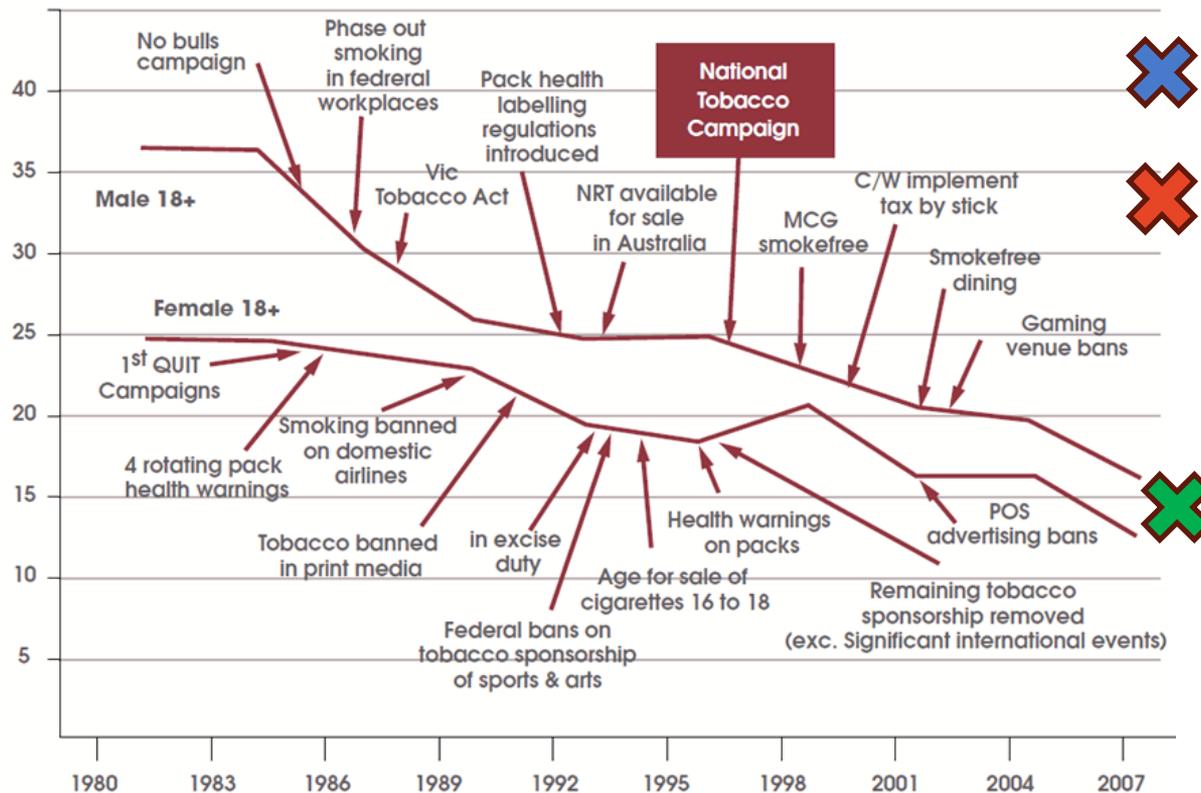
Positive framing - life affirming, doing things of personal significance; not judgmental or shaming

Community cares

Humour

Figure 1.4:

Milestones in reducing smoking in Australia 1980–2007



Source: The Cancer Council of Victoria 2009

## Take home messages:

**Whose business are LBQ women?** LBQ women can be easily missed if they are simply seen as a subset of women, they are equally likely to disappear as a subset of LGBT. We need to disaggregate quantitative data and develop research that attends to gender and sexuality.

We need to **shift beyond simple risk-based messaging** and develop strengths-based campaigns that recognise the complex role of substances in LBQ women's lives – and the social implications for women when we ask them to / they want to change their use, cut down or quit.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these insights with you today.

My deep gratitude to the:

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UnLEASH team at UNSW, especially Mo Hammoud