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

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Abstract

Background: Hello Sunday Morning (HSM) is an online program that encourages people to commit to a period of non-drinking and blog about their experiences. The purpose of this paper is to explore how HSM members negotiated their periods of abstention, with a focus on how not drinking influenced their narratives of selfhood. Methods: Thematic analysis was undertaken of 2844 blog posts from 154 Victorians who signed up to HSM in 2013 or 2014. Results: Analysis revealed three key narratives of selfhood offered by participants: 1) abstinence resulting in a disrupted sense of self, 2) non-consumption facilitating the development of a new healthy self, and 3) anti-consumption facilitating the development of a resistant self. Conclusion: Individuals construct and maintain their sense of self through consumption (or non-consumption) activities, and this occurs within the broader context of the relationship between selfhood, consumption and culture. HSM members developed narratives of self by drawing on a range of wider discursive structures concerning pleasure, healthism and resistance. The typologies of non-drinking selves identified in this paper could be disseminated through platforms such as HSM to support people who are new to non-drinking in choosing how they might construct and enact alternative selfhoods in contexts where alcohol consumption is deeply embedded.

Keywords: alcohol, Australia, Hello Sunday Morning
Introduction

The consumption of alcohol is deeply embedded in Australian culture, with historical roots that can be traced back to colonisation (Midford, 2005). Alcohol is used by the majority of Australian adults (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011), for many purposes including relaxation, socialisation and commiseration. Alcohol consumption is also one of many social practices though which people develop a sense of selfhood and experiment with markers of particular social identities and lifestyles (MacLean, 2015; Pennay, Lubman, & MacLean, 2011). However, alcohol consumption is also associated with significant social and health-related harms that are the subject of considerable public health scrutiny (Babor et al., 2010). As a consequence, public health organisations are increasingly trying to find innovative ways of reducing risky alcohol consumption. One recent approach has been the development of programs encouraging individuals to commit to a short-term period of abstinence from drinking, and in doing so, reflect on the role of alcohol in one’s life, and in society (Carah, Meurk, & Hall, 2015; Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alcohol, (non)consumption and selfhood

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

In the UK, Piacentini and Banister (2009) interviewed nine non-drinking university students who felt that their non-consumption of alcohol required taking a stance, either implicitly or explicitly, due to it being in opposition to the dominant ‘culture of intoxication’ (Measham & Brain, 2005). Piacentini et al. suggested that participants practiced various forms of avoidance as a strategy to resist drinking. These included experiential avoidance – they avoided alcohol due to previous unsatisfactory experiences, identity avoidance – they avoided alcohol because it did not correlate with their desired sense of self, and moral avoidance – they avoided alcohol as a form of resistance to the dominant norms around drinking (Piacentini & Banister, 2009). Also in the UK, Herring et al. (2014) interviewed 52 non- or light-drinkers and identified three narrative constructions of selfhood. These were ‘consistent’, for those who had always consumed little or no alcohol, ‘transitional’ for those engaged in a gradual process of decreasing use, and ‘turning point’ for the final group, who had experienced an event which motivated an abrupt change. Interestingly, participants had been able to build active and engaged lives and did not feel socially marginalised as non-drinkers: “what came through the interviews was a quiet determination and, for some, a pride in their resistance to the predominant drinking culture” (Herring et al., 2014, pg. 101).

A number of studies have explored how drinkers negotiate temporary periods of non-drinking. Cherrier and Gurrieri (2013) conducted 13 interviews with Australian adults who had partaken in FebFast – a month of abstinence during February. Their focus was on the barriers to abstaining during this period, and they found three main challenges faced by participants – the collective obligation to participate in sharing (i.e. not joining in collective drinking occasions and sharing special ritualised times together), reciprocity (i.e. breaking social obligations, such as not adequately celebrating a friend’s birthday in the same way they celebrated yours), and conformity (i.e. non-
conforming to social and cultural expectations, which may also affect group dynamics). However, despite these barriers, Cherrier and Gurrieri suggested that FebFast successfully managed to counter the cultural barriers to rejecting alcohol consumption because the program offered a supportive and inclusive anti-consumption space that fostered a community of like-minded anti-consumers and legitimised the decision not to drink. In doing so, they argued, it decentred dominant cultures of drinking, even if only for one month (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013).

