

# Risk and restraint—The key to understanding the decreasing use of alcohol for young people in high income countries?

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** In this article we seek to understand the changing social position of alcohol use for young people in Australia by identifying how alcohol has become framed as posing a significant risk to their bodies and futures.

**Methods:** Forty interviews were conducted with young people aged 18–21 years from Melbourne, Australia, who had previously identified as light drinkers or abstainers. Drawing on insights from contemporary sociologies of risk, we explored how risk was discussed as a governing concept that shaped young people's views of alcohol, and how it encouraged or necessitated risk-avoidance in daily life.

**Results:** Participants drew on a range of risk discourses in framing their abstinence or moderate drinking along the lines of health, wellness, wisdom and productivity. They reiterated social constructions of heavy or regular alcohol use as irresponsible, threatening and potentially addictive. The focus on personal responsibility was striking in most accounts. Participants seemed to have routinised ways of practicing risk avoidance and coordinated drinking practices with other practices in their everyday life, with alcohol therefore 'competing for time'.

**Discussion and Conclusions:** Our findings endorse the idea that discourses of risk and individual responsibility shape the contemporary socio-cultural value of alcohol for young people. Risk avoidance has become routine and is manifested through the practice of restraint and control. This appears particular to high-income countries like Australia, where concerns about young people's futures and economic security are increasing, and where neoliberal politics are the foundations of governmental ideology.

## KEYWORDS

alcohol, declining drinking, risk, young people

## Key Points

- Young people's drinking has been declining in high income countries for almost 20 years.

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- Concerns about risk and individual responsibility is key to understanding alcohol's diminishing socio-cultural position for young people.
- In countries with neoliberal governmental imperatives, heavy drinking is one of many risk practices that young people are avoiding.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Drinking rates among young people have declined significantly over the past 20 years in many high-income countries, which includes both a reduction in quantities and frequencies of drinking, as well as increasing abstention from drinking [1]. These trends are starkest among under-age young people but evidence from many high-income countries also shows reductions in the frequency and volume of drinking among young adults [2]. A comparison of qualitative literature on alcohol use from 15 years ago and today suggests significant differences in the way young people talk about drinking and states of intoxication, particularly with regard to notions of risk and reward (e.g., [3, 4]), and risk has been a feature of qualitative research exploring declines in young people's drinking in high-income countries (e.g., [5–9]). It is important to build on this by closely examining how risk is understood and practiced in relation to alcohol for young people. In this article we seek to understand the social position of alcohol use for young people in Australia by exploring how alcohol consumption is constructed as a risk behaviour through both discourse and practice. Drawing on qualitative data collected with young people aged 18–21 years in Australia, we argue that alcohol use, and particularly intoxication, has become contemporaneously synonymous with short- and long-term risk to individual bodies and future biographies.

### 1.1 | Alcohol use for young people

Fifteen years ago, sociological research from the United Kingdom framed young people's heavy and regular drinking as part of a 'culture of intoxication' [4]. This was marked by a 'cultural change in attitudes towards intoxication and an apparent pursuit of determined drunkenness at both the individual and social level' [4, p. 269]. Further studies from Australia and the United Kingdom (e.g., [4, 10–13]) emphasised alcohol's association with immoderation, transformational bodily pleasure, abnegation of responsibility and control, and switching off from everyday realities.

To understand these practices of regular and heavy drinking among people, sociologists reflected on changes to social and economic conditions. They identified that young people were more likely to stay in the family home

for longer, pursue higher education and delay having children—or decide never to do so. This period of 'new adulthood' [14] described a post-adolescent phase where young people could retain some of the freedoms of childhood while beginning to negotiate some of the responsibilities of adulthood. It was a time when young people could focus on the pursuit of leisure, pleasure and identity development, while starting to engage in work or university study and ponder looming responsibilities [15, 16]. Heavy weekend drinking was understood as a way to experiment with identities, forget daily pressures and suspend life's continual focus on risk and responsibility. It therefore served as 'a spatial and temporal location where the routine restraints of the day (were) supplanted by a melange of excitement, uncertainty and pleasure' [17, p. 442]. It was argued that the constant pressure to be successful in the post-industrial world was increasingly being offset with 'time out' or reward through the pursuit of hedonistic pleasures [18].

