



Research Report

**Formative Research For The
Development of A National
Alcohol Social Marketing
Initiative**

Prepared for:

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from a large scale qualitative exploration of target segment perceptions, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours surrounding alcohol, and in particular, intoxication or excessive alcohol consumption, in both a personal and broader social context. The purpose of this exploration was to inform the development of a marketing strategy with behavioural and communication objectives for the various target audience segments.

Key Research Findings

Mainstream Community

- Clearly, alcohol has an entrenched place in Australian Society, so much so that drinkers become defensive when asked to consider its role in their lives and or to consider their lives without it, or without the opportunity to get drunk.
- This positive view of alcohol has been built up over years of experience.
 - Early exposure to, and memories of, alcohol are very positive;
 - From very early on in people's lives, alcohol is associated with family gatherings, celebrations, good times, and laughter; and
 - Most households had alcohol served and consumed alcohol on a daily or frequent basis.
- Alcohol is seen to be an intrinsic part of Australian culture. It is perceived as going hand in hand with sport, our laid back image, and our hard working reputation. Public holidays are also strongly linked with alcohol consumption, even to the extent to which drinkers question what they would do on these days if they were unable to 'have a few drinks'. In fact, when asked to nominate places and occasions in which alcohol was unacceptable most struggled.
- There are many positives associated with alcohol, which in essence, provide drinkers with a rational reason for drinking alcohol. It is:
 - A social lubricant;
 - A reward;
 - Stress relief;
 - A lifter of moods;
 - An integral part of celebrations.
- We also shouldn't forget that many drinkers argue that their preferred alcoholic beverage also tastes good.

- The negatives that are associated with alcohol were far less numerous and were either associated with alcoholism or were mostly considered minor.
- The challenge for communication is that intoxication is closely linked to alcohol per se. When we simply asked participants about their earliest memories in relation to alcohol there was an overwhelming tendency to leap to their first drunk experience. Further these experiences were recalled with a sense of pride and nostalgia, even though the stories inevitably involved some embarrassment (or what would normally be considered embarrassing). For younger drinkers alcohol and drunkenness are strongly linked together as many have an all or none approach, i.e., they don't drink during the week, but when they do drink on the weekend they get very drunk.
- At a rational level being drunk was also largely viewed as a pleasurable experience, with it being linked to:
 - Greater happiness;
 - Loss of inhibitions;
 - Self confidence/self esteem;
 - Escape; and
 - Affection/sex.
- However, being too drunk or undertaking certain behaviours was considered to be unacceptable or going too far, with unacceptable behaviours being under the banner of being physically unwell; affecting other people, and personal embarrassment/shame (although this was unlikely amongst younger males, i.e., those under 25 years of age).
- Knowledge of the Australian Alcohol Guidelines was not widespread and 'risky' and 'high risk' drinkers considered the recommended levels of consumption unrealistic. They simply did not see what they considered to be normal levels of alcohol consumption as posing a health risk. Alcohol was thought to only pose a health risk if you are an alcoholic or drunk enough to get hurt in some way.
- The notion of counting drinks therefore had little relevance unless a drinker was driving and wanting to stay under the legal blood alcohol limit.
- In terms of cost to society, most did not feel we have a major problem with alcohol consumption in Australia (vis a vis other problems in the world). To that end, communication of the financial costs and impact were thought provoking but were not yet relevant at a personal level.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Community

- Alcohol is ingrained in some cultures, creating a challenging communications context for the Department. This is particularly the case in some European cultures, where alcohol forms a large part of one's cultural history and identity;
- Alcohol is entrenched in many social occasions, and often helps create an 'occasion'. Alternatively, it can also create great pressure to drink within these cultures, especially for men;
- Lower risk drinkers and non-drinkers held the most conservative views about alcohol consumption. Often these participants were the most moralistic and used quite serious language when discussing consumption compared with riskier drinkers;
- For riskier drinkers, 'unacceptable' drinking was generally seen as being 'totally wasted'. This implies, to some extent that making oneself 'wasted' is acceptable;
- In the Serbian community there are major double standards regarding the acceptability of women to drink alcohol relative to men. Drinking is largely a male domain; All participants were able to list a myriad of risks around excessive drinking, especially health-related risks. However there was a real lack of linkage of these risks to one's own behaviour;
- Intoxication is generally acceptable under certain conditions, though less so in Chinese and Vietnamese culture as it often means losing 'face' within one's community. It was seen to be more acceptable in Australian culture;
- There was some negativity regarding how CALD drinkers viewed Australian drinking culture. While getting drunk was seen to be largely accidental in CALD communities, this was often seen to be the end goal among Australian drinkers;
- There were major gaps regarding the level of knowledge that CALD audiences have around alcohol guidelines and labelling. Hence, many participants spoke of creating their own guidelines for how they knew they may be drinking to excess;
- The costs of intoxication were felt to be quite high, though no participants spoke of taking any personal responsibility for these costs. These costs were largely seen as important for governments to address rather than individuals.

