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Beyond 'drinking occasions': Examining complex changes in drinking practices during COVID-19

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Abstract

Introduction: ‘Drinking occasions’ are commonly used to capture quantities of alcohol consumed. Yet this standardised terminology brings with it numerous assumptions and epistemological limitations. We suggest that social changes brought on by COVID-19 restrictions have influenced routines, patterns of time use and drinking practices, highlighting the need to re-examine how we conceptualise drinking and ‘drinking occasions’ in alcohol research.

Methods: This analysis draws on data gathered from 59 qualitative interviews conducted during the second half of 2020 with Australian drinkers aged 18 and over. The interviews explored how COVID-19 restrictions impacted daily practices and alcohol consumption patterns.

Findings: Participants spoke about their work, study and social routines changing, which influenced the times, timing and contexts of their drinking practices. We separated these shifts out into four overarching themes: shifting of structures shaping drinking; the permeability of drinking boundaries; the extension of drinking occasions; and new contexts for drinking.

Discussion and Conclusion: COVID-19 restrictions have led to shifts in the temporal boundaries and contexts that would otherwise shape people’s drinking, meaning drinking practices may be less bound by structures, norms, settings and rituals. The drinking occasions concept, although a simple tool for measuring how much people drink, has not been able to capture these complex developments. This is a timely consideration given that COVID-19 may have enduring effects on people’s lifestyles, work and drinking practices. It may be useful to examine drinking as practice, rather than just an occasion, in order to better contextualise epidemiological studies going forward.

Keywords

alcohol, COVID-19, drinking occasions

INTRODUCTION

Within alcohol research, we often refer to a 'drinking occasion' to denote a segmented period of time where alcohol is consumed. Drinking occasions have historically been linked to particular times (e.g. after work, weekends, at night) and social events (e.g. a wedding or night out with friends) [1]. Epidemiological survey methods often rely on vague notions of 'typical' or 'recent' drinking occasions, making broader inferences based on these categories [1-4]. Drinking occasions are used as a heuristic tool to simplify complex and dynamic practices, providing a way for alcohol researchers to bound and measure drinking. However, there are numerous epistemological issues with using drinking occasions to measure consumption, which has rarely been critiqued. This includes how our understanding of 'drinking occasions' may be shaped and transformed by changing social contexts, such as changes due to COVID-19. In this article, we use empirical qualitative research on changing drinking practices during COVID-19 to interrogate how static concepts like 'drinking occasions' are limited in how well they capture the intricacies and instabilities of drinking.

Drinking occasions present several epistemological challenges for researchers. For one, measures that rely on drinking occasions tend to focus on drinking as the primary or sole activity, potentially excluding or missing drinking that may be co-occurring among other activities. For example, in some traditionally 'wet' countries (such as Mediterranean countries) drinking is seen as a more embedded part of everyday life and something that occurs rather unnoticed alongside many daily activities (e.g. with lunch, after work, with dinner and later into the night), rather than tied to specific occasions [5]. Second, what constitutes a drinking occasion is subjective and liable to change alongside other social changes. What is subjectively understood as a 'typical' drinking occasion can vary greatly according to other norms around age, gender and workplace [6, 7]. Third, assumptions of standardised drinking occasions assume periodic consumption is a discrete event, but this does not clarify how long a period of time should be considered a single occasion and where the cut-off point may be between multiple drinking occasions.

Although drinking can occur in ways that challenge notions of a bounded drinking occasion, there is limited literature that defines drinking occasions and articulates their pitfalls. Some work highlights the importance of contextual characteristics of a drinking occasion, such as situation, location, company and time [8]. There is also the notion of a "big occasion", which highlights certain events where the usual parameters of an occasion no longer apply [9, 10]. However, none of this work outlines exactly what constitutes a drinking occasion. This is important, as drinking occasions are a central measure in research on consumption and a way of constituting forms of 'risky' drinking and 'binge' drinking (i.e. having 5 or more drinks on an occasion) [11-13]. Problems with how drinking occasions are conceptualised are also particularly relevant given that COVID-19 restrictions have changed the contexts, temporal patterns and routines around which drinking occurs. Although COVID-19 restrictions in Australia changed over time and varied according to regions, they generally included restrictions on when and how far people could travel, the closure and/or reduced capacity of venues, restrictions on guests within private homes, restrictions on social gatherings, movement to online forms of work and education, and reduced hours or closures of other businesses and industries. These culminated in peaks of restrictions (or 'lockdowns') which required people to stay at home except for a few essential reasons (e.g. sole-person grocery shopping or outdoor exercise). During all of these restrictions, pre-packaged liquor outlets remained open, meaning people were still able to purchase and consume alcohol at home.

Despite an increase in off-premises and online purchasing of alcohol [14], survey research has reported slight decreases in overall consumption (due to the closing of licensed venues) but increases in frequency of consumption during COVID-19 [15]. Research from the UK and Ireland also presents a mixed picture, with some people increasing and some reducing their drinking during COVID-19 restrictions [16, 17]. However, it is important not only to examine epidemiological trends but also drinking practices themselves more closely. Changing practices of drinking may be shaped by personal and/or financial difficulties resulting from COVID-19 restrictions [18, 19], but may also be due in part to changes in temporal routines, free time, priorities and responsibilities. Many Australians will have lost jobs or transitioned to new working-from-home arrangements, leading to complex changes to everyday routines and drinking practices [19]. With the change in norms and social rhythms as people adjust to being part of an increasingly remote workforce, opportunities for new drinking patterns may have emerged. For example, less of a temporal distinction between home, work and the various other aspects of people's lives, may have shifted the way people viewed and consumed alcohol [20]. Home drinking, which is arguably less bound by social routines and the night-time economy [21], may have become more central. COVID-19 lockdown measures may have also enabled people to change their relationships with alcohol, leading to new norms around domestic drinking [22]. Furthermore, people's drinking may be constrained in different ways in the home environment owing to the influence of familial norms and roles [23]. All of these changes may have affected how people's drinking fits (or does not fit) within bounded notions of drinking occasions. This is important because new routines and habits may lead to enduring changes in the way people consume alcohol and relying on static concepts may fail to capture or elucidate these important changes.