Fifteen years later, such findings stand in stark contrast to current sociological research on young people's drinking in high-income countries. In fact, contemporary studies more often report that many young people have become wary of alcohol use, emphasising moderation, control, responsibility and needing to stay focused on everyday realities [6–9, 19–22]. Notably though, sociologists are posing some of the same explanations for declining drinking among young people as were previously employed to explain the rise of determined drunkenness. Even longer time is spent living in the family home, the delay of so-called adult responsibilities has stretched further, and pressures to succeed in study and work have only increased [7, 20, 23–25]. Alcohol intoxication, once framed as a response to contemporary social and economic conditions, has now become the inverse—it is now being avoided or minimised for many of the same reasons. In this article we will argue that this is because alcohol is now imagined as a product of risk for young people.

### 1.2 | Risk—Governance and practice

To better understand the role of risk and the way it shapes today's young people's views and use of alcohol, we draw on contemporary theories of risk—specifically that of Giritli Nygren et al. [26] and Torbenfeldt

Bengtsson and Ravn [27]. Giritli Nygren et al. [26] explore risk in terms of how it is used as a concept to govern society, while Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and Ravn [27] take a practice-based approach to understand how risk-taking or risk-avoidance becomes embedded in daily life. These approaches take two very different points of focus; however, we see them as complementary ways of understanding how risk shapes practices both at the individual and societal levels.

Neoliberalism is a theory from political economics describing societies that are governed in ways that promote individual entrepreneurial freedoms through free markets and trade, deregulation and privatisation. In sociology, neoliberalism is often used to describe the way these governing frameworks have produced social and cultural imperatives around individualism, personal choice and self-responsibilisation. The foundational work of Ulrich Beck [28] and Anthony Giddens [29] outlined how risk operationalises power in neoliberal societies through public policies, discourses, information and setting expectations about what is 'healthy' or 'good', and hence what is and what is not risky. Further developing this line of work, Giritli Nygren et al. [26] foreground how risks are constituted in particular socio-spatio-temporal contexts. Drawing on feminist theories of intersectionality [30], they argue that risks are understood, described and used by groups with access to different forms of power across time and across contexts. They suggest that the definitions, understandings and management of risk are always filtered through socio-cultural norms and values. This might be why, for example, alcohol is perceived as a risk to contemporary young people worried about their future selfhood and economic security, but not perceived as such by older groups or people in countries less governed by neoliberal logics [31, 32].

Giritli Nygren et al. [26] argue that the desired or ideal citizen is formulated according to what should be considered a normal or acceptable behaviour, which justifies policy solutions that target individuals. The most apparent policy field where risk is attached to individual bodies is that of social problems—such as alcohol use—since social problems are often framed in terms of risk. Through normalising processes, the conduct of the individual becomes governed through moral discourses of responsibility (i.e., notions of 'responsible drinking'), while being masked as the outcome of free and individual choice.

Informed by empirical work from two independent qualitative studies, Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and Ravn [27] further theorise how risks (as governed in the ways described above) are then situated and practiced in everyday life. They demonstrate that many young people who engage in practices considered to be risky do so in a routinised way. By shifting focus to how young people synchronise, coordinate and organise risk-taking practices in their everyday

lives, they foreground risk-taking as made and re-made through practices, and thereby redefine risk as something that does not exist independently of the broader socio-material entanglement of an individuals' social practices.

Drawing from theories of practice (e.g., [33, 34]), Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and Ravn [27] understand risk-taking as a social and relational construct that can only be understood by focusing on why and how something is considered a risk in relation to other practices and in different contexts. In particular, they describe how neoliberal processes of individualisation and feelings of greater vulnerability have heightened young people's awareness of risk and influenced their willingness to take risks.

For Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and Ravn [27] risk taking is inherently social. In their empirical work they show how risk taking (such as alcohol and drug use) occurs as part of broader participation in youth culture, and the meanings of youth cultural practices which exist within a particular historical period. Risk taking has to be coordinated within daily lives and is relative to social norms and perceived normalcy. Risk taking allows young people to break these boundaries and norms as a form of release from the constraints of everyday life (as can be seen in the 'culture of intoxication' literature described earlier; [4, 12], etc.). They suggest, while risk taking is embodied and affective, so too is risk avoidance. For many young people, some forms of risk can be felt as 'too much', either because of the images the risks invoke or because of their negative experiences with these practices.

In this article, we use these two theoretical explications of risk—one focusing on societal governance and one on risk as practiced—to anchor our empirical analyses and demonstrate how alcohol use is framed as a significant risk for contemporary young people in Australia.