Background

In mid 2006 the Ministerial Committee on Drug Strategy endorsed the National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009 Towards Safer Drinking Cultures, which aimed to reduce alcohol related harm and develop safer and healthier drinking cultures in Australia. In order to achieve this, four priority outcomes were identified:

1. Reduce the incidence of intoxication amongst drinkers;
2. Enhance public safety and amenity at times and places where alcohol is consumed;
3. Improve health outcomes amongst all individuals and communities affected by alcohol consumption; and
4. Facilitate safer and healthier drinking cultures by developing community understanding about the special properties of alcohol and through regulation of its availability.

To support the Strategy the Australian Government committed \$25.2 million to fund a national campaign over four years, with the aim of:

- Reducing the perceived acceptability of intoxicated behaviour;
- Promoting the Australian Alcohol Guidelines and standard drink labels and measures; and
- Increase awareness of the significant costs to individuals, families, communities and the Australian economy of the harmful use of alcohol.

Previously, considerable time and effort had been spent in targeting teenage and young adult drinking behaviours through youth oriented alcohol campaigns, such as “Drinking Choices” and “the Drug Offensive”. However it was recognised that whilst these youth campaigns can achieve positive results, they were operating in an environment in which young people are exposed to a significant amount of contrary messages. That is, both the media and society play a role in delivering contrary messages through positive depictions in advertising and intoxicated adult behaviour (negative role modelling).

It was therefore established that a more sustainable approach was required, one which gets to the core of the issue - the role of alcohol in Australian society. That is, in order to successfully affect long term behavioural change amongst youth there was seen to be a need to also affect a wider change in societal behaviour in regards to the use of alcohol. Further, it was believed that the best opportunity for affecting cultural or societal change in regards to alcohol was in the targeting of attitudes towards intoxication, or more specifically the perceived acceptability of intoxicated behaviour.

Working in parallel with the above communication it was also decided that there was a need for the promotion of the Australian Alcohol Guidelines (AAG) and an information strategy to raise awareness of the extensive costs of harmful use of alcohol to individuals, families, communities and the Australian economy.

The Department of Health and Ageing therefore identified the need for market research in order to inform the development of behavioural and communication objectives for target audience segments and to guide strategy formulation.

The Key Research Tasks

In an overall sense the fundamental task of this research was to inform the development of a communication strategy with behavioural and communication objectives for the various target audience segments. In order to meet this requirement the research needed to explore target segment perceptions, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours surrounding alcohol, and in particular, intoxication or excessive alcohol consumption, in both a personal and broader social context.

Broadly speaking there were four key areas that the research explored:

1. Alcohol's place in Australian Society;
2. The issue of intoxication and the extent to which it is an essential part of Australia's Alcohol culture;
3. The Australian Alcohol Guidelines; and
4. The costs of alcohol to society.

The key challenge was therefore seen as being able to identify fertile territory for beginning to break down the positive acceptance of intoxicated behaviour.

As such, we sought to explore:

- Overall perceptions of alcohol:
 - The beliefs and attitudes people hold in regards to alcohol and its place in society;
 - The positive perceptions people hold for alcohol;
 - The negative perceptions;
 - The perceived scale of the positives in comparisons to the negatives (ie, does one outweigh the other and in what way).
- Perceptions of risk in regard to alcohol:
 - Do people associate alcohol with risk;
 - What type of risk (long term health vs. psychological vs. short term);
 - What is their perception of the risks (serious vs. insignificant);
 - To what extent are those risks personalised (or are they risks for others).
- Perceptions of intoxicated behaviour:
 - The things people have seen or heard regarding intoxicated behaviour;
 - If a scale was produced on which to plot intoxicated behaviour how would they

label the axis;

- Where the behaviours sit on that axis;
- What would be classed as unacceptable behaviour;
- How they go about defining unacceptable behaviour;
- What makes it acceptable or unacceptable;
- Is there room to change the definition of acceptable or unacceptable and why.

