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Young Adult Drinking Styles

Current Perspectives on Research, Policy
and Practice

Edited by
Dom Conroy · Fiona Measham

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Dom Conroy • Fiona Measham
Editors

Young Adult Drinking Styles

Current Perspectives on Research,
Policy and Practice

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macmillan

Editors

Dom Conroy
Faculty of Arts and Social Science
The Open University
London, UK

Fiona Measham
Department of Sociology
Social Policy and Criminology
University of Liverpool
Liverpool, UK

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Preface

The phrase ‘young adult drinking’ conjures up evocative images, at least until recently, of excess, anti-social behaviour and harm. More recently the images of young adults on our screens have been of a more restrained, and indeed often strained, ilk, associated with a prioritisation of health and wellness in image and deed, plant-based diets (evident in the growing popularity of vegan products marketed at young adults) and concerns about their own future and the future of the planet, with movements like Extinction Rebellion reflecting a shift from a culture of consumption to a culture of restraint and sustainability.

At the close of the second decade of the twenty-first century, research and scholarly discussion concerning young adult alcohol use increasingly recognises the myriad ways in which alcohol can be understood and researched. Evidence now consistently points to broad demographic shifts in drinking behaviour among young adults. This is reflected in changes in expectations and stereotypes around drinking styles and behaviours among women and men and in the significant increase in the number of non-drinkers found among young adults in many developed countries. The rapid rise of social media use and mobile/smartphone technology also hold significant implications for future trends in alcohol, not just for drinkers but also for health promotion, and for alcohol industry manufacturing, marketing and retail practices.

Views on drinking behaviour and approaches to alcohol among young adults continue to evolve. Accordingly, new research agendas and some evidence of movement away from a purely 'pathological' model for thinking about drinking behaviour among young adults have occurred. This new research climate is partly reflected in the great increase in qualitative and mixed methods research and a growth in multi-disciplinary collaborations involving anthropologists, epidemiologists, psychologists, criminologists and sociologists, to name but a few. This diversification of topic focus and method application in the field of alcohol research is critically important from both clinical and policy perspectives. Progressive, successful modes of promoting more moderate drinking over the life course among young adults seem likely to benefit from the 'real world' emphasis of some contemporary alcohol research.

Why should the drinking practices among individuals whom we are terming 'young adults' (those aged approximately 18–30 years) warrant particular attention? Some authors consider that there are typical characteristics and decisions involved in this life stage—for example, relating to living arrangements; acquiring secure/meaningful employment; initiation and experimentation with illicit drugs and altered states of intoxication; engaging with choices and meanings associated with identity and sexuality—that qualitatively distinguish young adulthood from earlier or later life stages. While early phases of experimentation may be behind them, many young adults are leaving the protective influences of family and local community for university, work and cohabiting with friends and partners, and beginning to lay down particular understandings about alcohol's role in their life, which may form the basis for how alcohol is used (or not) for the remainder of that individual's life. Therefore, from their late teens onwards, young adults are presented (in most cases) with a relatively unfamiliar but considerable range of settings and occasions which demand decisions and action relating to alcohol use (and non-use).

How might 'drinking styles' provide a useful shift of focus? The lexicon for describing and understanding drinking behaviours and practices, and for identifying particular 'types' of drinkers is vast but is also culturally and historically situated. For example, we can think of drinking behaviour in terms of 'social drinking', 'moderate drinking', 'problem drinking', 'anti-social drinking', 'binge drinking', 'light drinking' and the list

continues. Given the constructive power of the terminology surrounding alcohol consumption in the context of young adult drinking practices, questions are raised about possible alternatives that manage to navigate a route through these hard definitions to produce a more coherent appreciation of young adult drinking practices, cultural and policy change surrounding alcohol consumption, and new trends in research. The term 'drinking styles', which has appeared previously on occasions in the alcohol literature, helps guide the development of theory that accounts for fluidity and inconsistency in drinking practices over time. In terms of 'real world' advantages, the term 'drinking styles' provides a term that recognises that drinking behaviour is chosen and re-chosen between and within events involving the potential for alcohol consumption. Put another way, to discuss an individual's (or group's) drinking styles provides a way of acknowledging the multiple factors (and therefore multiple sites) for pursuing a health promotion agenda to promote safe, sustainable drinking practices among young adults.