METHODS

This analysis draws on data gathered through phone interviews with 59 Australian drinkers aged 18 years and older as part of a broader qualitative study examining alcohol consumption practices of Australian adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted during the second half of 2020 by six researchers based at the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University (ethics approval HEC20192). The study participants were drawn from a larger sample of people who completed an online survey measuring drinking practices during COVID-19 restrictions [24], where those contacted had expressed interest in participating in a follow-up interview. Participants lived in a variety of domestic contexts, including in share houses, with families and alone. They also came from a range of Australian states and areas where restrictions differed, although all had experienced some form of COVID-19 prevention measures (e.g. social distancing, mask-requirements, lockdowns) at the time of the interviews.

Interviews were semi-structured and designed to explore how COVID-19 restrictions affected daily life and alcohol consumption patterns. Questions explored everyday routines, how alcohol fitted in with routines, and how these might have changed over time. Interview times ranged from 15 minutes to an hour, with most interviews taking around 30 minutes. We purposively recruited participants from four pre-defined groups based on their employment circumstances. The groups were: (i) 'Lost Job' – those who had lost their jobs during the pandemic; (ii) 'Not Working' – those who were not working before COVID-19 restrictions (e.g. retirees or those who were unemployed); (iii) 'Working from Home' – those who transitioned to work from home during the pandemic; and (iv) 'Working in Usual Workplace' – those who continued attending workplaces outside their homes

(such as those in essential services). Our sampling strategy aimed to capture a range of experiences and circumstances that might influence drinking practices.

The analysis presented in this article was born from discussions between the research team, where changing temporal patterns of consumption were recognised as a prominent feature of participants' accounts. Upon closer re-reading of the interview data, we found that many participants talked about significant changes to the way they consumed alcohol, and these new practices did not align with clearly identifiable ways of drinking as an 'occasion'. These observations prompted us to interrogate the usefulness of this widely employed concept as a means of understanding and measuring drinking practices.

The lead author first went through all the data and extracted excerpts that related to the temporal elements of participants' drinking. After this, thematic analysis was used as a way to separate and understand the social patterns and meanings in the data [25]. This was an inductive process whereby the lead author identified four broad themes based on his reading of the excerpts, then proceeded to read through the transcripts again and code relevant excerpts into the themes. These themes were further refined as the analysis proceeded in collaboration with the co-authors (several of whom also conducted interviews).

FINDINGS

Our analysis is presented in four overlapping, yet distinct themes: shifting of structures shaping drinking; the permeability of drinking boundaries; the extension of drinking; and new contexts for drinking. We note that these themes represented common sentiments across the sample but were most noticeable from participants who underwent changes to their routines – either by transitioning to working from home or having lost their job.

Shifting of structures shaping drinking

The first change that we identified from participants' accounts was that during COVID-19 social distancing measures, particularly during lockdown, the number of formal obligations and restrictions that would otherwise act to bound people's drinking were sharply reduced. This was especially true for those who lost jobs or switched to working from home, and whose routines and daily structure had rapidly transformed. While there were no longer the same organised social rituals and drinking that accompanied them (e.g. going to the pub), the reduction in responsibilities meant that many participants were more open to drinking in ways and at times that they had not before COVID-19 restrictions. The effects of this reduced "accountability" are illustrated in the two quotations below:

"When I was working, I would only ever drink in the evening, but when I stopped working, I'd probably start drinking about two in the afternoon." (Man, 35 years, Lost Job)

"I managed my drinking around my job. Then, I think as soon as my job came to be inside my home, that's when I didn't have any of that accountability." (Man, 29 years, Working from Home)

Across participants who were now spending more time at home than at work or in social settings, there was a strong articulation that the divide between weekdays and weekends had been blurred. This sometimes meant the personal boundaries and drinking norms associated with weekend drinking or weekday drinking similarly changed. For those who shifted to working from home, for example, this change in daily routines altered the opportunities for drinking and, relatedly for some,

opportunities to recover from a drinking occasion. Several participants spoke about being able to drink during the working day, or drink into the night and wake up later, or work hungover without serious consequences. As one participant who worked from home during the start of the pandemic, then later took a voluntary redundancy package, explained:

"... because we didn't have to go anywhere to go to work, you got up later and nobody knew if you were in your pyjamas or not. Yeah, it really shifted all the boundaries that I think you set up."

(Woman, 61 years, Lost Job)

The capacity to drink during the day was also shaped by some individuals' home environments. For example, some participants were able to drink with friends, family, neighbours and housemates who were in a similar situation. Some talked about drinking with friends during lunch, after work, at dinner or into the night, leading to multiple drinking occasions within a day.

Other changes to responsibilities, including being involved in (or taking children to) sports, socialising and activities that might have required driving, were similarly reduced. This reduction in informal responsibilities created more opportunities (and fewer disincentives) for drinking, as illustrated by a mother describing no longer having to take her son to sport:

"Previous to COVID when I had to drive places, that [drinking] didn't happen because I was in the car an awful lot driving my very active son around. But it suddenly felt like quite a freeing thing to be able to – 'I don't have to drive anywhere; I don't have to go or anything; I can just have a glass of wine; that'll be fine'." (Woman, 57 years, Working from Home)

Overall, this reduction in formal and informal responsibilities was the most common finding. The shift towards working from home or not working during COVID-19 restrictions transformed the times and contexts around which participants previously structured their drinking, leading to increased opportunities to drink. We note here, though, that there were some exceptions to this. For example, one participant who worked in the hospitality sector described regularly drinking before the pandemic "when you finish or even sometimes while you're working, regardless of what day of the week it was" (Woman, 27 years, Not Working). She later talked about drinking less during the pandemic due to not working and living at home with parents. This highlights how, in non-COVID-19 times, some workplaces and industries (e.g. hospitality and the night-time economy) may enable less structured opportunities for drinking.