Research Design

The research consisted of a series of 38 mini-group discussions (including standard and affinity groups) as well as 10 in-depth interviews amongst stakeholders for the mainstream community, together with a mix of in-depth interviews and full group discussions for the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) component of the research.

Mini Group Discussions For Mainstream Community

A screening process was employed to determine the 'risk' level in accordance with the Australian Alcohol Guidelines:

1. Non drinkers
2. Low risk drinkers – i.e. drink but don't usually get intoxicated
3. Risky drinkers – i.e. get intoxicated but not regularly
4. High risk drinkers – i.e. get intoxicated on a regular basis

Given that we were seeking to explore the issue of intoxication it was agreed that we would combine non-drinkers and low risk drinkers. The screener used during recruitment is appended to this document.

The standard mini-groups were conducted in three metropolitan (Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane) and three regional centres (eg: Tamworth, Ballarat and Toowoomba), with the following distribution by gender, age, and risk category range:

| | Non-Drinker/Low Risk | Risky | High Risk |
|--------------|--|---|---|
| 15 to 17 | 1 x female WC (Mel) | 1 x male WC (Bri) 1 x female BC (Syd) | 1 x male BC (Bri) |
| 18 to 24 | 1 x male BC (Mel) 1 x female BC (Syd) | 1 x male (Tam) 1 x female WC (Mel) | 1 x male WC (Bri) 1 x female BC (Syd) |
| 25 to 34 | 1 x male WC (Bri) 1 x female (Bal) | 1 x male WC (Syd) 1 x female BC (Bri) | 1 x male BC (Mel) 1 x female (Tam) |
| 35 to 50 | 1 x male WC (Mel) 1 x female BC with teens (Bri) | 1 x male BC (Too) 1 x female (Bal) | 1 x male BC with teens (Syd) 1 x female WC (Syd) |
| 50+ | 1 x male with teens BC (Too) 1 x female with teens WC (Syd) | 1 x male WC (Syd) 1 x female with teens BC (Bal) | 1 x male (Tam) 1 x female (Too) |
| TOTAL | 9 mini-groups | 10 mini-groups | 9 mini-groups |

BC = Blue Collar WC = White Collar Syd = Sydney Tam = Tamworth Bri = Brisbane

Too = Toowoomba Mel = Melbourne Bal = Ballarat

In addition, a series of affinity (ie. friendship) mini-group discussions were conducted as follows:

| | Non-Drinker/Low Risk | Risky | High Risk |
|--------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 18 to 24 | - | 1 x male (Too) | 1 x female (Bal) |
| 25 to 34 | - | 1 x female (Dub) | 1 x male (Syd) 1 x female (Mel) |
| 35 to 50 | - | 1 x male (Mel) 1 x female (Syd) | 1 x male (Bri) |
| 50+ | - | 1 x female (Bri) | 1 x male (Syd) |
| TOTAL | - | 5 mini-groups | 5 mini-groups |

Stakeholder In-depth Interviews

The ten in-depth interviews were split as follows:

- A representative of the Good Sports organisation;
- An emergency room nurse;
- A family therapist from an Area Health Service;
- Ambulance officer;
- Three police officers (2 NSW, 1 VIC);
- Hotel Manager;
- Two Nightclub/Hotel Door staff.

CALD Component

The CALD component of this project was conducted by Cultral & Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA). Their full report is appended to this document, however, at the end of each section we have included a short summary of the CALD findings for comparison purposes.

This CALD research consisted of two stages – some preliminary research with stakeholders followed by qualitative group discussions conducted with a range of CALD community members. Specific detail regarding these two components is outlined below.

Research with stakeholders

This consisted of conducting four short in-depth telephone consultations with stakeholders working in health, policy, and drug and alcohol service provision, to help understand which CALD communities should be the focus for the qualitative focus groups. This was a particularly important part of the research as the availability of detailed data around the level of alcohol consumption within specific CALD communities is relatively scant compared with the mainstream.

