



Learning from COVID-19: What are the effects of social isolation and disruptions to daily routines on alcohol purchasing and drinking?

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Introduction/Background

The community wide physical distancing in place in NSW as of March 23rd in response to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic represents a public health intervention on a scale never seen before. The intervention is theorised to affect a range of social harms, including problems with alcohol and other drugs. Although the current circumstances are unique and acute, many Australians periodically face disruptions to their daily routines and social isolation due to circumstances outside of their control. Although we know these are commonly associated with constructs of alcohol as a respite, the pandemic presents a unique opportunity to study the different patterns of drinking these factors may produce across a diverse cross-section of Australian society in NSW.

Aims

To obtain insights into:

1. changes to alcohol consumption behaviour before and during the COVID-19 containment measures and,
2. examine the roles of disruptions to daily routine and social isolation in the formation of consumption patterns, to inform future alcohol policy

Method

- Data collection: In-depth interviews conducted remotely (ZOOM/ phone), audio-recorded & transcribed
- Recruitment: Social media, word of mouth, emails, snowballing
- Participants:
 - 38 participants aged 18 – 70 years, ave. 21 mins, reimbursed \$40 Coles voucher
 - Interviewed 26th May – 14th August, 2020
 - NSW residents, consumed alcohol in past 12 months
 - Quota sampling: generational, gender and pandemic income impacts
- Interview questions: Usual drinking prior to, entering lock down and restrictions easing, “Tell me about X...”
- Analysis: Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), constructed patterns across participant responses (CW)
- UNSW Ethics: UNSW Ethics committee approval #: HC200305.

Three main interrelated themes are identified at this time:

Time and Routine

Participants expressed that their normal work and social routines had influenced the times and days they drank:

[W]e, I and my wife, tended not to drink for the start of the week. So, for three or four days at the start of the week we wouldn't drink at home. But that kind of went out the window pretty quickly in the crisis! (interviewee #5, 36 year old male)

Changes to these routines in the form of less socializing and not physically going into work, in turn, increased consumption, at least initially:

There's no real limit because there's nothing else to do ... (interviewee #30, 23 year old male)

Yeah, look, I think it's definitely easier to drink in lockdown. It sounds like a copout, but just not having anything to do, just sort of think, "Oh yeah." Not that I stopped training or anything, but before you'd get up, go to the gym. You had to be up a lot earlier as well. So you just tend to be up later into the night. I've noticed that if I go to bed at 12:30, I can sleep until 7:35 if I have to. Whereas pre-COVID, when I had to get the gym in before work, I had to be in bed by 11:00, 11:30 so I could be up at 6:00 to be done with the gym at 7:30, which is when I wake up now. So, pros and cons. (interviewee #6, 34 year old male)

As restrictions began to be eased, routines returned, and drinking returned to pre-COVID times for some:

I think it [drinking patterns] probably just went back naturally ... life has started to get fairly busy then you're out and about a lot more and therefore you come home, so by the time you get home and you have a shower and change and all of that sort of stuff you think, "Oh well, it's almost time for dinner," and you go back to that similar routine prior to the lockdown (interviewee #10, 70 year old male)

But, this was not always the case:

[W]e went on a pub crawl, like a group of friends, and we realised, like we'd go to a few places and we'd be like, "Oh, this sucks," because you have to sit around, can't talk to anybody anyway. You've got to stay in your group. So we're like, "Yeah, screw this. Let's just go home and do the exact same thing we're doing here, but instead it will be probably cheaper buying a growler or a case and just doing it in our place, if we can't even speak to anyone." So we've attempted to, a couple of times, to just go to places, but it's not the same... everything has to be planned now. (interviewee #30, 23 year old male)

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Restrictions, Socialising, and place

Drinking alcohol was tied to socializing for many of our participants. The loss of socializing through social distancing measures, including the closure of on-premise outlets, had led to a reduction in drinking for many:

I'd say I just pretty much completely stopped drinking, because I only usually drink on special occasions or social settings. I pretty much didn't drink at all. (interviewee #25, 23 year old female)

Q: So, were you drinking at all during that time?

A: No, because I was never seeing any friends. So no, I never did anything. (interviewee #35, 19 year old male)

Participants explained how they sought to maintain socializing under lockdown through online platforms such as Zoom. Drinking was often part of these social interactions:

[W]e did have a couple of Zoom parties. Yeah. Again, with a group of friends that we might not necessarily have socialised with before. But I think it was just like, "Oh yeah, someone's got like this Zoom dinner or Zoom pizza night type thing." (interviewee #12, 34 year old male)

However, participants reflected this was not the same as socializing in-person:

Q: So, you said you weren't seeing any of your mates. Were you doing catch-ups online or having one mate that you would still see?

A: It was more online. Just like online games, voice calls at night and stuff, but it's not the same thing. (#35, 19 year old male)

It was in replacement for catching up in person... [W]e did that several times. But interest in our group of friends in doing that seems to have waned because there's some novelty to it, but it's actually nothing like catching up with people in person. The tool makes it feel kind of limiting, so, to some extent, why bother. (interviewee #5, 36 year old male)

This participant goes on to reflect:

And, like a lot of social occasions, basing it around having a drink is a simple shorthand for whatever. It doesn't actually matter if anyone's drinking. It's not about the act of drinking alcohol. It's just about catching up with people. (interviewee #5, 36 year old male)

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Home drinking

Participants explained there were new consumption and purchasing practices that came with lockdown:

I am more consistently buying alcohol online rather than buying some, drinking it all, buying it again. But it's not really stockpiling, which probably says something about the rate of consumption actually. ... pre-coronavirus, I'd very rarely keep beers in the fridge. Just never have it. (interviewee #5, 36 year old male)

[I]f we were getting takeaway food from a venue, a licenced venue, because of that policy change that that was possible. When we wanted to support our local restaurant that we like and we'd get dinner there we'd also buy wine, if we could, because it's helpful to them and we like wine (interviewee #5, 36 year old male)

For some people, drinking at home was associated with increased consumption:

You're at your own place, so you don't have to worry about how much you've had to drink. You don't have to worry about any of that. (#30, 23 year old male)

there's something in knowing that you're going to the pub and you've got \$40 to spend. And so you'll get a bottle of wine and you're like, "Okay, that's my quota." Whereas at home, when we've got unlimited booze, it's like, "Oh well, why not just open another bottle?" (interviewee #8, 36 year old female)

Conclusion

Participants' responses were varied and complex but the research highlights some of the ways people have changed their consumption under lockdown and beyond:

- Alcohol consumption is tied strongly to time and place; disruptions to usual place and daily and weekly routines have likewise impacted consumption.
- Drinking at home can be risky. There is no 'responsible service of alcohol' at home, portion sizes are not contained (once a bottle is open), labelling of standard drinks remains limited (in visibility and in consumers knowledge), and there are fewer constraints (such as driving home). Further research focused on home drinking seems warranted, without necessarily assuming that drinking at home is associated with problematic alcohol consumption patterns
- Much more to learn from this experiment in alcohol policy (e.g. licensed venues, drinking alone, online sales)