



## Research paper

## Hello Sunday Morning: Alcohol, (non)consumption and selfhood

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Hello Sunday Morning (HSM) is an online program that encourages people to commit to a period of non-drinking and blog about their experiences. The purpose of this paper is to explore how HSM members negotiated their periods of abstinence, with a focus on how not drinking influenced their narratives of selfhood.

**Methods:** Thematic analysis was undertaken of 2844 blog posts from 154 Victorians who signed up to HSM in 2013 or 2014.

**Results:** Analysis revealed three key narratives of selfhood offered by participants: (1) abstinence resulting in a disrupted sense of self, (2) non-consumption facilitating the development of a new healthy self, and (3) anti-consumption facilitating the development of a resistant self.

**Conclusion:** Individuals construct and maintain their sense of self through consumption (or non-consumption) activities, and this occurs within the broader context of the relationship between selfhood, consumption and culture. HSM members developed narratives of self by drawing on a range of wider discursive structures concerning pleasure, healthism and resistance. The typologies of non-drinking selves identified in this paper could be disseminated through platforms such as HSM to support people who are new to non-drinking in choosing how they might construct and enact alternative selfhoods in contexts where alcohol consumption is deeply embedded.

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## Introduction

The consumption of alcohol is deeply embedded in Australian culture, with historical roots that can be traced back to colonisation (Midford, 2005). Alcohol is used by the majority of Australian adults (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2011), for many purposes including relaxation, socialisation and commiseration. Alcohol consumption is also one of many social practices through which people develop a sense of selfhood and experiment with markers of particular social identities and lifestyles (MacLean, 2015; Pennay, Lubman, & MacLean, 2011). However, alcohol consumption is also associated with significant social and health-related harms that are the subject of considerable public health scrutiny (Babor et al., 2010). As a consequence, public health organisations are increasingly trying to find innovative ways of

reducing risky alcohol consumption. One recent approach has been the development of programs encouraging individuals to commit to a short-term period of abstinence from drinking, and in doing so, reflect on the role of alcohol in one's life, and in society (Carah, Meurk, & Hall, 2015b; Cherrier & Gurreri, 2013).

Hello Sunday Morning (HSM) is an example of such a program. Developed in Australia in 2009, HSM is an online program that encourages people to commit to a period of non-drinking and to blog about their experiences. Once individuals sign up to HSM, they instantly have a platform to discuss their experiences with a network of others, which aims to create an environment that enables people to communicate and support one another. Those who have concluded their period of abstinence are welcome to continue to blog and support others. HSM was developed to support people to change their own drinking patterns, reflect on their alcohol consumption and on alcohol's role in society. One thing that separates HSM from other programs such as Dry January or FebFast – which are programs designed to encourage a break from drinking for one month (with the option to raise money for charity while doing so) – is the blogging aspect, with access to an online platform for contributors to connect and interact.

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The purpose of this paper is to explore how HSM members negotiated their periods of abstinence in the context of the embeddedness of drinking in Australian society. In particular, our focus was on how HSM participants reflected on non-consumption and how not drinking influenced the construction of selfhood. In doing so, we aim to gain an understanding of how people adjust their expressions of self to live as a non-drinker in a society where drinking is embedded. This in turn can inform the design of programs such as HSM that aim to facilitate a broader change in the acceptability of non-drinking.

### *Consumer culture theory and selfhood*

Consumer culture theory (CCT) refers to a group of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationship between consumers, the market and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Put simply, CCT is the study of consumption, with a specific focus on the social and cultural influences on consumption choices and practices. CCT is particularly appropriate for understanding how ceasing a consumption practice (in this case, alcohol) might influence constructions of the self, because it explores how consumers rework the use of goods, or transform their symbolic meanings, in order to alter their personal and social circumstances, or shift aspects of their lifestyle and goals (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Selfhood is an ongoing social construct, with social interaction and social practices providing the basis for identification (Shankar, 2009). The production of selfhood involves the individual and their interpretation of self, their interaction with others, their embodied being in the world, and the institutional contexts within which they operate. Understanding the way in which selfhood is constructed necessarily involves focus on the complexity of social relationships and the way in which consumption practices influence these relationships, the environment within which interaction occurs and the “institutionalised patterning and symbolic ways” of the social environment (Fry, 2010, pp. 1283).