Consultations were conducted with the following types of stakeholders:

- Two different research officers at the Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC);
- A representative from the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria who sat on the Premier's Drug and Alcohol Round Table;
- A manager of drug and alcohol services at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Sydney; and,
- A representative from the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health.

A few stakeholders also recommended consulting a number of existing research reports and publications in this area to use in CIRCA's analysis during this stage of the research. The information sources consulted have been listed in Appendix One of CIRCA's report.

Research with CALD communities

After the process of determining which CALD communities should be selected, a total of five group discussions and five paired, in-depth interviews were conducted across the following communities:

- Russian;
- Chinese (Cantonese);
- Italian;
- Vietnamese; and
- Serbian.

Participants recruited for the group discussions were all 'risky' or 'high risk' drinkers, with a mix of both men and women recruited within most groups (except the Serbian group) from a range of lifestages. All in-depth interview participants were either non-drinkers or low risk drinkers, so as to provide a comparison of views within these communities amongst heavier and less heavy / non-drinkers.

All discussions were facilitated by bilingual researchers, in-language. The nature of the questions asked were similar to those used in the mainstream research, so as to provide a comparison between mainstream and CALD attitudes.

Alcohol's Place In Australian Society

Early Experiences with Alcohol

One of the first discussion areas within each of the groups related to memories that people had of their first taste of alcohol. It was quite interesting to note that the research participants (across all age groups) frequently skewed this discussion toward the fond memories that they had of their first drunken experiences, rather than adhering to the initial line of the discussion (i.e. their first taste of alcohol).

Further, it was also interesting that first memories of alcohol were more vague than those they claimed to be their first memories of being drunk. Typical recollections of first experiences with alcohol generally related to family occasions in which relatively young children were given “a taste”.

“I was probably 8 to 10 years old, and I was given a sip of wine. I think it had lemonade or something with it”

“I used to nag dad for some of his beer. He gave in and gave me some when I was young. I don't know how old.....and it wasn't much, just a mouthful I guess”

“I was 12 or so, and I had a sip of bubbly wine. I think it was some sort of special occasion.....like Christmas time”

“I don't remember if I asked for it, or if it was offered, but I think I had my first sip of alcohol with dad on a fishing trip. I remember drinking some rum, but I'm not sure if it was in coffee, or just straight”

“As an Italian we were always having big family gatherings, you know lots of food, lots of drinking, singing, ... I was probably about 8 when my uncle gave me my first sip.”

“My dad reckons I used to bug him when I was about 4 for a sip of his beer, so he used to let me have a taste.”

Indeed, it seemed that childhood exposure to alcohol was quite common (and considered quite ‘normal’ amongst group participants). These experiences inevitably related to their immediate family, including scenarios such as:

- Having a sip of their father's beer when he was watching sport/TV;
- Being offered a small glass of beer/shandy with parents;
- Having a small glass of wine at a special occasion/family meal (this scenario with family meals seemed to be more prevalent amongst those with a European background);
- Being given a small amount of alcohol at a family/friend get-together (eg. an extended family BBQ, New Years Eve, Weddings).

Overall it was clear that while not necessarily prominent, these memories were generally

happy while also tending to be quite 'relaxed' and casual in nature. For some though there was a definite element of excitement surrounding their memory of their first taste of alcohol.

"You could be one of the grown-ups if you had half a glass of wine..... it was really exciting"

"The adults were generally happier and spoke to us kids more when they were drinking"

In that sense, most people's early experiences with alcohol are clearly leaving very positive markers within their memory systems. From very early on in our lives we are storing memories of alcohol and its association with family, celebrations, and positivity.

In comparison to their first taste experiences, the descriptions of first drunken experiences that emerged at this point appeared to be much more prominent and definite in the minds of the research participants.

"I remember it clearly. I was 16 and my older sister got hold of some sherry. We drank way too much, and I felt really ill afterwards. I told myself that I would never drink again.....but of course that didn't last."

"Mine wasn't until I hit 21. I was away with the basketball team, and we all went to a local RSL and had far too much to drink. It was messy in the end, but it was one of those nights I'm sure everyone would remember"

"I was 15 years old at a party. My parents were at the same party, but I was with all of the older kids. They were drinking alcohol, and I started drinking too. It was more than I could handle, and I ended up being sick in my parents car. Not pretty!"