Whilst there is persistent coverage of alcohol-related issues in the media, academic, policy and broader cultural settings, what is much less clearly available is a space dedicated to a consideration of the trends, nuances and contexts for young adult drinking linked with life stage transitions and identity/identities in the post-Internet world. In exploring the complexities of drinking behaviour among young adults the contributors to this collection avoid traditional understandings of young adult drinking that pathologise and generalise. We advocate instead for an inclusive approach evident in the wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, cultural perspectives and international settings represented in this book, in order to better understand the economic, cultural and pharmacological cross-roads at which we now stand.

Never before has there been such a wide range of methods and approaches to considering drinking behaviour and practices among young adults. Our collection reflects this diversity with a range of methodological traditions which help expose nuance and difference in young adult drinking behaviour. Much of this is comprised of interview-based data, but this book also contains research based on focus groups, on studies of policy documents and on analyses of large-scale survey data. We think this variety has helped to produce a more engaging and stimulating

text but has also offered a collection that acknowledges the range of methodological lenses that can be applied to alcohol research focused on young adults and, as such, offers a more representative reflection of current field research.

We have structured the book into five short but distinct sections. Part I is organised around the theme of ‘Changing Trends in Young Adult Drinking’ reflecting both growing interest in what appears to be a decline in alcohol consumption among young people in recent years but also how drinking practices in young adulthood may transition to different drinking practices later in life. Part II is titled ‘Diversity in Young Adult Drinking’ and presents a series of examples of the diversity of young adult drinking behaviour with focus in the new edition on under-represented groups.

Part III turns attention to non-drinkers and non-drinking in newly titled section, ‘Young Adults Who Drink Little or No Alcohol’ which is designed to highlight and explore contemporary aspects of drinking practices among young adults (or, indeed, anyone) including focus on, illustratively, participation in abstinence challenges, and experiences of sober dating among young adults.

Part IV presents chapters under the section heading ‘Young Adult Drinking Spaces: Staying Inside; Going Outside; Digital Spaces’ and suggests how young adult drinking styles might be usefully framed in a contextualised sense involving specific places, time periods, online spaces or particular groups of people. Part V titled ‘Young Adult Drinking Styles Since COVID-19: Policy and Practice’ shifts attention to consider topic areas with perhaps particular relevance to alcohol policy, with two final book chapters which explore, respectively, violence associated with alcohol consumption and connections between alcohol consumption and mental health and policy implications relevant to young adults.

London, UK
Liverpool, UK

Dom Conroy
Fiona Measham

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Ethics Approval Where original research is described in book content this research was ethically approved and required individuals to sign informed consent before participating in research.

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Notes on Contributors

Marie Fjellerup Bærndt is a postdoctoral researcher at VIVE, the Danish Center for Social Science Research, Denmark and did her PhD studies on young Muslim women and the Danish (youth) alcohol culture. She has focused on young Muslim women's subjective experiences with an interest in how youth drinking can advance as well as complicate issues of community, belonging and inclusion. Currently she is doing research on STX (upper secondary school) students' different ways to find and develop communities of cohesion within their school, with a particular interest in relations that cut across differences such as ethnicity and gender. Her theoretical interests are broad and cover, for example, intersectionality, belonging, sociology of emotions, phenomenology and storytelling.

Emma Banister is a Professor of Consumption and Society at the University of Manchester. Her research expertise is in Transformative Consumer Research, informing policy outcomes and addressing inequalities and vulnerabilities in the marketplace and the workplace. Her research mainly focuses on issues connected with identity, consumer culture, and policy in relation to alcohol, parenting, and parental leave. She is co-chair of the Academy of Marketing's 'Consumer Research with Social Impact' Special Interest Group. Her work has been published in a range of sociology and business journals.