The permeability of drinking boundaries

Just as some participants were able to drink more as their responsibilities lessened or changed, so too did drinking occasions become less bound to times, places and contexts. Some participants described drinking out of boredom or to help them relax, but also described how drinking became increasingly intertwined with other daily activities such as working, cooking, eating and spending time with other household members. This meant that drinking occasions were not necessarily planned or intended, but often mundane and spontaneous. While spontaneous drinking opportunities were not uncommon pre-pandemic, the notion of an 'occasion' as denoting some kind of event or celebration for drinking did not seem to accurately describe the casual attitude many participants had towards drinking. For example, as a university student who had lost his job explained:

"... it's just more casually slipped in ... when I'm just walking around the house bored at 4 o'clock I'll be like, 'yeah okay, I'll just have a beer, why not?'" (Man, 23 years, Lost Job)

This permeability of drinking boundaries was due partly to the inability of some participants to drink within their preferred contexts (e.g. with friends in a pub or bar) and partly to the lack of clear boundaries that previously designated 'appropriate' drinking contexts. By having alcohol at home and being home most of the time, drinking seemed to be less of an occasion and more embedded in other everyday activities and practices. Many participants spoke about drinking as previously being a social activity, but COVID-19 restrictions had transformed it into something less structured and more mundane. For example, one participant talked about how drinking became a less reflective practice:

"... it went from a social thing to a just something to do I suppose, like instead of probably drinking on the weekends I'd drink, just have a couple during the week or on a weeknight or something like that. It wasn't really routine." (Woman, 54 years, Working from Home)

Because there was not necessarily a dedicated time to drink, celebrate or socialise, some participants described drinking less during discrete episodes but more consistently and unremarkably during week. As another participant noted, this regularity made drinking a "prosaic" accompanying pleasure to other everyday activities:

"So yeah, like I said, it would normally be attached to a social occasion and an event, whereas now it's a bit more prosaic; it's just, well, while watching a movie at home, let's open a bottle of wine, which is something we never would have done in the past." (Man, 38 years, Working in Usual Workplace)

This ordinariness of drinking also meant that many participants did not conceive their drinking as a particular occasion or event, but rather as an unremarkable or unexceptional practice that they could fit around their (COVID-19 restricted) lifestyles. These attitudes towards alcohol may have also been linked to changing drinking contexts. For example, drinking in one's own home, rather than at a bar or party may have changed some of the norms and expectations around drinking (e.g. having a 'big drinking occasion' with friends). Indeed only a few participants talked about regularly drinking to intoxication. This was often younger participants drinking with housemates or participants who described heavy drinking both before, and during, COVID-19 restrictions. For many others, these reductions in big drinking occasions were likely due to the lack of events, venues and contexts that might otherwise support them.

The extension of drinking

Closely associated with the shifting structures and attitudes towards drinking, some participants also spoke of having newly extended periods of time during which they could drink. This could mean starting earlier in the day or drinking later into the night. These extended drinking periods did not necessarily result in intoxication or steep increases in drinking (indeed, quantitative studies suggest otherwise for many Australians [15]). For example, one participant spoke about how he was able to "sip" on drinks during work until late into the evening:

"I would crack a beer at 10.30 in the morning or 11 o'clock, around that time, and I'd sip on 2 bottles of beer that would get me through until around about 3-ish, I guess. Then I would have a glass of wine and continue sipping on the wine through the evening, through till 10 or 11 o'clock when I would normally go to bed." (Man, 58 years, Working from Home)

Here, drinking was not a discrete occasion, but a practice that could last an extended period of time. The traditional notion of a drinking occasion fails to capture how drinking in this way is limited relative to social or event-based drinking. Alternatively, home drinking made it unclear when exactly a drinking occasion started and stopped. As illustrated in the account below, participants contrasted this with 'going out' to drink to bars, restaurants or other social events, where the event itself provided endpoints to a drinking occasion:

"We'd definitely go on [drinking] longer, we'd go on longer, for sure. Because there was nothing else to do. It was like, well, where we would normally have gone out and found a restaurant or seen friends or anything." (Man, 53 years, Lost Job)

Again, the change in responsibilities (and other pastimes or hobbies) in participants' lives had made extended periods of drinking feasible. Several participants spoke about day drinking at home during COVID-19 restrictions, for example, suggesting extended drinking practices during the day had become increasingly normalised.

We note that extended drinking occasions were not always a direct result of COVID-19-related changes to work routines or lifestyles. For example, one participant – a retiree – described drinking small amounts throughout the day prior to COVID-19 restrictions. This reminded him that he had been asked about a drinking 'session' in the online survey he had completed previously and prompted him to question, "Well, what's a session? I drink from 10 AM 'til 6 PM. Is that one session?" (Man, 71 years, Not Working). He further observed that most people have a "drinking time and they have a definite session", but that he did not. This highlights how work and lifestyle routines are important in shaping how people understand and enact drinking occasions, even beyond the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions.

New contexts for drinking

As well as the loosening temporal understanding of a drinking occasion, many participants also spoke about new contexts and meanings for drinking. Rather than confining drinking to specific times and places, the restrictions of COVID-19 and the capacity to drink at home encouraged some participants to create new contexts for drinking. For example, some spoke about drinking alone before, during and after dinner as a "substitute for social interaction" (Woman, 68 years, Not Working). Others spoke about how the shift to more home drinking encouraged novel situations of (and times for) drinking:

I noticed a lot with my friends as well, a lot of people are more comfortable with day drinking than in the past. [...] I know at the beginning of lockdown my partner and I would have like a mimosa with breakfast on the weekend or like we would go, when there were still stage 2 lockdowns, we would go have a beer with our breakfast. (Woman, 31 years, Working in Usual Workplace)

For this participant, 'having time' and altered responsibilities led to drinking during times usually not dedicated to drinking occasions (e.g. breakfast). Although this was not a commonly expressed shift in practice, it highlighted how the novelty of COVID-19 restrictions might encourage novel drinking practices.

What was more commonly articulated in participants' accounts was the creation of new drinking contexts via online chats or video calls. These video calls sometimes included large numbers of people and became a key way by which some participants socialised with friends and family. These

also became new virtual-social contexts for drinking occasions. For example, several participants spoke about having organised “Zoom gin sessions” (Woman, 60 years, Lost Job) or having a “cocktail hour” (Man, 39 years, Not Working) on video calls. This online drinking blurred notions of appropriate drinking spaces and situations. For example, one participant said:

“I normally have a wine with a meal or if I’ve got friends in the house I will drink in the house. But I would not normally ever drink if I’m the only physical person in the space. But on a Zoom call that became very different.” (Woman, 39 years, Lost Job)

Not only did being able to socialise online change the context for drinking occasions, but for some participants, this possibility also influenced the timing and duration of their drinking. For example, one participant described starting virtual drinking sessions with friends overseas during lockdown, which at times led them to drink as early as 5 AM. Similarly, several participants spoke about extended video calls lasting for several hours or jumping from one video call to another, which created multiple (consecutive) drinking events.