Two recent studies have explored the way in which HSM members experienced a period of non-drinking. Drawing on blog data and in-depth interviews with 15 HSM members, Fry (2014) showed that participation in HSM involved the shedding of ritualised habits and cognitive, psychological and emotional repositioning of the self, similar to the processes described by newcomers to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), who have discussed the need to undergo a process of identity diffusion and reconstitution (Cain, 1991). Fry concludes that, like AA, HSM encourages a process of learning and engaging in meaningful socially embedded daily discourses and practices structured around reduced alcohol consumption. In a second study of HSM, Carah et al. (2015) used the software program ‘Leximancer’ to analyse the blog posts of 2590 HSM members from across Australia, with a particular emphasis on how blog content changed over time. They found that in the first month, HSM members described their goals, their previous drinking practices and their aspirations. After one month, they shifted towards evaluating their efforts to change, reflecting on their place within a broader drinking culture and providing advice to others.

This paper aims to extend previous work by exploring how ceasing alcohol consumption influences constructions of selfhood. Analysing the nature of online personal reflections and accounts of particular experiences relating to the non-consumption of alcohol provides an innovative way of understanding how (non)consumption practices shape narratives of selfhood in the context of the institutional embeddedness of drinking in particular environments, and society more broadly.

**Methods**

Hello Sunday Morning (HSM) has more than 35,000 registered users, including more than 25,000 from Australia. Approximately 60% of those signed up to HSM are female (which is the reverse of the Australian alcohol treatment population, which is 67% male), with 54% aged under 30 years of age (which is much higher than the Australian alcohol treatment population, of which only 27% is under the age of 30) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). A recent analysis of Australian HSM member demographics undertaken by Carah et al. (2015) reported that at baseline (when signing up
to the program) the mean Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test (AUDIT - Babor, Higgins-Biddle, Saunders, & Monteiro, 2001) score of HSM members was 19.8, indicating high-risk or harmful drinking. These high baseline AUDIT scores, combined with the fact that HSM is not a charitable program (i.e. the aim is not to raise money by giving something up for one month), suggests that people join HSM to change their relationship to alcohol through a period of abstinence. It is unclear how many HSM members see this as the beginning of a lasting change with respect to their alcohol consumption, or whether they intend to return to normal consumption levels afterwards. It is likely that both types of consumers join HSM.

The data drawn on in this paper were accessed as part of an evaluation of the motivations for joining HSM, barriers to abstaining, and strategies for overcoming these barriers, reported by HSM members from the state of Victoria in Australia (Pennay, Rankin, & MacLean, 2015). When HSM members sign up to the program they enter basic demographic and goal setting data, as well as consenting to their data being used for research purposes. HSM members provide their personal information such as name and telephone number but also select a non-identifying username for themselves, which is the only information that becomes publically accessible on the website. We only received these usernames, not the identifiable information. Ethics approval for the study was granted through Eastern Health Human Research Ethics Committee (LR17/2014).

As part of the evaluation, we received data from HSM management for 344 Victorian HSM members who began their HSM in 2013 or 2014. Of the 344 Victorian HSM members, only 154 (44.6%) had corresponding blog data, which suggests that the remaining HSM members (n=190) had signed up to the program without going on to blog – although may have still utilised the program by reading and commenting on others’ posts. This is consistent with a previous evaluation of HSM which found that two thirds of HSM members do not blog (Morrell, Carah, & Angus, 2013). Analysis of blog content for the purposes of this study was restricted to the 154 participants with blog data. The 154 Victorian HSM members who were included in analysis posted between 1 and 152 times each, contributing a total of 2844 blog posts.

Participants

As can be seen in Table 1, the sample of 154 Victorian HSM members was mostly female (71%) and mostly over the age of 30 (88%), with a mean age of 41. There was a substantial amount of missing data for age and gender, which means HSM members had not entered this information when signing up to the program. It is important to note that our Victorian sample were much more likely to be
over 30 than HSM members generally. There were no significant differences between HSM members with blog data, and those without.