## 2 | METHODS

Interviews were undertaken with 40 young people (aged 18–21 years) in 2020 who participated in a longitudinal qualitative study focused on declining youth drinking. Participants from Victoria, Australia, were recruited in 2018 via social media advertising when they were aged 16–19 years and self-identified as abstainers or light drinkers (had not consumed more than four drinks on occasion and typically consumed alcohol infrequently). They were interviewed in 2018 (Wave 1, for more information see [8, 19, 20]) and then again in 2020 (Wave 2). The data reported on here are from Wave 2, when all participants had reached Australia's legal drinking age of 18 (see Table 1 for study demographics).

There were 50 participants in the Wave 1 sample (2018), but only 40 could be followed up in 2020; either

**TABLE 1** Demographics of the sample.

Characteristic	n (%)
Gender	
Man	17 (43%)
Woman	23 (57%)
Age, years	
18	10 (25%)
19	23 (57%)
20	4 (10%)
21	3 (8%)
Cultural background	
Australian born parents	21 (53)
One or both parents born elsewhere <sup>a</sup>	8 (20)
Participant born elsewhere <sup>a</sup>	11 (27)
Primary educational or employment status	
Still at secondary school	2 (5%)
Studying at university	25 (63%)
Working part or full time (no current study)	13 (33%)
Region	
Inner-Melbourne	14 (35%)
Outer-suburbs of Melbourne	23 (57%)
Regional area outside of Melbourne	3 (8%)
Social class <sup>b</sup>	
From a working-class area	18 (45%)
From a middle-class area	22 (55%)
Drinking status	
Abstainer or very infrequent drinker	11 (27%)
Moderate drinker (weekly to monthly consumer of ≤4 drinks)	15 (38%)
Heavy episodic drinker (weekly to monthly consumer of >4 drinks)	14 (35%)

<sup>a</sup>Of first- and second-generation immigrants, 12 were from Asian backgrounds (China, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, India), 2 were from middle eastern backgrounds, 2 were from southern European backgrounds, 2 were from western European backgrounds and one was from New Zealand. Our participants' cultural backgrounds are very similar to demographic census data for Melbourne, Australia [35].

<sup>b</sup>Social class was measured using the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics [36] to rank the relative advantage and disadvantage of an area. Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas ranks postcodes on a 10-point scale of advantage, with 1 being the most disadvantaged and 10 being the most advantaged. We used wave 1 data for this measure (the area where a participant lived as a teenager and went to school). Participants in deciles 1–5 were considered from a working-class area (less than average advantage) and participants in deciles 6–10 were considered from a middle-class area (more than average advantage).

because their phone and email details had changed, they did not respond or they declined further involvement. Most participants were 19 years old at Wave 2, two-thirds were studying at university, and they were from both working-

class and middle-class areas of inner and outer Melbourne. Although half of our sample have at least one parent born overseas, this is broadly representative of the Melbourne population, which is ethnically diverse [35]. Most participants had begun consuming alcohol regularly by Wave 2; however, 11 remained abstainers or very infrequent drinkers. Participants included a combination of abstainers (27%), moderate drinkers (38%) and heavy episodic weekend drinkers (35%) (see Table 1). By way of comparison to national representative data, in 2019, 21% of 18- to 24-year-olds reported being abstainers, and 41% reported being heavy episodic drinkers at least monthly [37].

Interviews were undertaken in the first half of 2020, when COVID-19 restrictions had begun to be implemented in Australia. For this reason, the first 10 interviews were conducted face to face, with the rest on Zoom or over the phone. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 min, with most lasting approximately 45 min. Data were collected by three Caucasian interviewers (two women and one man) in their 20s and 30s. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms. All participants provided written consent (either in person or by email) and ethics approval was provided by La Trobe University (HEC19479).

The interview guide was semi-structured and covered topics including alcohol and other drug use, work and study life, socialising patterns, friendship networks, leisure time, family life and health practices. Questions were phrased openly, such as 'Tell me about alcohol and how you feel about it. How much of a role does it play in your life?' and 'Why do you drink? What do you get from alcohol?' and 'Do you ever not drink? If so, why would that be?'. Alcohol as a risky product was one of the most frequent themes identified in early readings of the transcribed data. Informed by contemporary literature on risk (i.e., [26, 27]), the lead author analysed data with a particular focus on how risk was described and alluded to. This involved paying attention to whether and how participants discussed drinking as a risk in terms of their capacity or need to self-govern, and as made and re-made through daily practice. We identified that drinking practices were negotiated in the social and economic contexts of young people's lives, but also by the discourses young people encountered about what was 'normal' and 'appropriate' for them.