DISCUSSION

Drinking occasions are a mainstay of alcohol research, used as a practical way of empirically measuring and defining complex drinking practices. However, while operating as a blunt tool for gauging *how much* people drink, drinking occasions overlook many of the complexities of *how* people drink. This has been brought clearly to our attention in our analysis of changing drinking practices during COVID-19. Many of the routines and responsibilities around which we might expect drinking to take place transformed during COVID-19 restrictions, creating new drinking patterns and styles that often did not fit within pre-established notions of drinking occasions. Moreover, given that COVID-19 may have far-reaching impacts on both working practices (e.g. more people working from home) and workers themselves (e.g. how they manage their time and wellbeing) [26], it is important to consider how this will shape the ways and contexts in which people drink going forward. As such, we argue that COVID-19 restrictions create a strong impetus to re-examine drinking occasions in alcohol research, including the role of structures, norms, settings and rituals that might have previously bound them. A closer investigation of these changing drinking practices using a more theoretically informed lens, such as Social Practice Theory [27, 28] may provide a useful way forward. Social Practice Theory incorporates an examination of materials, meanings, skills, locations and timings to understand (changes in) practices, and allows for and highlights the importance of the interconnection between practices (e.g. drinking and eating) [27]. Social Practice Theory has been used to unpack the complex and varied influences on drinking practices [29] and could be useful for understanding changing drinking patterns relative to changing contexts (e.g. a shift towards domestic drinking) and the associated changes in meaning.

Although there have been growing concerns around increased alcohol intake and alcohol-related harms during COVID-19 [30], epidemiological research has not shown a clear increase in drinking [15, 31]. Self-identified changes in employment, stress and mental health have been associated with reports of increased drinking [32–34], so it is perhaps unsurprising that many participants in our study who described changes to their drinking styles were those who lost their job during the pandemic. However, we also saw how drinking changed among other groups, such as those who transitioned to work from home or lived in households where regular routines were disrupted due to COVID-19 restrictions. Changes in drinking can occur alongside changes in daily-life routines, where major life events (such as chronic illness, retirement, marriage or separation) can act as

instigators [7]. It may be that COVID-19 restrictions resulted in similar changes in life circumstances for many people, subsequently highlighting the various dimensions of change in the meaning and frequency of drinking for individuals.

Because COVID-19 restrictions reduced both formal responsibilities (such as work) and informal activities (such as sports and social events), drinking was often described as an unremarkable, everyday occurrence. Indeed, the idea of a drinking 'occasion' did not accurately reflect the way drinking became intertwined with everyday routines and practices for some participants. Drinking patterns were often described as being structured around work and other routines prior to COVID-19. Without these, drinking was more permeable. For example, among retirees and those who had lost their jobs, drinking was not bound by the requirements of work and was more able to seep into everyday routines but seemed less intense and intoxication oriented. Thus, it is important that research on drinking during COVID-19 restrictions – and research using the concept of drinking occasions more generally – considers the importance of economic and labour changes. Notably, changes in the structures that shape drinking occasions may also change the associated harms (e.g. drinking in the night-time economy and alcohol-related violence vs. home drinking and mental health issues) [35].

Although drinking sessions on a night out can last for over nine hours [36], such intensive drinking practices (where drinking tends to be the focus of the activity) were different from the extended, lower intensity drinking occasions described by participants in our study. Indeed, in Australia, the UK and the US, research on drinking during COVID-19 restrictions has suggested a shift away from heavy episodic drinking occasions towards more frequent home drinking occasions [15, 24, 31, 37]. This highlights the importance of changing drinking contexts. While some of the drinking practices participants spoke about were protracted over long periods of time, they were also defined by settings and routinised practices. For many, drinking was a way to signal the winding down of the day, or it was an accompaniment to other activities like working, cooking or catching up with friends online. In contrast, many participants spoke of the lack of venues and social events (such as going out to a pub or bar for drinks) that would have shaped their drinking before COVID-19. This event-based pub or bar drinking has also been considered central to traditional Australian drinking culture [38], and so the decline of this type of drinking may have also changed some norms and routinised practices that shape drinking (e.g. the practice of buying rounds or drinking to intoxication). Some of the drinking styles we saw here echoed the traditional picture of drinking in 'wet' countries, where light and regular drinking was viewed as a part of everyday activities and practices, rather than an 'occasion' [39, 40]. However, for some participants, drinking was not only a practice that co-occurred with others (such as cooking or eating) but also a practice to pass time and take advantage of unstructured time.

While we know the context of drinking occasions is an important influence on how much people drink [8] and that home drinking is likely to be a central feature to drinking during COVID-19 restrictions [21], our analysis also highlighted how people adapted their drinking practices. Here, we saw an increase in drinking alone as a substitute for social interactions, as well as drinking while on video calls (although we cannot be sure how much these forms of drinking existed prior to COVID-19). The question of whether these changes simply reflect novel ways of adapting and connecting during COVID-19 restrictions, or whether they represent longer-term habitual changes to drinking contexts, deserves further investigation as restrictions ease.

We note that our findings tended to reflect the experiences of those whose lifestyles and routines had changed the most due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This included those who had lost jobs or had experienced other stresses and personal turmoil not described here (such as reduced work hours, financial hardship, sudden changes to living arrangements, relationship issues). In contrast, drinking occasions for those who continued to work in their usual workplace seemed to have changed the least. Thus, it is important to acknowledge this research examined changing practices, with less attention to individual circumstances and motivations. It is also important to remember that we have not seen an overall increase in alcohol consumption in Australia, but rather a change in the frequency of drinking and the amount consumed when drinking [15]. This highlights how standardised terms such as 'drinking occasions' are limited in their ability to grapple with this variability in drinking practices – both among different populations, and amid sweeping social and labour market changes. Moreover, as we found, there are people whose drinking prior to COVID-19 restrictions already challenged notions of a drinking occasion.

CONCLUSION

It is important to be cognisant of limitations in the terminology we use, the complexities in our objects of study and how these may be influenced by social changes. We argue that concepts like 'drinking occasions' represent such a problem, where COVID-19 has provided a renewed impetus to examine how we define and apply drinking occasions in alcohol research. In this article, we saw changes regarding the time, timings and contexts of drinking. These changes should be further explored to add context and meaning to epidemiological findings. Furthermore, research on how COVID-19 restrictions may have changed social norms around alcohol, and what this means for drinking practices and styles into the future, will be important to understand and investigate further. Such an understanding might allow us to rethink when it is and is not useful to rely on standard measures like drinking occasions to guide public health policy. Particularly with the advent of COVID-19, it may be fruitful to reimagine drinking as a practice with distinct meanings which, in the domestic sphere, may be more permeable and co-occur alongside other practices.

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Conflicts of Interest

None to declare.