Ashlea Bartram is a senior research fellow at the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction at Flinders University, Australia. She is a mixed-methods researcher with over seven years of experience in research and evaluation related to alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, with work that spans the spectrum from prevention and policy to treatment and workforce development. She has a particular interest in the ways people do ‘non-drinking’ and the implications of these for health promotion.

Alexandra Bogren is Associate Professor of Sociology at Södertörn University, Sweden. She is currently doing research on young people’s experiences of sexual encounters and sexual violence in drinking settings. She is also the Principal Investigator (PI) on a Swedish Research Council funded project on the uses of body-worn cameras within the Swedish Police. Her previous work has examined how the mass media (re)produce, communicate, and challenge gendered discourses of alcohol and drug use.

Gabriel Caluzzi is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University. His work aims to understand how drug and alcohol practices among young people are informed by sociocultural context. He is particularly interested in the cultural meanings young people associate with alcohol, and how recent declines in young people’s drinking might be understood within the context of broader generational changes.

Dom Conroy is an associate lecturer at The Open University. Dom has expertise in qualitative and mixed methods research and has conducted health-related research focusing on alcohol consumption among young people, non-drinking, sobriety and temporary abstinence challenges. Over the last 15 years, Dom has produced over 30 peer-reviewed articles in addition to the first volume of *Young Adult Drinking Styles* which, in 2021, won a British Medical Association category award.

Claire Davey is a researcher of contemporary sobriety culture, particularly women’s use of online sobriety communities. Claire holds a PhD from Canterbury Christ Church University obtained in 2024 and was a recipient of their University Research Scholarship. Her research has been

published in numerous peer-reviewed journals, including *Frontiers in Global Women's Health*, *Drug and Alcohol Review* and *Journal of International Women's Studies*. In 2023, Claire won the Feminist Studies Association's Student Essay Prize. She is currently writing a book titled *Sober Sisterhood: Women's Recovery Culture within Online Sobriety Communities*, based on her PhD research.

Vibeke Asmussen Frank is Head of Research Center for Social Marginalisation, VIA University College, Denmark and has done social science alcohol and drug research for over 20 years. A main interest has been substance users' own perspectives and experiences, and how these are embedded within cultural, societal, and political contexts. She has focused on young peoples' alcohol intoxication and use of nitrous oxide, substance use by prison inmates, and marginalized citizens in drug use treatment. Frank has engaged with theories related to the subjective experiences of substance use, including theories of intoxication, addiction, recovery, intersectionality, gender, welfare institutional sociology and policy-in-practice.

Millie Gooch is the founder of the Sober Girl Society and is one of the voices leading the sobriety movement in the UK. As a journalist, she has written for a range of publications and has been featured everywhere from *Elle* and *Stylist* to the BBC and *British Vogue*. Her debut book, *The Sober Girl Society Handbook*, was released in 2021, and in 2022 she received the Media Award from the Research Society on Alcoholism for her contributions in helping disseminate empirical research on alcohol and creating a safe space for people to explore alcohol-free living. Millie is a proud ambassador for Alcohol Change UK and has just completed her master's degree in Addiction and Mental Health. Her second book *Booze Less* was released in November 2024.

Ian Goodwin is Associate Professor of Communication at Waipapa Taumata Rau/University of Auckland. With a background in cultural studies Ian's research has been wide-ranging and inter-disciplinary yet centres on understanding the societal changes associated with the rise of digital media technologies. In the last few years, he has focused particularly on social media. He is currently interested in exploring intersections

between algorithmic culture, health and well-being, alcohol consumption, unhealthy product marketing, consumer activism, citizenship, and media policy.