### 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | The pervasiveness of risk discourse: Alcohol and its risk to future selfhood

Girtli Nygren et al. [26] conceptualise risk as an organising principle with the power to change individual

attitudes and behaviours. Indeed, the construction of alcohol as a problem to be managed through self-governance was common in our data. For both men and women, alcohol was framed persistently as unhealthy, dangerous or as morally irresponsible. Participants (both drinkers and non-drinkers) often reflected on the idea that a single occasion of heavy drinking had the potential to destroy lives (e.g., drink driving, accidental death), and also that regular drinking could impact future physical, social and mental health. For drinkers, moderation was an important boundary, and the slope was slippery if this boundary was flirted with. Consider Joel and Rashid's justifications for their moderate drinking practices:

'If you're having a little bit here and there it's all right but if you're really abusing it, it can be really, really bad for you. I'd compare it to be as bad as meth or something, you know, because if you get on the drink super hard you can see people just throw their lives away'. (Joel, 18, drinks moderately)

'I think everything – so like with any substances that affect the brain I think you can take any substance you want and have a good time as long as you do it in moderation ... If they're done in moderation and you – like obviously you know what you're taking and how much you're taking of it I think you can still have a really good time and suffer no health implications and obviously if you don't do it often as well. So if you space out every single time you do it'. (Rashid, 19, heavy episodic drinker)

In Joel's view, heavy drinking could result in the loss of a productive healthy life. For this reason, he typically consumed no more than four standard drinks. Rashid's perspective was that the key to moderation was infrequent heavy drinking. In his interview he noted drinking around seven shots at nightclubs with friends—exceeding national drinking guidelines [38]—but doing so no more than once a month. For Rashid, moderation was about frequency of heavy drinking rather than quantity consumed at once. Both Joel and Rashid seemed to have negotiated their own boundaries about what constituted an acceptable level of risk. Such reflections contrast with the views expressed in literature from 15 years ago, where among heavy drinkers, deliberate excess was positioned as a regular weekend pleasure state to enable weekday productivity and work-life balance [12, 18].

In our data, among both drinkers and non-drinkers, concerns about addiction and dependence were common,

which, given alcohol's traditional positioning as a social substance for young people [39], were curiously persistent. This is evident in Joel's view that drinking 'super hard' could result in throwing one's life away, and that 'you can see' this happen—although he also reported not knowing anybody who was a heavy drinker or who had encountered problems with alcohol. In her interview, Gabriella was particularly focused on the risks of dependence of later chronic health problems:

'I feel like if I let myself, I could definitely become someone who is dependent on alcohol so I don't want to let myself get to that point because I don't want to be that person and I feel like I could ... I don't know, but I don't want to be at a point where it's like, I drank so much in my 20s that now I'm going to have lifelong health problems. Because people get liver problems and all that and I know that. It's just I don't want to throw potentially a future away for a couple of years of drinking when it's not something that is that important to me, personally'. (Gabriella, 19, moderate drinker)

Research from the past two decades suggested that young people were more concerned about the immediate risks from heavy drinking (e.g., accidents, injuries, altercations, embarrassment) with little concern about long-term health problems [10, 12, 40]; but in our data, concern about longer-term health problems—as noted by Gabriella—were commonly reported (see also [8, 9, 22]). This suggests that institutional discourses of alcohol as a long-term risk factor are salient for young people today. In our data, the risks of drinking were not only positioned with regard to future health, but also in terms of future productivity (see also [20]). Frankie, who was an abstainer in Wave 1 before transitioning to heavy weekend drinking in her first year of university and now identified as an ex-drinker, discussed the impact of regular drinking on all facets of life, but particularly on future employment progression:

'It's like, if you are drinking then it's potentially because of mental health problems, and that's going to impact your career. Or, if you're drinking, that's going to impact your career, and it's going to lead to mental health problems, so it's like they all kind of lead into each other ... Yeah, because in my high school, it wasn't really a massive thing in my friendship group, and we kind of looked down on the people who drank all the time.