---- insert Table 1 ------

HSM encourages people to commit to a three or 12-month period of abstinence. A majority of Victorian HSM members had committed to a 3-month HSM (88%), as opposed to a longer HSM. Just over half of Victorian HSM members had posted more than 10 times (51%), and 55% had posted evenly across their HSM period, with 45% posting initially and then dropping off. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sunday was the day of the week when Victorian HSM members posted the most, followed by Monday, with progressively fewer posts each day until Saturday. Mornings were the most popular time for posting followed by evenings and then during the day, with fewer people posting between midnight and 6am.

Analysis

The demographic characteristics of the 154 HSM members with blog posts and their blog data (n=2844) were exported into NVivo version 10 (QSR International, 2014) for analysis. Thematic analysis of blog posts was undertaken by two researchers (GR and AP), with a third researcher (SM) double-coding 20 users’ blog posts to ensure coding consistency. Given the specific research questions that underpinned the evaluation, a framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) approach was employed, which involved the construction of thematic categories into a matrix, into which data was coded. Framework analysis is an approach that allows themes or concepts to be specified prior to analysis (deductive approach), while allowing for additional themes or concepts to emerge during analysis (inductive approach). This meant that we were able to fulfil the requirements of the evaluation while also being able to detect and characterise issues that emerged from the data (Dixon-Woods, 2011). Despite not being one of the concepts specified prior to analysis, narratives of selfhood inductively emerged as a key theme during analysis. Analysis of this theme revealed three key narratives offered by participants: 1) abstinence resulting in a disrupted sense of self, 2) non-consumption facilitating the development of a new healthy self, and 3) anti-consumption facilitating the development of a resistant self.
Findings

Abstinence and disruption to self

I could not believe the intensity of my urge but what was more surprising was that there was an overwhelming sense of grief involved and the grief was for alcohol and all of the fun things that we associate with it, like sitting at the beach watching the sunset with a chilly glass of white or sipping a red near the fire discussing philosophy or meeting with friends and sharing boutique beers listening to blues music. (HSM member, female, unknown age)

The meaning and significance of consumer goods is located both in the culturally constituted world and with the individual consumer (McCracken, 1986). Indeed, some HSM members reported challenges during their period of abstention due to the loss or absence of a culturally constituted consumption practice that they associated with leisure and pleasure. Alcohol consumption was inextricably entwined with these social practices, and partaking in these activities without one of the core ingredients was associated with feelings of loss and sadness. A reference to brand preference is noticeable in the use of the term ‘boutique beers’, emphasising the relationship between the market and the cultural meanings ascribed to the consumption practice. A similar point was made by another HSM member, who also reflected on brand preference, and who focused both on the product and the social and affective nature of alcohol consumption (see also Carah, Meurk, & Angus, 2015):

I think it is the "idea" of wine that I am finding more difficult to give up than actually drinking. The thought of a beautiful glass of chilled chardonnay or a glass of French champagne ... The thought of living a socially full life without wine makes me desperately sad! (HSM member, female, 42 years)

Some HSM members reported a sense of loss in relation to activities that were more explicitly centred on alcohol. Alcohol consumption is intricately tied to celebration and commiseration, solidarity and bonding, and sharing and belonging. It is a communal act, and missing out on these social and collective benefits provides challenges and loss (see also Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013). For example:

I must say I do miss catching up for a drink with people – I love the random conversations and laughter that occurs after a few drinks. I love the ritual, and I love the feeling of being a bit loose. (HSM member, male, unknown age)
The social status of some HSM members was challenged by the absence of alcohol, because they either felt they had to avoid situations where alcohol was present, or were not included in social events once they stopped drinking:

I've had ONE social invite from my friends. That's approximately 1/18th of the invites I had as a drinker. The people who I used to spend two or three nights a week with (and who promised to still include me when I started my HSM) are nowhere to be seen.

(HSM member, female, 39 years)

Non- or anti-consumers undergo numerous struggles when choosing not to consume if their position runs counter to the dominant consumption paradigm (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013; Humphery, 2009). The comment above is an example of a struggle related to loss or change with respect to social status. It has been reported by other non-drinkers that anti-consumers, while desiring a change in their consumption behaviour, do not necessarily want to leave the culture entirely, and so struggle to maintain their anti-consumption stance (Piacentini & Banister, 2009).