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Beyond 'drinking occasions': Examining complex changes in drinking practices during COVID-19

Running Title: Beyond 'drinking occasions': Changes in drinking during COVID-19

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Abstract

Introduction: ‘Drinking occasions’ are commonly used to capture quantities of alcohol consumed. Yet this standardised terminology brings with it numerous assumptions and epistemological limitations. We suggest that social changes brought on by COVID-19 restrictions have influenced routines, patterns of time use and drinking practices, highlighting the need to re-examine how we conceptualise drinking and ‘drinking occasions’ in alcohol research.

Methods: This analysis draws on data gathered from 59 qualitative interviews conducted during the second half of 2020 with Australian drinkers aged 18 and over. The interviews explored how COVID-19 restrictions impacted daily practices and alcohol consumption patterns.

Findings: Participants spoke about their work, study and social routines changing, which influenced the times, timing and contexts of their drinking practices. We separated these shifts out into four overarching themes: shifting of structures shaping drinking; the permeability of drinking boundaries; the extension of drinking occasions; and new contexts for drinking.

Discussion and Conclusion: COVID-19 restrictions have led to shifts in the temporal boundaries and contexts that would otherwise shape people’s drinking, meaning drinking practices may be less bound by structures, norms, settings and rituals. The drinking occasions concept, although a simple tool for measuring how much people drink, has not been able to capture these complex developments. This is a timely consideration given that COVID-19 may have enduring effects on people’s lifestyles, work and drinking practices. It may be useful to examine drinking as practice, rather than just an occasion, in order to better contextualise epidemiological studies going forward.

Keywords

alcohol, COVID-19, drinking occasions

INTRODUCTION

Within alcohol research, we often refer to a 'drinking occasion' to denote a segmented period of time where alcohol is consumed. Drinking occasions have historically been linked to particular times (e.g. after work, weekends, at night) and social events (e.g. a wedding or night out with friends) [1]. Epidemiological survey methods often rely on vague notions of 'typical' or 'recent' drinking occasions, making broader inferences based on these categories [1-4]. Drinking occasions are used as a heuristic tool to simplify complex and dynamic practices, providing a way for alcohol researchers to bound and measure drinking. However, there are numerous epistemological issues with using drinking occasions to measure consumption, which has rarely been critiqued. This includes how our understanding of 'drinking occasions' may be shaped and transformed by changing social contexts, such as changes due to COVID-19. In this article, we use empirical qualitative research on changing drinking practices during COVID-19 to interrogate how static concepts like 'drinking occasions' are limited in how well they capture the intricacies and instabilities of drinking.

Drinking occasions present several epistemological challenges for researchers. For one, measures that rely on drinking occasions tend to focus on drinking as the primary or sole activity, potentially excluding or missing drinking that may be co-occurring among other activities. For example, in some traditionally 'wet' countries (such as Mediterranean countries) drinking is seen as a more embedded part of everyday life and something that occurs rather unnoticed alongside many daily activities (e.g. with lunch, after work, with dinner and later into the night), rather than tied to specific occasions [5]. Second, what constitutes a drinking occasion is subjective and liable to change alongside other social changes. What is subjectively understood as a 'typical' drinking occasion can vary greatly according to other norms around age, gender and workplace [6, 7]. Third, assumptions of standardised drinking occasions assume periodic consumption is a discrete event, but this does not clarify how long a period of time should be considered a single occasion and where the cut-off point may be between multiple drinking occasions.

Although drinking can occur in ways that challenge notions of a bounded drinking occasion, there is limited literature that defines drinking occasions and articulates their pitfalls. Some work highlights the importance of contextual characteristics of a drinking occasion, such as situation, location, company and time [8]. There is also the notion of a "big occasion", which highlights certain events where the usual parameters of an occasion no longer apply [9, 10]. However, none of this work outlines exactly what constitutes a drinking occasion. This is important, as drinking occasions are a central measure in research on consumption and a way of constituting forms of 'risky' drinking and 'binge' drinking (i.e. having 5 or more drinks on an occasion) [11-13]. Problems with how drinking occasions are conceptualised are also particularly relevant given that COVID-19 restrictions have changed the contexts, temporal patterns and routines around which drinking occurs. Although COVID-19 restrictions in Australia changed over time and varied according to regions, they generally included restrictions on when and how far people could travel, the closure and/or reduced capacity of venues, restrictions on guests within private homes, restrictions on social gatherings, movement to online forms of work and education, and reduced hours or closures of other businesses and industries. These culminated in peaks of restrictions (or 'lockdowns') which required people to stay at home except for a few essential reasons (e.g. sole-person grocery shopping or outdoor exercise). During all of these restrictions, pre-packaged liquor outlets remained open, meaning people were still able to purchase and consume alcohol at home.

Despite an increase in off-premises and online purchasing of alcohol [14], survey research has reported slight decreases in overall consumption (due to the closing of licensed venues) but increases in frequency of consumption during COVID-19 [15]. Research from the UK and Ireland also presents a mixed picture, with some people increasing and some reducing their drinking during COVID-19 restrictions [16, 17]. However, it is important not only to examine epidemiological trends but also drinking practices themselves more closely. Changing practices of drinking may be shaped by personal and/or financial difficulties resulting from COVID-19 restrictions [18, 19], but may also be due in part to changes in temporal routines, free time, priorities and responsibilities. Many Australians will have lost jobs or transitioned to new working-from-home arrangements, leading to complex changes to everyday routines and drinking practices [19]. With the change in norms and social rhythms as people adjust to being part of an increasingly remote workforce, opportunities for new drinking patterns may have emerged. For example, less of a temporal distinction between home, work and the various other aspects of people's lives, may have shifted the way people viewed and consumed alcohol [20]. Home drinking, which is arguably less bound by social routines and the night-time economy [21], may have become more central. COVID-19 lockdown measures may have also enabled people to change their relationships with alcohol, leading to new norms around domestic drinking [22]. Furthermore, people's drinking may be constrained in different ways in the home environment owing to the influence of familial norms and roles [23]. All of these changes may have affected how people's drinking fits (or does not fit) within bounded notions of drinking occasions. This is important because new routines and habits may lead to enduring changes in the way people consume alcohol and relying on static concepts may fail to capture or elucidate these important changes.