Digital technology has become ubiquitous in the contemporary era, and the expansion of technology has led to the evolution of digitised forms of social interaction and knowledge production (Lupton, 2014, 2015). The growth of the internet has facilitated the emergence of online interaction involving groups of geographically dispersed people with similar interests (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Health promoters are increasingly using online interactive programs to disseminate information about preventative health and attempt to ‘nudge’ members of target groups to alter their behaviour in the interest of their health (Lupton, 2014). See, for example, programs targeting physical inactivity (Ballantine & Stephenson, 2011; Cavallo, Tate, Ries, DeVellis, & Ammerman, 2012; Rovniak et al., 2013) and smoking (Vambheim, Wangberg, Johnsen, & Wynn, 2013). Lupton (2015) suggests that health promotion programs can be used as tools for communicating health behaviours by those in power, but can also provide the opportunity for contestation and resistance to health messages.

The online practice of blogging is one way in which selfhood is practiced and negotiated. Blogging allows a form of communication that can be described as ‘one-to-many’, which means individuals can transfer and share knowledge and communicate their selfhood to a large audience, with ensuing interactions with others enabling the development of a sense of community with people they would not otherwise have access to (Kim, Zheng, & Gupta, 2011). Virtual spaces of interaction allow for new constructions of selfhood, with self being negotiated, reproduced and indexed in a variety of ways in online interactions; however, narratives of selfhood in the online context cannot be understood without considering the offline context (Wilson & Peterson, 2002).

In the offline context, individuals have a variety of lifestyle, stylistic and consumption choices available to them, and this allows people to continually construct and reconstruct their sense of self through consumption. Selfhood can be organised and expressed through a range of practices, choices and ideologies, which are likely to shift across time, setting and company (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). Undoubtedly, alcohol consumption offers a way to perform a recognisable and valorised sense of self, particularly for young adults (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009). However, selfhood is complex and influenced by many factors, with alcohol use being just one (albeit important) practice of self.

While there has been a significant amount of research exploring the ways in which consumption choices shape selfhood, there has been less research exploring how non-consumption choices influence the production of the self. One exception is the work of Cherrier (2009), who has explored how non-consumption of certain products can produce forms of resistant consumer identities. Her discourse analysis revealed two types of non-consumption identities – the hero identity and the project identity. She suggests that a hero identity is one that resists exploitative consumption, with non-consumption an act of political opposition to the system of domination. A hero identity expresses alternative values, and anti-consumption becomes about engineering change in consumption norms. Taking up hero identities enables people to reject dominating ideologies and promote the ordering of a new system of consumption. The project identity, on the other hand, expresses resistance but not in opposition to domination, instead resisting for personal growth and inner change. Project identities enable people to reposition their consumption and their place in society, finding spaces for themselves that can be experienced as more authentic and fulfilling (Cherrier, 2009).

### *Alcohol (non) consumption and selfhood*

In contrast with the voluminous literature on the importance of alcohol consumption to selfhood, only a few studies have explored the ways in which non-consumption of alcohol has been negotiated with respect to selfhood, and most of this research has focused on non-drinkers, rather than drinkers who are undergoing a short-term period of abstinence. Nairn, Higgins, Thompson, Anderson, & Fu (2006) and Fry (2010) examined how young people in New Zealand ( $n = 39$ , adolescents) and Australia ( $n = 48$ , aged 18–25) constructed meaningful non-drinking subject positions and resisted powerful societal drinking norms. They offered five subject positions adopted by non-drinkers: (1) some participants adopted alternative subject positions such as “sporty/healthy”, “academic/professional” or cultural or religious non-drinking subjectivities; (2) some participants constructed alternative leisure subjectivities with different norms around socialising that did not involve alcohol (“gamers” might be one example of this); (3) some participants expressed resistance to alcohol and repositioned it as abject to legitimise non-drinking; (4) some participants struggled with their status as a non-drinker and attempted to appear as a drinker in spaces where alcohol was consumed or provided excuses not to drink, such as being the designated driver, and (5) some participants resisted through integration by engaging with drinking friends and proving they could be cool and partake in the fun without consuming alcohol (Fry, 2010; Nairn et al., 2006).

In the UK, Piacentini and Banister (2009) interviewed nine non-drinking university students who felt that their non-consumption of alcohol required taking a stance, either implicitly or explicitly, due to it being in opposition to the dominant ‘culture of intoxication’ (Measham & Brain, 2005). Piacentini et al. suggested that participants practiced various forms of avoidance as a strategy

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