Laura Goodwin is a senior lecturer in Mental Health and theme lead for Public Mental Health at Lancaster University. She conducts research on the comorbidity of mental health and alcohol problems, with specific expertise in understanding the complexity of these issues in trauma exposed population, such as in military veterans. She has been funded by the MRC, ESRC, NIHR and third sector organisations and is currently leading NIHR funded work on how we can improve treatment pathways for people with co-occurring problems. Her work has informed policy and practice, for example in the recent “UK clinical guidelines for alcohol treatment”.

Geoffrey Hunt a social anthropologist, is Professor at the Centre for Alcohol and Drugs Research at Aarhus University, Denmark and Director at the Institute for Scientific Analysis, in San Francisco. Hunt is the Principal Investigator (PI) on a US NIH funded project on Intoxication and Sexual Encounters and also PI on a Danish Research Council funded project establishing a Network of gender researchers among the five Nordic countries. His book publications include: *Youth Drugs and Nightlife* (Routledge, 2010), *Drugs and Culture* (Ashgate, 2011), *Sage Handbook of Drug and Alcohol Studies* (2017) and *The Routledge Handbook of Intoxicants and Intoxication* (2022).

Patricia Irizar is a research fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of Manchester. Her research focuses on understanding co-occurring alcohol and mental health problems, particularly in trauma-exposed occupations, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Irizar’s wider research involves examining the levels and drivers of ethnic inequalities in physical and mental health, including ethnic inequalities in adolescent well-being. As an interdisciplinary researcher, Irizar collaborates with academics across a range of disciplines, as well as third sector organisations and people with lived experience, to address health inequalities.

Susan Kiene is Professor of Global Health at San Diego State University School of Public Health and Honorary Professor at Makerere University School of Public Health. Kiene is a social and behavioral epidemiologist who studies the multilevel (e.g., social environment, behavioral, structural) factors that affect health and inequities in access to health services among underserved and historically marginalized populations. Kiene's research is primarily in infectious diseases, sexual and reproductive health, alcohol and substance use, and implementation science, with a focus on developing, testing, and preparing for multilevel interventions to improve health and health equity.

Emmanuel Kyasanku is the Program Director and a researcher at the Africa Medical and Behavioral Sciences Organization (AMBSO) and a PhD candidate at Karolinska Institutet. Emmanuel has an extensive training in Public Health, clinical medicine and community health, and leads AMBSO's initiatives in research and community-based service delivery. He is a key investigator on the AMBSO Population Health Surveillance program (APHS) that nests alcohol and substance use studies and he is also expanding AMBSO's research scope into clinical trials. His role at AMBSO and his academic pursuits at Karolinska Institutet underscore his dedication to advancing public health both locally and internationally.

Carly Lightowlers is a Reader in Criminology at the University of Liverpool with experience as an academic as well as conducting research in local and central government settings. Her research primarily makes use of secondary data sources and quantitative methods with which to study alcohol-related violence, the processing of such cases through the courts, as well as the unequal distribution of associated harm.

Michael Livingston is an associate professor at the National Drug Research Institute in Australia. He worked at the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research and the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre and has a long history of research on alcohol policy and epidemiology. His work focuses on the impact of alcohol policy changes and general trends in alcohol consumption and harm, with a particular emphasis on youth drinking patterns.

Antonia Lyons is Director of the Centre for Addiction Research at the University of Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. She brings a critical health psychology perspective to her work in multidisciplinary teams. Her research has focused on the social and embodied contexts of behaviours related to well-being and developing pathways towards improving outcomes. Her work has explored digital media, identity, drinking practices and cultures and alcohol consumption at different life stages.

Sarah MacLean is a professor in Social Work and Social Policy and is affiliated with the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research at La Trobe University. She has published extensively on alcohol and inhalant use and, in recent years, also on gambling. During 2019–2022 she was joint Editor-in-Chief of *Health Sociology Review*. Sarah works collaboratively to identify responses that can be implemented by alcohol and drug services, local communities and governments.