METHODS

This analysis draws on data gathered through phone interviews with 59 Australian drinkers aged 18 years and older as part of a broader qualitative study examining alcohol consumption practices of Australian adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted during the second half of 2020 by six researchers based at the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University (ethics approval HEC20192). The study participants were drawn from a larger sample of people who completed an online survey measuring drinking practices during COVID-19 restrictions [24], where those contacted had expressed interest in participating in a follow-up interview. Participants lived in a variety of domestic contexts, including in share houses, with families and alone. They also came from a range of Australian states and areas where restrictions differed, although all had experienced some form of COVID-19 prevention measures (e.g. social distancing, mask-requirements, lockdowns) at the time of the interviews.

Interviews were semi-structured and designed to explore how COVID-19 restrictions affected daily life and alcohol consumption patterns. Questions explored everyday routines, how alcohol fitted in with routines, and how these might have changed over time. Interview times ranged from 15 minutes to an hour, with most interviews taking around 30 minutes. We purposively recruited participants from four pre-defined groups based on their employment circumstances. The groups were: (i) 'Lost Job' – those who had lost their jobs during the pandemic; (ii) 'Not Working' – those who were not working before COVID-19 restrictions (e.g. retirees or those who were unemployed); (iii) 'Working from Home' – those who transitioned to work from home during the pandemic; and (iv) 'Working in Usual Workplace' – those who continued attending workplaces outside their homes

(such as those in essential services). Our sampling strategy aimed to capture a range of experiences and circumstances that might influence drinking practices.

The analysis presented in this article was born from discussions between the research team, where changing temporal patterns of consumption were recognised as a prominent feature of participants' accounts. Upon closer re-reading of the interview data, we found that many participants talked about significant changes to the way they consumed alcohol, and these new practices did not align with clearly identifiable ways of drinking as an 'occasion'. These observations prompted us to interrogate the usefulness of this widely employed concept as a means of understanding and measuring drinking practices.

The lead author first went through all the data and extracted excerpts that related to the temporal elements of participants' drinking. After this, thematic analysis was used as a way to separate and understand the social patterns and meanings in the data [25]. This was an inductive process whereby the lead author identified four broad themes based on his reading of the excerpts, then proceeded to read through the transcripts again and code relevant excerpts into the themes. These themes were further refined as the analysis proceeded in collaboration with the co-authors (several of whom also conducted interviews).

FINDINGS

Our analysis is presented in four overlapping, yet distinct themes: shifting of structures shaping drinking; the permeability of drinking boundaries; the extension of drinking; and new contexts for drinking. We note that these themes represented common sentiments across the sample but were most noticeable from participants who underwent changes to their routines – either by transitioning to working from home or having lost their job.

Shifting of structures shaping drinking

The first change that we identified from participants' accounts was that during COVID-19 social distancing measures, particularly during lockdown, the number of formal obligations and restrictions that would otherwise act to bound people's drinking were sharply reduced. This was especially true for those who lost jobs or switched to working from home, and whose routines and daily structure had rapidly transformed. While there were no longer the same organised social rituals and drinking that accompanied them (e.g. going to the pub), the reduction in responsibilities meant that many participants were more open to drinking in ways and at times that they had not before COVID-19 restrictions. The effects of this reduced "accountability" are illustrated in the two quotations below:

"When I was working, I would only ever drink in the evening, but when I stopped working, I'd probably start drinking about two in the afternoon." (Man, 35 years, Lost Job)

"I managed my drinking around my job. Then, I think as soon as my job came to be inside my home, that's when I didn't have any of that accountability." (Man, 29 years, Working from Home)

Across participants who were now spending more time at home than at work or in social settings, there was a strong articulation that the divide between weekdays and weekends had been blurred. This sometimes meant the personal boundaries and drinking norms associated with weekend drinking or weekday drinking similarly changed. For those who shifted to working from home, for example, this change in daily routines altered the opportunities for drinking and, relatedly for some,

opportunities to recover from a drinking occasion. Several participants spoke about being able to drink during the working day, or drink into the night and wake up later, or work hungover without serious consequences. As one participant who worked from home during the start of the pandemic, then later took a voluntary redundancy package, explained:

"... because we didn't have to go anywhere to go to work, you got up later and nobody knew if you were in your pyjamas or not. Yeah, it really shifted all the boundaries that I think you set up."

(Woman, 61 years, Lost Job)

The capacity to drink during the day was also shaped by some individuals' home environments. For example, some participants were able to drink with friends, family, neighbours and housemates who were in a similar situation. Some talked about drinking with friends during lunch, after work, at dinner or into the night, leading to multiple drinking occasions within a day.

Other changes to responsibilities, including being involved in (or taking children to) sports, socialising and activities that might have required driving, were similarly reduced. This reduction in informal responsibilities created more opportunities (and fewer disincentives) for drinking, as illustrated by a mother describing no longer having to take her son to sport:

"Previous to COVID when I had to drive places, that [drinking] didn't happen because I was in the car an awful lot driving my very active son around. But it suddenly felt like quite a freeing thing to be able to – 'I don't have to drive anywhere; I don't have to go or anything; I can just have a glass of wine; that'll be fine'." (Woman, 57 years, Working from Home)

Overall, this reduction in formal and informal responsibilities was the most common finding. The shift towards working from home or not working during COVID-19 restrictions transformed the times and contexts around which participants previously structured their drinking, leading to increased opportunities to drink. We note here, though, that there were some exceptions to this. For example, one participant who worked in the hospitality sector described regularly drinking before the pandemic "when you finish or even sometimes while you're working, regardless of what day of the week it was" (Woman, 27 years, Not Working). She later talked about drinking less during the pandemic due to not working and living at home with parents. This highlights how, in non-COVID-19 times, some workplaces and industries (e.g. hospitality and the night-time economy) may enable less structured opportunities for drinking.