Some HSM members experienced difficulty achieving the same enjoyment from environments or social spaces in which they had traditionally consumed alcohol without partaking, or came to the realisation that their enjoyment of some activities had been elevated by the physical effects they experienced when they consumed alcohol. For these participants, alcohol had become a key part the social practices through which they enjoyed themselves and expressed a desired selfhood, without their explicit realisation of it, for example:

Inside of me is a niggling feeling that nights out with my husband are not as much fun as they were ... looking back it seems as if the conversations flowed more easily and we were closer. (HSM member, female, unknown age)

Yesterday evening I went to an event, didn't drink, and felt as gawky as when I was a teenager ... I don't know if I actually like myself like this! (HSM member, female, unknown age)

Sex is now more depressing without a veil of wine to hide behind ... Life without wine seems pointless. (HSM member, female, 42 years)

It was common for HSM members who realised through the HSM process that alcohol was central to their sense of self to report their non-drinking life as ‘boring’. This term was used both in reference to the individual self – ‘I’ve become more boring’, and to their lifestyle – ‘the event was boring’ or ‘weekends are boring’, for example:
Life is more boring, I am not the crazy girl I thought I was. (HSM member, female, unknown age)

Bored sometimes. Sometimes find moderation stifling, unsatisfying. (HSM member, male, 45 years)

Well last night we had a work night out, the first one that I can remember not drinking at! Unfortunately I now totally understand why I drink at these events – it was boring as all hell. (HSM member, female, unknown age)

Humphery (2009) has observed that relinquishing pleasurable consumption practices can be a source of grief, even where people actively choose to do so for health or environmental reasons. For some HSM members alcohol was part of social engagements such as conversation with a partner, capacity to express a ‘crazy’ self, or sex, and these practices served to reinforce their sense of self, with an ensuing disruption to desired aspects of selfhood when they no longer drank.

**Non-consumption and the development of a healthy self**

While some HSM members struggled with abstention because alcohol was central to their selfhood and the patterning of their social lives, others found the process revelatory, embracing a new non-drinking selfhood and exploring new aspects of their lifestyle. For example:

I feel so good. I feel calm and peaceful, like I am settling into myself. I never realised while I was drinking how bad I actually felt. I was always anxious and in some kind of a hurry, even just internally somehow. I daresay that I feel good about who I am, that underneath it all I am a loving and beautiful person. I feel like now I can give that love to myself in the best possible way. (HSM member, female, 50 years)

HSM members who reflected on positive changes as a result of non-drinking emphasised the importance of non-drinking activities in the establishment of their new selves, particularly physical activity. Some HSM members reflected frequently about having more time for exercise and new challenging physical pursuits, as well as increased productivity and finding more time not only for hobbies and chores, but also more time to sit quietly, and contemplate life. For example:

I find myself really enjoying reading in the evenings and I can read books that previously would have been too complicated for my fuddled brain. My guitar playing has improved, my business is going better. I revel in my ability to control my temper with the kids as
my capability for rational thought has improved. Exercise is key – it is a virtuous circle, weight loss, feel better, more exercise, feel better, etc. (HSM member, male, unknown age)

These reflections suggest that resisting consumption allowed some HSM members to engage in the development of alternative constructions of selfhood. One of the ways they did so was by drawing on relevant social and leisure pursuits such as fitness, productivity and work, demonstrating how individuals engage with a range of social activities to construct representations of the self and negotiate their subjectivities (see also Carah, Meurk, & Angus, 2015; Fry, 2010). Some HSM members drew heavily on discourses of health in constituting their non-drinking selfhood.

Responsibility for good health has become a key moral obligation promulgated by public health organisations. This involves maintaining both physical health – through moral standards that encourage order, control and restraint, as well as mental health (Lupton, 1995; Pennay, 2012; Turner, 2000). Turner (2000) argues that maintaining optimal health is encouraged by public health via the promotion of asceticism (the practice of abstinence and restraint) and the valorisation of attractive self-presentation (through marketing and commodification).