It's like, aren't you trying to get into uni? [Laughs]. Like, what's wrong with you?'. (Frankie, 20, infrequent drinker)

Frankie's implications that there is something 'wrong' with young people who drink regularly or heavily may have been shaped by her history as an abstainer during high school, or her experiences drinking during her first year of university. However, her focus on psychological, education and career-related risk diverges significantly from the normalisation of heavy episodic drinking for young adults suggested by Parker et al. in the late 1990s [41]. While Frankie's views around the customariness of university are classed, it is important to note that these sentiments were common from participants who came from both working- and middle-class areas; indeed, Frankie grew up and attended secondary school in a working-class area. There were, however, exceptions to accounts of heavy or regular drinking positioned as a barrier to achieving healthy, happy, productive, future selves. Some participants had transitioned into weekend heavy drinking with few concerns about how this might impact future health or employment opportunities. Other participants valued the social advantages alcohol afforded despite their concerns about alcohol's risk value. For example:

'For me, my current ideology is that I'll have a drink if it allows me access to a social occasion but I'm not going to – I won't have a drink for no reason. Just like I won't just have a glass of wine with dinner ... because I know that it's unhealthy and I just don't want to consciously be having this substance which I don't have to have which could be – I don't know, impacting my brain development and things like that ... I have been thinking that in order for me to make new friends in uni I might just have to succumb to – I'll just have to drink alcohol ... I mean I don't particularly like it'. (Marcus, 18, infrequent drinker)

Marcus expresses disdain towards alcohol throughout his interview and discusses the potential harms, but also notes its social utility. Indeed, he is willing to sacrifice his health for 'access to a social occasion' or to 'make new friends' given the benefits this might consequently provide to his mental and social health. It is interesting to note that, unlike a lot of the narratives in the data about non and light drinking being a superior consumption stance, Marcus still believes that he needs to consume alcohol to fit in and make friends at university. This suggests that alcohol's risk value differs in different institutional and

social contexts, particularly during transitional stages such as beginning university (see also [42]).

Sarah's view, while extreme and not endorsed to the same degree widely across the sample, is a perspective that is arguably unique to young people today:

'There's a bit of a vibe, where it's like if you drink a lot, it's like, what's wrong with you, in a way, like, why do you need to drink so much? There's something going on there. Yeah, so there's a bit of a stigma around it, in that way ... It's okay to drink if you're like 18, but if you're in your 20s, and you're still doing that, it's like, yeah, it's like, shouldn't you be doing something with your life? We're starting to enter our 20s, and you don't drink every week in your 20s, unless you're sad. Yeah, so it's just not a thing'. (Sarah, 20, infrequent drinker)

As we have shown in this section, participants drew on multiple risk discourses in framing their abstention or moderate drinking along the lines of health, wellness, wisdom, intelligence or productivity. They reiterated social constructions of heavy or regular alcohol use as irresponsible, threatening and potentially addictive. The focus on personal responsibility was striking in most accounts, consistent with neoliberal ideology. This contrasts with views reported in the literature with heavy drinkers from 15 years ago, where rejection of responsibility and control were part of the motivations for drinking. In the early 2000s, Measham and Brain suggested broad social changes had occurred in permissive attitudes towards intoxication, alongside a shift in norms and values that had previously served to limit excessive drinking. Our data show the opposite—a clear collective shift in attitudes against intoxication and towards moderation and responsibility (see also [43]).

### 3.2 | Practicing risk and risk avoidance: Maintaining physical and social control

Drawing on the work of Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and Ravn [27], we also identified ways in which risk and risk avoidance were practiced by our participants in their everyday lives within the context of their broader socio-cultural environments. Consider this view from Cara, an abstainer, who talks in her interview about vigilantly practicing non-drinking in daily life. She says:

'I won't go to nightclubs, that's a step too far for me ... but I'll go to a house party ... I

usually just adjust my expectations to it ... I know everyone's going to be drunk and it may not actually be super fun but I think that as I've been to more as I've got older, I've found ways for me to enjoy those situations more'. (Cara, 19, abstainer)

Cara discusses a range of ways for making the night easier for herself (i.e., carrying her own non-alcoholic drink in a plastic cup), as a way of participating in social activities while also practicing sobriety. She also draws boundaries around spaces she will and will not attend according to the drinking practices she associates with them.