The permeability of drinking boundaries

Just as some participants were able to drink more as their responsibilities lessened or changed, so too did drinking occasions become less bound to times, places and contexts. Some participants described drinking out of boredom or to help them relax, but also described how drinking became increasingly intertwined with other daily activities such as working, cooking, eating and spending time with other household members. This meant that drinking occasions were not necessarily planned or intended, but often mundane and spontaneous. While spontaneous drinking opportunities were not uncommon pre-pandemic, the notion of an 'occasion' as denoting some kind of event or celebration for drinking did not seem to accurately describe the casual attitude many participants had towards drinking. For example, as a university student who had lost his job explained:

"... it's just more casually slipped in ... when I'm just walking around the house bored at 4 o'clock I'll be like, 'yeah okay, I'll just have a beer, why not?'" (Man, 23 years, Lost Job)

This permeability of drinking boundaries was due partly to the inability of some participants to drink within their preferred contexts (e.g. with friends in a pub or bar) and partly to the lack of clear boundaries that previously designated 'appropriate' drinking contexts. By having alcohol at home and being home most of the time, drinking seemed to be less of an occasion and more embedded in other everyday activities and practices. Many participants spoke about drinking as previously being a social activity, but COVID-19 restrictions had transformed it into something less structured and more mundane. For example, one participant talked about how drinking became a less reflective practice:

"... it went from a social thing to a just something to do I suppose, like instead of probably drinking on the weekends I'd drink, just have a couple during the week or on a weeknight or something like that. It wasn't really routine." (Woman, 54 years, Working from Home)

Because there was not necessarily a dedicated time to drink, celebrate or socialise, some participants described drinking less during discrete episodes but more consistently and unremarkably during week. As another participant noted, this regularity made drinking a "prosaic" accompanying pleasure to other everyday activities:

"So yeah, like I said, it would normally be attached to a social occasion and an event, whereas now it's a bit more prosaic; it's just, well, while watching a movie at home, let's open a bottle of wine, which is something we never would have done in the past." (Man, 38 years, Working in Usual Workplace)

This ordinariness of drinking also meant that many participants did not conceive their drinking as a particular occasion or event, but rather as an unremarkable or unexceptional practice that they could fit around their (COVID-19 restricted) lifestyles. These attitudes towards alcohol may have also been linked to changing drinking contexts. For example, drinking in one's own home, rather than at a bar or party may have changed some of the norms and expectations around drinking (e.g. having a 'big drinking occasion' with friends). Indeed only a few participants talked about regularly drinking to intoxication. This was often younger participants drinking with housemates or participants who described heavy drinking both before, and during, COVID-19 restrictions. For many others, these reductions in big drinking occasions were likely due to the lack of events, venues and contexts that might otherwise support them.

The extension of drinking

Closely associated with the shifting structures and attitudes towards drinking, some participants also spoke of having newly extended periods of time during which they could drink. This could mean starting earlier in the day or drinking later into the night. These extended drinking periods did not necessarily result in intoxication or steep increases in drinking (indeed, quantitative studies suggest otherwise for many Australians [15]). For example, one participant spoke about how he was able to "sip" on drinks during work until late into the evening:

"I would crack a beer at 10.30 in the morning or 11 o'clock, around that time, and I'd sip on 2 bottles of beer that would get me through until around about 3-ish, I guess. Then I would have a glass of wine and continue sipping on the wine through the evening, through till 10 or 11 o'clock when I would normally go to bed." (Man, 58 years, Working from Home)

Here, drinking was not a discrete occasion, but a practice that could last an extended period of time. The traditional notion of a drinking occasion fails to capture how drinking in this way is limited relative to social or event-based drinking. Alternatively, home drinking made it unclear when exactly a drinking occasion started and stopped. As illustrated in the account below, participants contrasted this with 'going out' to drink to bars, restaurants or other social events, where the event itself provided endpoints to a drinking occasion:

"We'd definitely go on [drinking] longer, we'd go on longer, for sure. Because there was nothing else to do. It was like, well, where we would normally have gone out and found a restaurant or seen friends or anything." (Man, 53 years, Lost Job)

Again, the change in responsibilities (and other pastimes or hobbies) in participants' lives had made extended periods of drinking feasible. Several participants spoke about day drinking at home during COVID-19 restrictions, for example, suggesting extended drinking practices during the day had become increasingly normalised.

We note that extended drinking occasions were not always a direct result of COVID-19-related changes to work routines or lifestyles. For example, one participant – a retiree – described drinking small amounts throughout the day prior to COVID-19 restrictions. This reminded him that he had been asked about a drinking 'session' in the online survey he had completed previously and prompted him to question, "Well, what's a session? I drink from 10 AM 'til 6 PM. Is that one session?" (Man, 71 years, Not Working). He further observed that most people have a "drinking time and they have a definite session", but that he did not. This highlights how work and lifestyle routines are important in shaping how people understand and enact drinking occasions, even beyond the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions.

New contexts for drinking

As well as the loosening temporal understanding of a drinking occasion, many participants also spoke about new contexts and meanings for drinking. Rather than confining drinking to specific times and places, the restrictions of COVID-19 and the capacity to drink at home encouraged some participants to create new contexts for drinking. For example, some spoke about drinking alone before, during and after dinner as a "substitute for social interaction" (Woman, 68 years, Not Working). Others spoke about how the shift to more home drinking encouraged novel situations of (and times for) drinking:

I noticed a lot with my friends as well, a lot of people are more comfortable with day drinking than in the past. [...] I know at the beginning of lockdown my partner and I would have like a mimosa with breakfast on the weekend or like we would go, when there were still stage 2 lockdowns, we would go have a beer with our breakfast. (Woman, 31 years, Working in Usual Workplace)

For this participant, 'having time' and altered responsibilities led to drinking during times usually not dedicated to drinking occasions (e.g. breakfast). Although this was not a commonly expressed shift in practice, it highlighted how the novelty of COVID-19 restrictions might encourage novel drinking practices.

What was more commonly articulated in participants' accounts was the creation of new drinking contexts via online chats or video calls. These video calls sometimes included large numbers of people and became a key way by which some participants socialised with friends and family. These

also became new virtual-social contexts for drinking occasions. For example, several participants spoke about having organised “Zoom gin sessions” (Woman, 60 years, Lost Job) or having a “cocktail hour” (Man, 39 years, Not Working) on video calls. This online drinking blurred notions of appropriate drinking spaces and situations. For example, one participant said:

“I normally have a wine with a meal or if I’ve got friends in the house I will drink in the house. But I would not normally ever drink if I’m the only physical person in the space. But on a Zoom call that became very different.” (Woman, 39 years, Lost Job)

Not only did being able to socialise online change the context for drinking occasions, but for some participants, this possibility also influenced the timing and duration of their drinking. For example, one participant described starting virtual drinking sessions with friends overseas during lockdown, which at times led them to drink as early as 5 AM. Similarly, several participants spoke about extended video calls lasting for several hours or jumping from one video call to another, which created multiple (consecutive) drinking events.