While some HSM members reported struggling in social environments without alcohol, others were buoyed by their enjoyment of social situations without alcohol, some even finding that they preferred experiencing these occasions without alcohol, for example:

I made it through a 30th without needing any alcohol. I was the only person not drinking. I had a great night and I wasn’t the quiet, boring person that I was worried I would be … this weekend has boosted my confidence big time. (HSM member, female, 27 years)

I didn’t get sleepy, I really engaged with the presentations and thought about their relevance to my work, I asked questions, I made comments and I networked a small amount but didn’t feel like I had to make conversation just to assuage my guilt. I had good chats to my manager while we waited at the airport and resolved an issue that was plaguing my confidence as well as offering her advice on a situation she had to deal with. So there! It was so much better. In every way. (HSM member, female, 44 years)

HSM members who reflected on these positive inner changes embody Cherrier’s (2009) description of a project identity: an individual who resists a consumption practice for personal growth and inner change. These HSM members repositioned their selfhood, finding spaces for themselves that felt more rewarding. Becoming non-consumers of alcohol allowed them to develop new, more fulfilling
narratives of selfhood, or reclaim or reconcile positive elements of their ‘authentic’ self (Carah, Meurk, & Angus, 2015; Fry, 2014). In doing so, they transformed the symbolic meanings attached to alcohol from positive to negative ones, which led to a shift in their lifestyle goals and the development or rediscovery of a ‘better’ self.

Anti-consumption and the development of a resistant self

For a society in which excessive alcohol consumption is so rife, I truly believe it is fundamentally important for individuals to give some thought as to why this is, what it means, and what its causes and effects are. (HSM member, female, 25 years)

The third construction of selfhood evident in HSM members’ blog posts focused on overtly resistant anti-consumers. These HSM members reflected frequently about alcohol in a negative way, typically with respect to how pervasive and ingrained alcohol consumption is in Australian society. These posts focused less on growth at a personal level, but more on how the change in their consumption had altered their view of their social world. This caused them to question the dominance of alcohol in society, for example:

Over the past couple of days, I’ve noticed just how ingrained our drinking culture is. Every formal event there is no lack of supply of alcohol ... Even if you aren’t drinking, it is expected that you have one just to be social. What is wrong with society? Can’t a person go to a formal function and not feel the pressure of social norms to drink? Like seriously? Every time you get dressed up, you're expected to have a drink. Every time you go to a party, again, you are expected to drink. The list is endless. (HSM member, female, 22 years)

But why is it that Australians have to mark events and special occasions with alcohol? It doesn’t seem ‘special’ until the cork is popped. This culturally embedded ‘mark of celebration’ makes it hard to squeal with excitement holding a diet coke. (HSM member, female, 33 years)

Critiques of widespread social reliance on alcohol such as these helped some HSM members to make sense of their non-drinking self. These people might be enacting what Cherrier (2009) describes as hero identities, that is, they spoke of themselves as resisting exploitative consumption, and regarded non-consumption as a form of political opposition to the dominant consumption paradigm. This
entailed altering consumption norms by advocating for HSM, but also by attempting to convince peers about the importance of reconsidering the position of alcohol in Australian society:

Explain the 'what' & 'why' of HSM to my friends is starting to feel like an elevator pitch. I think the hardest bit to explain is that for me it's not about my personal relationship with alcohol, so much as being mindful of alcohol culture in general, and trying to spread that mindfulness to those around me. (HSM member, female, 30 years)

For anti-consumers, alcohol had become incongruent with their desired selves, and they performed forms of identity or moral avoidance – avoiding alcohol for ideological or moral reasons (Piacentini & Banister, 2009). Adopting anti-consumption positions allowed these individuals to constitute their own form of selfhood and attempt to distinguish themselves from the dominant culture:

My behaviour amongst the masses is not normal. It actually got me thinking, it’s very rare I will ask the person standing next to me why they are choosing to drink booze, yet I’m always asked why I’m not. Funny that! (HSM member, female, 33 years)

One of the primary challenges faced by HSM members who reconstituted the cultural position of alcohol and reworked the symbolic value of the product was overcoming the obligatory expectations to participate in sharing, reciprocity and conformity through consumption (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013). In this way, they faced additional constraints to HSM members who resisted alcohol to achieve personal change. These anti-consumers constantly reflected on the social pressure to drink from those around them:

I've noticed that not a day has gone by since beginning my HSM where I haven't been offered, around, or tempted with a drink. It's been really interesting to observe that. To see just how prevalent alcohol is in my world, in our culture. (HSM member, female, unknown age)

HSM members infrequently reflected on alcohol as a market product or as a form of consumption facilitated by commercial interests, instead they reflected more on the ‘drinking culture’ as the object to resist. However, in their disapproving statements about the pervasiveness of alcohol in social environments, they were essentially expressing their resistance to the saturation of alcohol marketing and product availability. Alcohol marketing and the notion of ‘alcohol culture’ are inseparable given that clever marketing normalises drinking and represents alcohol consumption as a cultural imperative (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013).
While anti-consumption of alcohol was one of the key distinguishing features of their non-drinking selves, it was common for HSM members to report that the program, and the information and support from other HSM members, contributed to the development and maintenance of these selfhoods. In this way, the program helped to foster and forge new collective narratives and reinforced the subject positions of anti-consumers. In doing so, these HSM members attempted to produce a cultural discourse against drinking. This was done through articulating refusal to be part of a coercive alcohol consumption culture, and incorporating non-drinking as a part of individual expressions of selfhood (see also Fry, 2010).

Discussion

This paper has explored the way in which embarking on a temporary period of non-drinking influenced narratives of selfhood for a group of Australian adults. There were three primary narratives offered by HSM members. For some, non-drinking was associated with a disruption to selfhood, and these people often reported finding abstention challenging. Members of this group were fewer in number than the other two groups. A second group of HSM members reflected on a positive shift in selfhood as a consequence of their non-consumption, with HSM facilitating the development of alternative non-drinking subjectivities. These participants reflected on the importance of non-drinking leisure activities, with a particular focus on health, as key to their new sense of self. This group were the most frequently observed. A third group of HSM members focused on anti-consumption, taking an oppositional stance against the dominance of alcohol in Australian society, with not-drinking becoming a strong feature of their sense of self. Not all participants neatly fell into one of these categories, with some HSM members not reflecting on journeys of selfhood at all in their blog posts, while others moved between positions throughout their HSM experience, or only partially identified with these constructions. It is also important to consider that these selfhoods were not static and that such constructions are embodied and reflexive and are influenced by a wide range of socio-cultural, historic and other factors beyond the simple act of not-drinking (Fox & Ward, 2008).

As is evident from the differing narratives offered by HSM members, and has been long observed by sociologists, selfhood is not fixed or stable, but is dynamic and continually produced and reproduced in specific social and physical settings (Giddens, 1991; Warde, 1994). Individuals construct and maintain their sense of self through consumption (or non-consumption) activities, and this occurs within the broader context of the relationship between selfhood, consumption and culture. HSM members developed these narratives of self by drawing on a range of wider discursive structures.
Those who experienced a disrupted self as a consequence of ceasing drinking drew on discourses of pleasure. Western cultures have an ambivalent relationship with pleasure, and many of the behaviours that public health seeks to regulate are associated with pleasure (Coveney & Bunton, 2003; Pennay, 2012). Nonetheless, pleasure seeking selves are valorised in a consumer culture which “prioritises and commodifies pleasure and in particular altered or heightened states of physical pleasure through pharmacological and behavioural means” (Measham, 2004, pg. 319). The pursuit of pleasure has long been acknowledged as a key motivator for alcohol consumption, not least because enjoying alcohol is part of enacting a socially engaged selfhood by sharing fun and experiencing the bodily effects of alcohol consumption with others (Griffin et al., 2009; MacLean, 2015), and these HSM members drew heavily on discourses of pleasure in constructing their narratives of selfhood with respect to alcohol. Selfhood is created and reinforced through consumption activities and HSM participants reflected on the socially and culturally constituted importance of alcohol in their lives and associated alcohol not only with pleasure enjoyment (and non-consumption with loss of pleasure and enjoyment), but as a key aspect of their sense of self.