"When I was 19 I was drinking rum with some friends. For some reason we just decided to drink everything we had. I was so sick the next day."

The fact that the discussions often spontaneously changed from 'first tastes' to 'first drunken experiences' hints that there is a clear association between drinking and being drunk or drinking too much. The clarity with which the first drunken experiences were recalled indicates that the moment was significant to them, that it marks some significant point in their lives. As mentioned previously there was a sense that experiencing alcohol and inebriation was linked with the notion of 'coming of age' and moving towards adulthood.

It was therefore not all that surprising that there was clearly a tone of fondness and almost pride in the way in which each group member recalled their early drunken experiences, despite the fact that they tended to involve some form of embarrassing behaviour. In some groups, participants were literally lining up to proudly tell their story to the rest of the group. As such, first drunken experiences were often recounted with a smirk, giggle or wry smile. There was no real sense of embarrassment or regret associated with their experiences (or the telling of those stories). Rather, there was a clear sense of nostalgia and pride associated with the event, and a clear acceptance within the groups that "it was

one of those things that you do as a teenager”.

Early drunken experiences did vary considerably on an individual basis, but there were also common trends that emerged. These included:

Drinking to get drunk

It was clear that for a large number of participants that they had intentionally set out to experience being drunk, and to do so were not drinking alcohol for the pleasure of drinking it (they may not have liked the taste at all), but for the desired outcome of getting drunk.

Drinking very cheap alcohol

Most could recall the type of alcohol that they consumed, and given that experiences generally occurred when they were quite young, it is not surprising that it tended to be with very cheap alcohol (eg. ‘summer wine’, ‘passion pop’, ‘a mix of spirits from the cabinet/bar’).

Stealing alcohol

There were also quite a few stories told of first drunken experiences resulting from alcohol that had been ‘taken’ from their parents or the parents of one of their friends (who they ended up getting drunk with).

Gender differences in the type of alcohol chosen

For most males their first drunken experience involved drinking beer or some form of spirit (usually obtained from parental stocks without permission), while for younger females this was much less common and more likely to involve drinking vodka or some form of pre-mixed sweet spirit. Older females, those aged 50 and over, were more likely to have had their first drunken experience with beer, wine, or even sherry.

Getting drunk in ‘secret’ places

The first drunken experiences recalled by participants generally involved underage drinking, and therefore a setting far removed from adults that may disapprove or attempt to stop their experience (eg. in a park, in the bush, on a beach, while camping, or at a friend’s house when the parents were away).

Common behavioural outcomes

The descriptions of first drunken experiences also included the effect that the alcohol had on them, and often involved uncontrolled giggling (for female participants), stumbling or even falling over, arguing/fighting with someone, being very emotional/crying (for female participants), feeling sick and even vomiting, and feeling bad or having a ‘hangover’ the next day.

Another common trend within the groups was the age at which participants were indicating that they had their first drunken experience. It was not uncommon for participants within

the older age category groups to talk of their experiences around the age of 20 to 21 years, while the younger participants were more likely to be indicating that it had occurred when they were 15 to 16 years of age.

There were however some older males who talked about their first drunken experiences occurring around the time that they were an apprentice, at the age of 16-17 years. Interestingly, in recounting their story they were often quick to point out how their behaviour was markedly different to that of “today’s kids”.

“It was when I was an apprentice. At the end of the week all the lads would head down the pub for a drink. So of course they took great delight in taking the new apprentice. I remember trying to keep up with them and one of the older guys tapping me on the shoulder and saying ‘righto son, it’s time for you to go. I think you’ve had enough’. I was pretty crook the next day.”

The ‘Importance’ of Alcohol in Our Lives

Whether in relation to social consumption, or in terms of getting drunk, it was clear that alcohol played an important role in the lives of the research participants, whether they freely admitted it or not. This was found to be true not only for the individuals themselves, but also for the wider community when the discussion sought (through projective techniques) to determine the importance of alcohol within Australian society.

While not directly questioned about the importance of alcohol within their family unit, discussions also touched on the importance of alcohol within these environs. This revealed that it was not uncommon for there to be set ‘rituals’ or ‘funny sayings’ that were directly associated with alcohol consumption within their families.