Many participants had begun drinking socially by Wave 2. However, even those participants who did engage in regular heavy episodic weekend drinking did not talk about annihilation, transcendence or immoderation as noted in literature from 15 years ago (e.g., [10, 13]). Instead, they talked about composure, moderation and discipline. For example:

'If we're going clubbing or something I'll probably have maybe five standards or something ... I try to stay below that so I've got my wits about me and – because I've got to be alert in public ... and every so often I'll do a sober night just to take a break or just to show myself I can still have fun without drinking. I definitely know I can so I just use that to prove it to myself every so often, like yeah you know, you're still all good, you're not being excessive about it, which is something that I think about a lot and I strive to keep it responsible'. (Christos, 18, heavy episodic drinker)

It was common for participants to report having been intoxicated once or a handful of times, and learning very quickly that they either did not enjoy that, or felt embarrassed afterwards or unable to meet their obligations due to tiredness, and so deliberately curtailed their drinking going forward. Sometimes this meant keeping to three to five drinks; but this was also reported by those who reported consuming up to 12 drinks on a night out. Despite these heavy episodes of drinking, these participants still emphasised control and knowing their personal limits. Drinking to intoxication has always been bounded—Measham [18] used the term 'controlled loss of control' to describe young people's pursuits of intoxication; however, our participants discussed not wanting to relinquish control even when drinking in quantities that might be considered excessive:

'I haven't had a hangover yet ... I prefer being in control because I view myself as pretty rational. So, yes, I would like to have control of myself and of my surroundings so that I would try to avoid being intoxicated to the extent that I lose control'. (Justin, 19, moderate drinker)

'I see alcohol as a big distraction, so I try to really only do the bare minimum and be really careful'. (Phillip, 20, heavy episodic drinker)

By 'the bare minimum' Phillip means that he tries to drink as infrequently as possible. Justin and Phillip are early into their study for challenging degrees at university. Justin equates intoxication with irrationality and Phillip notes that drinking is a big distraction due to the importance of his studies, showing how it is in the context of their socio-cultural environments that risk practices compete for time and are deliberated. Similar statements were repeated throughout the interviews, including among those working full time rather than attending university. Risk avoidance is embodied, as noted by Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and Ravn [27], and participants were focused on embodied control as a valorised function of their social worlds (see also [44]).

In 2004, Measham hypothesised that alcohol intoxication enabled people to manage lives in contemporary capitalist society, with increasing pressures to be successful at university and work being offset with 'time out' or reward [18]. Ariana's sentiment below, suggests that the focus on control in neoliberal capitalist society has meant she cannot achieve the abandonment she now desires:

'It used to definitely be I don't want to get drunk, I don't want to be out of control of my body, like I had control issues. But this year when I went out, some nights it was like I want to try and get drunk, because I just want my brain to shut up. It was kind of like a mix of anxiety about I used to not want to lose control, now it's like I'm striving to just get my brain to drink enough that I'm not in control of stuff. I just want to be able to kiss a guy and it not be overthought, or restricted by anxiety. But then I don't know, so far I haven't been able to get drunk, even when I try ... But I don't know, I just don't feel like I can let my guard down fully'. (Ariana, 18, heavy episodic drinker)

Ariana seems to suggest that she wants to pursue hedonistic abandon through drinking but is not able to—

she cannot relax enough or let go of control enough to experience the altered state she thinks will enable her to 'switch off' from the world. Ariana's view wasn't common, and most participants coveted control; however, it does show how risk taking and risk avoidance are practiced within particular settings in the context of broader social pressures. As noted by Torbenfeldt Bengtsson and Ravn [27], risk-taking and risk avoidance is embodied and often structured by past experiences and future anticipations—this might be why Ariana feels unable to 'let [her] guard down'.

As we have demonstrated in this section, participants seemed to have routinised ways of practicing risk-taking (heavy alcohol use) and risk avoidance (light or no alcohol use). Participants' drinking practices were coordinated with other practices in their everyday life, such as being productive and carving out a successful future, in essence 'competing for time' [27].

## 4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Within the context of declines in alcohol use among young people, and in recognition of the salience of 'risk' in international literature on this topic, we further explored how a sample of young Australians understood alcohol as a risk—both in terms of alcohol's constructed risk to bodies and futures, and also the ways risk avoidance have become firmly embedded in young people's daily lives. Alcohol is not the only risk-taking practice young Australians are avoiding or delaying, with decreases also observed in illicit drug use, tobacco use, truancy, crime rates, risky driving and teenage pregnancies over a similar time period [45]. This suggests that alcohol is one of many risky products or risk practices that young people in Australia (and possibly other high-income countries) have internalised concern about and consequently practice avoiding. Of Swedish young people, Törrönen et al. also note that broad and pervasive 'normalising discourses of health and risk' are producing and reproducing 'self-care and risk-avoiding regimes and practices' [9, p. 319].