Marjana Martinic is an independent consultant with an interest in cross-cultural dimensions of drinking patterns, lifestyle, and health. She has an extensive background in alcohol policy and its supporting evidence base. Marjana led the Science and Policy workstream at the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking (IARD) and its predecessor, the International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP). Her past work and publications have explored youth drinking, risk, the evolution of drinking patterns, and opportunities for engagement among public and private sector entities in helping to reduce alcohol-related harm.

Fiona Measham has been Chair in Criminology at the University of Liverpool since 2019. She has spent over three decades researching trends in drug use, their relationship with drug policy and the wider socio-cultural contexts to use. Fiona has authored and co-authored over 100 publications, most recently exploring aspects of drug cultures, harm reduction and the interface of drugs and sexuality, as well as engagement in nightlife, underpinned by critical understandings of power, pleasure and deviance in society. Fiona is founder and trustee of The Loop (2012–) and The Loop Australia (2018–), award-winning charities best known for introducing drug checking in the UK and three Australian states.

Amanda Miller is a Research Assistant Professor at San Diego State University. She earned her PhD in Public Health through a joint doctoral program between San Diego State University and the University of California, San Diego. Miller also holds a Master of Science in Global Health Sciences from the University of California, San Francisco, and a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from the University of California, Santa Barbara. With over a decade of experience in alcohol research, her work focuses on understanding and addressing substance use and its impact on public health.

Stephen Mugamba is a Ugandan researcher and public health expert with experience in epidemiology, clinical trials, and public health program management. He is currently the Deputy Program Director at Africa Medical and Behavioral Sciences Organization (AMBSO) in Uganda. Mugamba's background training is in Health Communication and Public health and for the last 20 years, he has made significant contributions to the field of HIV prevention science. His research work focuses on improving HIV prevention outcomes, particularly in resource-limited settings and has been published in several peer-reviewed journals.

Emily Nicholls is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of York, UK. Her work focuses on contemporary lived experiences of drinking and non-drinking, including the role of alcohol in 'doing' femininity on a 'girls' night out', drinking during the COVID-19 pandemic, women's experiences of early sobriety and the consumption and marketing of No- and Low-Alcohol drinks.

Amy Pennay is a Senior Research Fellow and the Deputy Director of the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research at La Trobe University. Amy's research investigates how social and cultural factors influence drinking practices and health outcomes. Her recent work has focused on youth drinking practices, (sub)cultures of drinking, and intersections of drinking and policy with social determinants such as gender, class, race, place and sexuality.

Margit Anne Petersen is an associate professor at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Aarhus University, Denmark. She has a background in social and medical anthropology. Her work primarily focuses on young

people's uses and perceptions of legal and illegal substances (alcohol, illicit drugs and pharmaceuticals) and how these in different contexts contribute to developing or changing a gendered self. She is Principal Investigator of several large research projects that cover different aspects of intoxicated youth.

Maria Piacentini is Professor of Consumer Research at Lancaster University Management School and Director of the Centre for Consumption Insights. Her research focuses on consumer vulnerability, and she has explored this theme in a number of contexts of public policy concern. Her work has been published in *Sociology*, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Marketing Management* and *Marketing Theory*. Maria was co-editor of 'Consumer Vulnerability: Conditions, contexts and characteristics', published as part of the Routledge Studies in Critical Marketing series. Maria was a co-chair of the ESRC seminar series on Vulnerable Consumers (2012–2014). Along with Emma Banister and Kathy Hamilton, she is co-chair of the Academy of Marketing's 'Consumer Research with Social Impact' Special Interest Group.

Jo-Anne Puddephatt is a senior lecturer at Edge Hill University with a background in better understanding co-occurring alcohol and mental health problems. Jo-Anne's research is interested in the mechanisms between alcohol and mental health problems and identifying groups at risk of experiencing these problems through a range of epidemiological and qualitative methodologies. Her research also focuses on how people with co-occurring problems can be identified earlier and better supported in their treatment journey. Jo-Anne is a member of the Health Research Institute at Edge Hill University and has supported the delivery of NIHR and charity funded projects.