“5 o’clock was known as dad’s beer o’clock in our family”

“Mum would always have a glass of wine with her in the kitchen”

“On Christmas holidays my auntie would say that there’s always a pub open somewhere”

“My dad used to say that it’s 5 o’clock somewhere in the world”

“I always think of Nana’s Burger Rings and brandy”.

Again, these memories were recounted with laughter and happiness, and for some were considered ‘special’ memories that they treasured about their relatives. Only one or two of our panellists admitted to negative early memories relating to alcohol because of an alcoholic father who was physically abusive or an uncle or aunt who was renowned for getting “too drunk” at family gatherings and celebrations.

In addition, there were also a few participants who indicated that they did not have any

such family memories associated with alcohol, as they came from non drinking families (for either religious or health reasons).

In general though, alcohol was considered to be a fundamental part of Australian society and culture, with participants suggesting a variety of explanations as to why this was the case.

“Aussies are laid-back, friendly people”

Clearly study participants held a strong view that as a nation we are a relaxed, “laid back” people. However, it was interesting to note that most felt that drinking alcohol fits with this image, that it is a part of why we are “laid back”. In fact, many felt that the consumption of alcohol even enhances this portion of the national personality, as it “makes people friendlier”, and somewhat more relaxed.

“We have a reputation as drinkers”

Whether true or not, there was a strong perception amongst research participants that we are known as big drinkers by people from other countries, and there was a definite sense of pride expressed in relation to this, along with a feeling that it needed to be maintained. This big drinking reputation was said to be carried by young travellers overseas and was often portrayed in the media through TV programmes, advertising, and movies, all of which commonly show Australians as big drinkers. As one participant stated, “even one of our Prime Ministers was known for his ability to down a yard glass”.

“It’s not hard to spot an Aussie overseas, they’re usually the ones having a few drinks, having a bit of fun, and making some noise. They’re easy to spot in Bali, or at Oktoberfest ...”

We are “sports crazy”. Alcohol and sport are intrinsically linked

Most group participants were somewhat proud that as a nation we are considered “sports crazy”. Australians were thought to be passionate participants and viewers. However, in Australia, at least, it was suggested that alcohol and sport go hand in hand. Many different aspects of sports and sporting achievement were associated with alcohol in some way. For example, it was noted that:

- when we watch sports we drink alcohol, whether we are there at the game or watching it at home, although this attitude had a strong male skew, (eg: “you can’t watch the cricket without a beer – that’s just wrong”);
- when we win we celebrate with alcohol, (eg: “You always see the winners drinking champagne, having a beer together after the game. If you win you drink (and you probably get drunk too)”);
- many of the known/revered players themselves are known to be big drinkers (eg. “look at Boonie he’s doing that thing with VB because he is famous for breaking the record for the number of beers consumed on a flight from Australia to London”) and many of our sporting personalities actively promote different alcohol brands

(Eg: David Boon for VB, Alan Border for XXXX, etc);

- Alcohol sponsorship is intrinsic to sport. Alcohol brands sponsor sporting codes or premierships, they sponsor teams or particular events, they sponsor TV coverage or telecasts, and even when they can't get directly involved they conduct ambush marketing in order to link themselves to a particular sport or event, such as the XXXX beach cricket campaign that has been happening throughout the summer in Australia. In that sense, any contact with sport in Australia invariably leads to contact with alcohol advertising or marketing.

Advertising

The aspect of advertising itself generated quite a bit of discussion within the groups. Participants indicated that the ads for alcohol often portray alcohol as an important part of our society (utilising imagery and language along the lines of the 'hard earned thirst' campaign).

In addition, most alcohol advertising is fun and well liked, with some alcohol advertising categories almost considered part of our culture. Beer advertising, for example, was considered well produced and humorous in nature. The big budget beer ads were well regarded with young males, in particular, and some mentioned how they looked forward to seeing the next one that is coming. As one participant explained, "beer advertising has become almost a contest to see who can make the best or the funniest ad. They don't tell you about the beer they just want to make an ad that people will like, will talk about. Everyone's waiting to see what they will come up with next. These days they even try and ramp up the excitement by giving you sneak previews on the internet, which everyone then passes around. It's always like, 'hey, have you seen the new Tooheys ad' or 'have you seen the new Carlton ad'".

