

Introduction

It is a common assumption in alcohol-related health promotion that knowledge of health risk factors will lead to changed (risk-averse) behaviour, but relatively little research has explicitly explored why people drink at all.

Current research into alcohol consumption is overwhelmingly focussed on problematic drinkers and populations considered likely to engage in risky behaviours. Middle-aged drinkers (30-65 years old) are one of these under-researched groups, despite emerging evidence that their regular drinking patterns may carry some risk.

In this study, we review existing research on how this under-researched group account for their drinking practices and construct alcohol consumption in their lives. Understanding the sociological phenomenon of alcohol consumption in this group will support more effective health interventions.

Method

We carried out a systematic search (Scopus, Ovid Medline, Ovid PsycInfo) of English-language peer reviewed publications and identified a total of thirteen qualitative publications about non-problematised middle-aged drinkers.

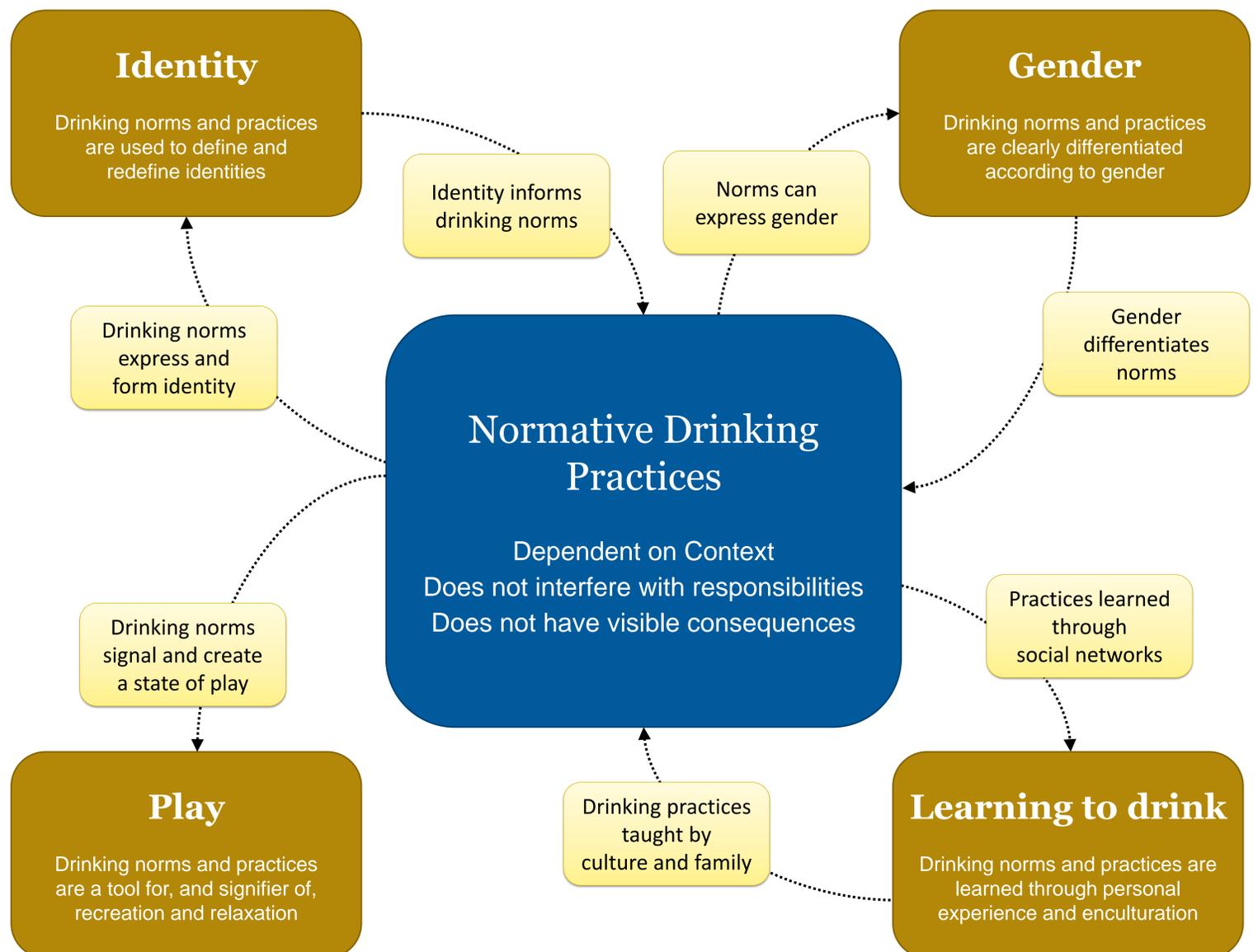
We defined non-problematised consumption as that which was neither significantly harmful (to self or others), nor socio-legally proscribed (culture or law).

We analysed the publications for key themes, and for the relationship and interactions between them.

Results

We found that middle-aged non-problematised drinkers collectively construct their drinking practices by creating narratives of acceptable and unacceptable drinking practices out of discourses of gender, identity, play, and learning to drink. Health was not identified as a significant consideration, except where drinking behaviours were likely to harm others.

- **Acceptable drinking** was framed as drinking that was respectable and which allowed participants to meet responsibilities.
- Drinking practices were used as a tool to express and display adherence to and transgression of **gender** norms.
- One's **identity** can shape one's alcohol consumption, while modes of consumption can also be used as tools to shape one's identity.
- Alcohol consumption was used as a marker to signal the cessation of work or responsibilities, and also constituted social or leisure activity (**play**) in its own right.
- Acceptable drinking was described by participants as something they **learned**, both from family or culture and from knowledge of personal preferences and experiences of the effects of alcohol.



Conclusions & Implications for Practice

- Alcohol consumption is a complex social process for middle-aged non-problematised drinkers.
- A focus on unacceptable drinking behaviours may be more fruitful than a focus on personal health outcomes in public health interventions
- More research is needed into how Australian non-problematised middle-aged drinkers construct their drinking with a focus on factors useful to local public health interventions.