Many of those who explored alternative non-drinking selfhoods drew on discourses of healthism, focusing on personal improvements in fitness, mental health and success in other aspects of life. Healthism describes the privileging of good health above other aspects of one’s life, so that an individual’s activities and thoughts are continually directed towards this goal (Lupton, 2013). These individuals identified with public health discourses that promote an authentic and healthy self as well-ordered and good (Keane, 2002). Alcohol, then, becomes an ‘unhealthy’ practice, one that is framed as inauthentic and unnatural.

The final group – those who constructed alcohol as a pervasive cultural entity – drew on discourses of resistance. Resistance in relation to alcohol consumption has tended to focus on drinking as the act of resistance (d’Abbs, 2015; Gusfield, 1991; Lemert, 1991), rather than non-drinking as a form of resistance. Resistance is an act of opposition in response to control, power or domination (d’Abbs, 2015; Hollander & Einwohner, 2004), and through individual and collective level oppositional subject positions, these HSM members engaged in the production of cultural discourse against alcohol consumption. These discursive structures (pleasure, healthism, resistance) enabled the narratives of selfhood constructed by individuals to be meaningful, both to themselves and others. Similar findings with respect to the construction of different selfhoods through participation in HSM have been identified in previous analyses of HSM data (Carah, Meurk, & Angus, 2015; Fry, 2014), and also interviews with non-drinkers (Cain, 1991; Fry, 2010; Nairn et al., 2006; Piacentini & Banister, 2009), and drinkers undergoing a temporary period of abstinence (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013).
The HSM program provided a platform for the development of these alternative selfhoods, both through its explicit focus on altering consumption patterns, but also through its establishment of supportive non-consumption social networks where people are able to explore and co-create non-drinking selfhoods with others who have also given up alcohol through interactive conversations on their own and others’ blogs. Particularly with respect to anti-consumption, one of the ways in which HSM members negotiated and experimented with their anti-consumption stance was using HSM as a medium through which to voice their views and forge feelings of social solidarity with others who voiced similar discourses. The HSM program allowed members to share knowledge and develop a sense of community with a large and geographically dispersed audience (Kim et al., 2011; Lupton, 2014). In doing so, HSM enabled this consumption community to foster collective identifications grounded in shared beliefs, meanings, social practices and status systems (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Fry, 2014). Blogging and interaction through the internet allowed individuals to experiment with, and negotiate, their sense of self, in a truly postmodern form of communication (Turkle, 1995). Digital technology undoubtedly has a role to play in configuring and enacting experiences of embodiment, selfhood and social relations (Carah, Meurk, & Angus, 2015; Lupton, 2014). However, it is important to consider that digital technology is constantly evolving and that new social media platforms will be available to programs such as HSM as technology develops.

The role of HSM in helping people generate new narratives of selfhood suggests that programs that focus on short-term periods of abstinence are likely to be effective mechanisms for changing the way that some individuals think about alcohol and enact alcohol use in their lives. Temporary periods of abstinence certainly promote discussion about the role of alcohol in society and the pervasiveness of drinking in particular social settings, and society more broadly. These findings support the conclusions put forward by Cherrier and Gurrieri (2013) in their analysis of interviews with FebFast participants, that these types of interventions offer a supportive and inclusive non- or anti-consumption space, which may decentre dominant cultures of drinking for some individuals. Lupton (2015) has suggested that digitised health programs have tended to focus on changing individual behaviour, and that broader initiatives aimed at community development or challenging the political status quo remain in the minority; however, it can be argued that HSM is a program that has successfully done this – challenging the dominant status of alcohol and fostering a reflexive approach to the place of alcohol in society – at least for some of its users. Those who maintained an oppositional resistance to drinking produced a cultural discourse against drinking at the individual and collective level. However, for some individuals, not drinking resulted in a sense of loss or disruption, thus strengthening the importance and centrality of alcohol to selfhood. In this respect,
some HSM members contested and resisted the ultimate goal of HSM, which is to change an individual’s relationship with alcohol.