In comparison, advertising for spirits was generally (not always) seen to be sophisticated and modern. The image based approach taken with this sort of advertising was considered to be more aspirational and therefore slightly less in keeping with the common person. However, there were notable exceptions to this, such as the Bourbon category, with brands such as Jim Beam, Cougar and Wild Turkey all known for the humorous down to earth approaches. They were therefore seen (mostly by males) as being more typical of the standing of alcohol within the Australian society than some other categories.

Overall though, there was also considerable comment in relation to the amount of advertising, promotion and availability of alcohol. The older group participants were quick to point out that this has increased substantially over the years, as has the variety of alcohol available for people to consume. In that sense they believe that Alcohol is far more "in your face" and more accessible, particularly to younger people these days.

"If you can't find some form of alcohol that you like the taste of these days.. then there's something wrong.

"Yeah when we were young, there wasn't a lot of variety, so there were probably less young women or girls drinking. They didn't have much choice, so there probably wasn't much that they liked the taste of. These days, there seems to be every flavour under the sun.

They make all these sweet drinks so the young girls have got no problem finding something they like.”

Celebrations

Group participants also cited numerous known and accepted big drinking occasions and events such as:

- New Years Eve;
- Christmas;
- Boxing Day and ‘The Boxing Day Test’ (cricket);
- The end of exams (and in particular the “schoolies” period);
- 21st birthdays (with the yard glass and other general drinking);
- The Melbourne Cup;
- Grand Finals, to name a few.

In order to understand the extent to which alcohol was indeed intrinsically linked to these occasions we asked study participants what they thought these events would be like without alcohol. The results were quite illuminating, suggesting that Australian events and celebrations must include alcohol, at least in the minds of drinkers.

- In most groups, excluding those with non-drinkers and low risk drinkers, there was often a prolonged silence, with study participants almost being confounded by the question. In fact, some even expressed suspicion, questioning the moderator about their motivations or intentions.

“What do you mean, without alcohol? What are you going to do? What do they want to do? Ban alcohol at these big events?”

- Younger drinkers quickly dismissed the notion that these events or celebrations could be held without alcohol. To them, no alcohol meant no event.

“What’s the point? You’re hardly going to have a New Year’s Eve without drinking. Yeah, that’d be fun.”

“I can hardly see all of Australia having a punt on Cup Day if they weren’t all drinking. Horse racing isn’t that exciting!”

- Those aged 35 and over suggested that these events would be very very different without alcohol, but that “it wouldn’t be the end of the world”. Interestingly many often admitted that it simply meant that the occasions would be much shorter in duration.

“Australia Day for instance. We take the kids down to the harbour and watch all the action. I enjoy having a few beers, relaxing in the sun. It wouldn’t be that bad without a few beers ... but I reckon we’d go home a lot earlier.”

- Regional drinkers, were perhaps a little more defensive about the relationship between alcohol and these big events or celebrations, suggesting that they don’t have access to the entertainment that those in the city do, and as such alcohol is perhaps more important to them. This was an opinion strongly expressed by both young males and females in regional areas.

“It’s alright for you guys in the city. There’s always a lot to see and do. We don’t have too many options.”

- Non-drinkers and low risk drinkers were less adamant that these events required alcohol, with those with young families in particular suggesting that these events “can be a bit hairy towards the end” due to the number of drunk people. However, they did admit that no alcohol areas at most events had alleviated most of these concerns, although getting into and out of these areas could be an issue depending on their location in relation to alcohol areas.

“I took the kids to the Boxing Day test last year. We were in a no alcohol area so it was ok, but you could see plenty of people pretty drunk around the place. I wasn’t going to let the kids go and get some food or go to the toilet on their own.”

Being hard working

Alcohol was also seen to be associated with the Australian way of life in relation to our hard working nature. It was considered to be a reward for working hard, with the ‘work hard, play hard’ motto cited several times. In fact, the concept of deserving “a drink after a long day or week” was strongly entrenched in most drinkers’ minds, whether it is expressed amongst friends or work colleagues. For some, alcohol was also an intrinsic part of work life whether it is through a company with an active social environment or through a company or occupation that actively ‘wines and dines’ clients and suppliers. This idea that we are hard working and therefore ‘deserve’ our alcohol is covered in the following section of this report.