Tim Turner is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Coventry University. He worked as a forensic mental health nurse, and is the joint editor of *Critical Issues in Mental Health* (Palgrave). As a Registered Intermediary, Tim has worked extensively with vulnerable witnesses in the criminal justice system. His doctorate research, an ethnography of British youth in Ibiza, was conducted over three summers and examined the situated

social meaning of poly-drug use in the context of tourism. His research interests are focused on the relationship between drug use, pleasure and space.

Rakhi Vashishtha is a seasoned implementation scientist and mixed-method researcher specializing in quantitative methodologies, including clinical and economic evaluations. Her research focuses on innovative digital interventions for alcohol misuse management, leveraging technology to tackle public health challenges. With expertise in designing and analyzing complex interventions, she aims to improve health outcomes by embedding research findings into real-world healthcare settings. Passionate about health equity, she is committed to ensuring that digital health solutions, such as mHealth and AI-driven tools, are accessible to diverse populations, bridging the gap between research and practice.

Emma Vieira is an early career researcher and PhD Student with the National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University. Emma has a background in psychology, graduating from the University of Western Australia. Her PhD uses a mixed-methods approach to explore how gender impacts alcohol consumption and related harms for young adults in Australia.

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1

Book Introduction: Young Adult Drinking Styles

Dom Conroy and Fiona Measham

Abstract Alcohol consumption among young adults conjures up images of unrestrained, excessive consumption. However, alcohol use among young adults is increasingly understood using different lenses and with different emphases. This chapter introduces book aims and outlines contributions that reflect this range of lenses and emphases. Contributions cover alcohol's role in initiating and maintaining friendship groups; changes in alcohol use over time among young adults; links between identity and alcohol use including online identities; and how alcohol policy has responded to (and may be shaped by) young adults' alcohol consumption. The chapter emphasizes the inter-disciplinary, international

D. Conroy (✉)

Faculty of Arts and Social Science, The Open University, London, UK

e-mail: d.conroy@open.ac.uk

F. Measham

Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK

e-mail: f.measham@liverpool.ac.uk

focus of the book and also the importance of a focus on young adults, as a group of individuals at a distinctive life stage.

The phrase ‘young adult drinking’ has, historically at least, conjured up evocative images of excess, anti-social behaviour and harm. These images linking alcohol consumption by young adults with personal and social harms remain readily available in mass media depictions of archetypal leisure time activities involving drinking and drunkenness. The dangers posed to young adults by alcohol as a substance that too readily leads to over-indulgence, dependence and an array of other risks such as personal injury and potentially higher risk sexual encounters are often closely woven into the assumptions of empirical research in the social sciences. More recently the images of young adults on our screens have been of a more restrained, and indeed often strained, ilk, associated with a prioritisation of health and wellness in image and deed, plant-based diets (evident in the growing popularity of vegan products marketed at young adults), and concerns about their own future and the future of the planet, with movements like Extinction Rebellion reflecting an apparent shift from a culture of consumption to a culture of restraint and sustainability.

At the close of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, research and scholarly discussion concerning young adult alcohol use increasingly recognises the myriad ways in which alcohol can be understood and researched. This more nuanced attitude towards alcohol research acknowledges alcohol’s varied role within social rituals (such as pre-loading and drinking games) and permits scope for increased recognition of alcohol’s valued role in initiating and maintaining friendships among young adults.

Since the first edition of this collection was published six years ago, the evidence base has increasingly consolidated around broad shifts in young adult drinking behaviours previously, and more tentatively, explored here. This is reflected in changes in expectations and stereotypes around the gendering of drinking-related attitudes and behaviours and in the significant increase in the number of non-drinkers found among young adults, as well as the growth in the popularity of ‘sobriety’ or ‘mindful drinking’ communities in many developed countries. The central role of

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