There are some limitations that must be recognised with respect to this data. Firstly, this analysis only draws on HSM data from 154 Victorians, and the experience of HSM members from other locations may be different, especially given the culturally and socially constituted nature of selfhood. Secondly, we were only feasibly able to code blog posts, and not the comments that HSM members provided in response to the blog posts of others. An analysis of comments is likely to be useful for understanding the way in which HSM members engage and interact with each other and how they offer advice and support to one another. Unfortunately we did not have the capacity or resources to analyse all comments as well as blogs. Future research might consider analysis of comments in addition to blog posts. Finally, the HSM program gives feedback to individuals who sign up to the program based on their AUDIT scores (for example, for those drinking at harmful or dependent levels, the advice is to seek professional support), and it should be considered that this feedback might shape identification with various narratives. Further research is required to understand how these messages might influence narratives of selfhood.

It is important to note that our analysis did not identify the ways in which identifications with various selfhoods evolved over time, and this is an important consideration, particularly given that Carah et al. (2015) found that HSM participants’ blog content changed as their involvement in HSM progressed. It is also important to consider, that, while the first group – those who found not drinking deeply uncomfortable – were the least frequently observed, they may have been the most likely to cease using HSM or not participate in blogging due to their discomfort with completing the period of alcohol abstinence they had signed up for. Lupton (2013) has discussed how some individuals dislike the processes of self-tracking and self-reflection which are implicit to blogging. Some come to resent the process or find it provokes anxiety, leading to non-completion. It is important in this regard, that other research methods are employed with HSM users and ex-users, so that the perceptions of participants who have dropped out of the program, or use the program infrequently, are better understood (see for example, Fry, 2014).

On the other hand, the blog data analysed here offered unusual access to a shared digital space where people were able to experiment with and express new constructions of self that did not involve consuming alcohol. These findings suggest that such programs enable and support people to develop narratives of self which are not reliant on heavy alcohol use. Teasing out and describing culturally meaningful narratives of this nature may help others articulate their path towards being a non-drinker. The typologies of non-drinking selves identified in this paper could be disseminated
through platforms such as HSM to support people who are new to non-drinking. As others have argued (Herring et al., 2014), the academic and media attention to ‘binge’ or heavy drinkers, may make it more difficult for those who don’t drink to express non-drinking subjectivities. In this regard, efforts to promulgate stories of lives lived without alcohol offer people alternative templates around which they may construct selfhood.

**Conclusion**

Our analysis of the constructions of selfhood offered by HSM members undergoing a temporary period of abstinence underscores the need for a better understanding of the relationship between alcohol consumption and selfhood so as to maximise the possibility for positive non-consumption experiences and the development of fulfilling and recognisable non-consumption subjectivities. Programs like HSM provide a platform for individuals to experiment with, and express selfhood through non-consumption of alcohol, and to connect with others who are like-minded. In this respect they allow individuals to either consolidate or transform the symbolic and culturally constituted meanings they associate with alcohol.

**Acknowledgements**

This work draws on data accessed as part of an evaluation of Hello Sunday Morning funded by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. We gratefully acknowledge Hello Sunday Morning members for engaging with the program and sharing their views, and Felix Acker (VicHealth) and Jamie Moore (Hello Sunday Morning) for access to, and preparation of, the data for analysis.
References


Table 1. Demographics and HSM data for Victorian HSM members with and without blog posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Victorian HSM members with blog posts (n=154)</th>
<th>Victorian HSM members without blog posts (n=190)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>45 (29%)</td>
<td>47 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>109 (71%)</td>
<td>109 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean age</strong></td>
<td>41.0 (range 22-74)</td>
<td>39.8 (range 19-63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age groups</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian HSM members under 30</td>
<td>13 (12%)</td>
<td>23 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian HSM members 30+ years</td>
<td>90 (88%)</td>
<td>92 (80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HSM length</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>45 (88%)</td>
<td>too much missing data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>6 (12%)</td>
<td>too much missing data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of posts</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4 posts</td>
<td>38 (25%)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9 posts</td>
<td>37 (24%)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+posts</td>
<td>79 (51%)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of posting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evenly spaced throughout HSM</td>
<td>85 (55%)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posted initially then dropped off</td>
<td>69 (45%)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Age missing for n=51
*Gender missing for n=34
*HSM length missing for n=103
*Age missing for n=72