DISCUSSION

Drinking occasions are a mainstay of alcohol research, used as a practical way of empirically measuring and defining complex drinking practices. However, while operating as a blunt tool for gauging *how much* people drink, drinking occasions overlook many of the complexities of *how* people drink. This has been brought clearly to our attention in our analysis of changing drinking practices during COVID-19. Many of the routines and responsibilities around which we might expect drinking to take place transformed during COVID-19 restrictions, creating new drinking patterns and styles that often did not fit within pre-established notions of drinking occasions. Moreover, given that COVID-19 may have far-reaching impacts on both working practices (e.g. more people working from home) and workers themselves (e.g. how they manage their time and wellbeing) [26], it is important to consider how this will shape the ways and contexts in which people drink going forward. As such, we argue that COVID-19 restrictions create a strong impetus to re-examine drinking occasions in alcohol research, including the role of structures, norms, settings and rituals that might have previously bound them. A closer investigation of these changing drinking practices using a more theoretically informed lens, such as Social Practice Theory [27, 28] may provide a useful way forward. Social Practice Theory incorporates an examination of materials, meanings, skills, locations and timings to understand (changes in) practices, and allows for and highlights the importance of the interconnection between practices (e.g. drinking and eating) [27]. Social Practice Theory has been used to unpack the complex and varied influences on drinking practices [29] and could be useful for understanding changing drinking patterns relative to changing contexts (e.g. a shift towards domestic drinking) and the associated changes in meaning.

Although there have been growing concerns around increased alcohol intake and alcohol-related harms during COVID-19 [30], epidemiological research has not shown a clear increase in drinking [15, 31]. Self-identified changes in employment, stress and mental health have been associated with reports of increased drinking [32–34], so it is perhaps unsurprising that many participants in our study who described changes to their drinking styles were those who lost their job during the pandemic. However, we also saw how drinking changed among other groups, such as those who transitioned to work from home or lived in households where regular routines were disrupted due to COVID-19 restrictions. Changes in drinking can occur alongside changes in daily-life routines, where major life events (such as chronic illness, retirement, marriage or separation) can act as

instigators [7]. It may be that COVID-19 restrictions resulted in similar changes in life circumstances for many people, subsequently highlighting the various dimensions of change in the meaning and frequency of drinking for individuals.

Because COVID-19 restrictions reduced both formal responsibilities (such as work) and informal activities (such as sports and social events), drinking was often described as an unremarkable, everyday occurrence. Indeed, the idea of a drinking 'occasion' did not accurately reflect the way drinking became intertwined with everyday routines and practices for some participants. Drinking patterns were often described as being structured around work and other routines prior to COVID-19. Without these, drinking was more permeable. For example, among retirees and those who had lost their jobs, drinking was not bound by the requirements of work and was more able to seep into everyday routines but seemed less intense and intoxication oriented. Thus, it is important that research on drinking during COVID-19 restrictions – and research using the concept of drinking occasions more generally – considers the importance of economic and labour changes. Notably, changes in the structures that shape drinking occasions may also change the associated harms (e.g. drinking in the night-time economy and alcohol-related violence vs. home drinking and mental health issues) [35].

Although drinking sessions on a night out can last for over nine hours [36], such intensive drinking practices (where drinking tends to be the focus of the activity) were different from the extended, lower intensity drinking occasions described by participants in our study. Indeed, in Australia, the UK and the US, research on drinking during COVID-19 restrictions has suggested a shift away from heavy episodic drinking occasions towards more frequent home drinking occasions [15, 24, 31, 37]. This highlights the importance of changing drinking contexts. While some of the drinking practices participants spoke about were protracted over long periods of time, they were also defined by settings and routinised practices. For many, drinking was a way to signal the winding down of the day, or it was an accompaniment to other activities like working, cooking or catching up with friends online. In contrast, many participants spoke of the lack of venues and social events (such as going out to a pub or bar for drinks) that would have shaped their drinking before COVID-19. This event-based pub or bar drinking has also been considered central to traditional Australian drinking culture [38], and so the decline of this type of drinking may have also changed some norms and routinised practices that shape drinking (e.g. the practice of buying rounds or drinking to intoxication). Some of the drinking styles we saw here echoed the traditional picture of drinking in 'wet' countries, where light and regular drinking was viewed as a part of everyday activities and practices, rather than an 'occasion' [39, 40]. However, for some participants, drinking was not only a practice that co-occurred with others (such as cooking or eating) but also a practice to pass time and take advantage of unstructured time.

While we know the context of drinking occasions is an important influence on how much people drink [8] and that home drinking is likely to be a central feature to drinking during COVID-19 restrictions [21], our analysis also highlighted how people adapted their drinking practices. Here, we saw an increase in drinking alone as a substitute for social interactions, as well as drinking while on video calls (although we cannot be sure how much these forms of drinking existed prior to COVID-19). The question of whether these changes simply reflect novel ways of adapting and connecting during COVID-19 restrictions, or whether they represent longer-term habitual changes to drinking contexts, deserves further investigation as restrictions ease.

We note that our findings tended to reflect the experiences of those whose lifestyles and routines had changed the most due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This included those who had lost jobs or had experienced other stresses and personal turmoil not described here (such as reduced work hours, financial hardship, sudden changes to living arrangements, relationship issues). In contrast, drinking occasions for those who continued to work in their usual workplace seemed to have changed the least. Thus, it is important to acknowledge this research examined changing practices, with less attention to individual circumstances and motivations. It is also important to remember that we have not seen an overall increase in alcohol consumption in Australia, but rather a change in the frequency of drinking and the amount consumed when drinking [15]. This highlights how standardised terms such as 'drinking occasions' are limited in their ability to grapple with this variability in drinking practices – both among different populations, and amid sweeping social and labour market changes. Moreover, as we found, there are people whose drinking prior to COVID-19 restrictions already challenged notions of a drinking occasion.

CONCLUSION

It is important to be cognisant of limitations in the terminology we use, the complexities in our objects of study and how these may be influenced by social changes. We argue that concepts like 'drinking occasions' represent such a problem, where COVID-19 has provided a renewed impetus to examine how we define and apply drinking occasions in alcohol research. In this article, we saw changes regarding the time, timings and contexts of drinking. These changes should be further explored to add context and meaning to epidemiological findings. Furthermore, research on how COVID-19 restrictions may have changed social norms around alcohol, and what this means for drinking practices and styles into the future, will be important to understand and investigate further. Such an understanding might allow us to rethink when it is and is not useful to rely on standard measures like drinking occasions to guide public health policy. Particularly with the advent of COVID-19, it may be fruitful to reimagine drinking as a practice with distinct meanings which, in the domestic sphere, may be more permeable and co-occur alongside other practices.

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Conflicts of Interest

None to declare.

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