Our findings endorse the idea that alcohol's contemporary socio-cultural value for young people appears to be entrenched within discourses of risk, and individual and moral responsibility are key to this. Risk avoidance has become routine and is manifested through the practice of restraint and control. While risk taking and risk avoidance is embodied, we identified very little mention of embodied pleasures, hedonism, escape, switching off and even celebrating with alcohol. We have found it useful to contrast our findings with literature from 15 years

ago when heavy drinking was frequent and seemingly more valorised among young people (though noting that many of those studies were with heavy drinkers). This allows us to examine what seems like a stark shift in alcohol becoming positioned as a deep-seated risk to bodies and futures. Over a fairly short time period, alcohol appears to have switched from the tonic to living in a risky neo-liberal world, to the poison. While we acknowledge that many young people still drink alcohol regularly and heavily, and particular contexts such as universities may enable heavier drinking norms [42], there is a strong body of international literature endorsing the idea that young people in high-income countries increasingly see alcohol as a threat to individuals and societies.

For example, recently Yeomans et al. [6] suggested that risk as a concept has shifted away from being a probabilistic tool to manage the likelihood of harm, and instead has come to represent an incalculable danger to be avoided. They suggest that this has reconstructed how alcohol is understood at a policy level and how drinking is managed at a personal level, arguing that this has led to the practice of 'hyper-moderation' for young people. Contemporary literature from Sweden, Australia and the United Kingdom supports the notion that alcohol is frequently posed by young people as a risk to health [8, 22], that young people constantly and reflexively think about alcohol and risk-taking [19], and that maintaining control is a key factor for young people when considering their alcohol use [7, 46]. Concern over alcohol's potential to jeopardise performance, education, careers, economic security and future success has also been noted in international data [7, 21]. Taken together with our findings, this supports the notion that broad societal changes in risk discourse are key to understanding changes in young people's use of alcohol. Our contribution to this literature has been to draw on contemporary theories of risk to show how 'alcohol as risky' functions both as a governing concept and as a social practice.

We found it useful to draw on the work of Giritli Nygren et al. [26] in thinking about the ways that risks are understood, described and used by groups with access to different forms of power across time and across contexts. For example, drinking is not declining for older age groups in the way it is for young people [37]. It is also not declining for young people in developing countries in the same way it is for high income countries [47]. Alcohol appears to be perceived as a risk to young people in countries where concerns about future selfhood and economic security are increasing, and where individual responsibility and neoliberal politics are the foundations of governmental ideology. Concern about achieving success in university education and employment as well as future health seemed to be key to this, and this was consistent for men and women, and across the socio-economic spectrum in



our data. We also found it useful to explore how risk taking or risk avoidance is practiced in young people's daily lives [27]. The risk to bodies and futures was ever-present for our participants. The pressures, demands and anxieties faced by young people in high income countries appear to be impacting their attitudes towards and understandings of alcohol as a risk-taking practice. It is reasonable to assume that risk aversion practices are shaped by, and are actively shaping, young people's transitions into adulthood. Of course, our analytical separation of discourse and practice, while useful to understand the notion of risk as both a governing force and a daily practice, does not adequately reflect the non-linear relationship between socially constructed ideologies and materialised realities.

Our work is based on a modest qualitative sample and our sample was initially recruited because they were light or non-drinkers, which is likely to have influenced the perspectives of participants with regards to risk and alcohol. Two years later when they were interviewed as young adults, they were drinking at similar levels to Australians of the same age in national data but we did have a slightly higher proportion of abstainers and infrequent drinkers relative to Australians of the same age and a lower proportion of heavy episodic drinkers. To situate changes in risk we have compared our findings to previous literature when heavy drinking was more normative, and those samples were often comprised of self-identified heavy drinkers. Literature exploring declines in young people's drinking has not engaged substantially with present-day young heavy drinkers, which is a glaring omission given that their position and experiences of risk-taking and avoidance may be substantially different. Future research should seek to elicit these perspectives, along with a deeper examination of the intersecting influences of gender, class, education and cultural background, to enable a more comprehensive theorisation of how discourses of risk have shaped decreases in alcohol consumption for young people in high-income countries.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Each author certifies that their contribution to this work meets the standards of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

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