How and Why Alcohol is Consumed

While not a direct area of questioning within the groups conducted, the discussion process provided insights into how and why participants consumed alcohol via discussion of the ‘positive’ aspects of alcohol with drinking.

Alcohol as A Reward

Alcohol is clearly viewed as a reward. As mentioned previously, from an early age it is associated with family gatherings, special occasions and celebrations. Consequently it is also associated with being a reward or treat, even though it is juxtaposed with the notion that it is consumed, nightly or weekly, etc. In fact, an obvious indicator of our belief that alcohol is some form of reward is found in the constant references to ‘deserving a drink’ or ‘having earned a drink’, much like someone might ‘deserve a raise or promotion’ or someone has ‘earned a break or holiday’.

“Like today. It was hot, it was a long day, ... I’ve earned a drink.”

“It’s like it’s the end of another week, I deserve a few drinks on a Friday night”.

“The boss will say ‘c’mon we’ve had a tough week, I think we’ve all earned a drink’.”

“Every couple of months, all the girls get together. We leave the guys at home with the kids, we get together and have a few drinks, a bit of a laugh ... We’re stuck at home looking after the kids everyday, we deserve a night off, to let our hair down and have a few drinks every now and then”

While the older group participants (both males and females) may have established a more concrete routine in this regard, the younger panellists appeared to be just as keen to use alcohol to differentiate work and play – as a form of reward for the effort that they had made (be it at work, studying, looking after the kids, gardening etc). However, the key difference seemed to be that younger drinkers left their ‘reward’/drinking for binge drinking on Friday and Saturday nights (maybe Thursday and Sunday also), whereas older drinkers (35 years and over), particularly males aged 50 years and over, admitted that they rewarded themselves with a drink or two most nights of the week. Slightly older females (aged 35 +) with children at school were also happy to admit that they enjoyed their wine or wines each night, whilst cooking dinner, supervising homework, watching the news, and/or when the children had gone to bed and they could sit and relax with their partner (this was common across all drinking risk categories).

Further, it was not uncommon for the high risk males aged 50 and over, particularly those in regional areas, to be drinking 6 or so beers each evening. Most rationalised this level of alcohol consumption by suggesting they were “big” guys who did manual labour during the day and had been drinking for a long time, “so 6 beers of an evening for me is not the same as 6 for a woman or for a young bloke”.

Alcohol as A Social Lubricant

One of the main justifications given for drinking was that it acts as a social lubricant, and as such, it has strong links with social occasions such as the gathering of friends at a pub, BBQ, or dinner party. The participants expressed early memories of alcohol and social gatherings that appear to have enhanced their current belief that alcohol is crucial to the social aspect of gatherings.

However, this link with sociability is not just one that exists in drinkers' beliefs and perceptions. Their experience is that the relaxing and euphoric qualities of alcohol do make it easier for them to socialise and interact with others. In that sense, it was also seen as somewhat of a social leveller, whereby a few drinks allowed people to relax, "be themselves", and interact with others. Whilst both genders and all age groups referred to the notion of alcohol as a social lubricant, the prevalence of occasions in which this was relevant was much lower for both males and females aged 50 and over. That is, unlike younger drinkers, these older study participants did not report that they were out socialising at parties, pubs, nightclubs, etc, anywhere near as frequently as younger drinkers. Consequently, alcohol as a social lubricant was less prevalent.

"For me, it's a real social thing. I find that after a couple of drinks I can talk to people. I don't just talk to the same 2 or 3 guys in the corner."

"I find I meet a lot more people when I'm drinking. It relaxes you, you find yourself talking to people you wouldn't normally talk to. You talk to people at the bar, in the men's. If I'm not drinking I don't talk to anyone I don't know."

"Yeah a night out means you meet a lot of new people because you're drunk. You don't seem to care so much."

"Well let's be honest, we've all had relationships that started with a drunken night out. Some girls have met their husband when they were out drinking."

"Beer is one of those things that can bring people together. A bloke in a singlet who is a labourer or something can share a beer with a bloke in a suit and tie. They probably wouldn't talk at any other time, but a beer sort of makes 'em equals."

To some extent (amongst males across all age groups, and as reported by females) sharing a drink with others (males) provided a level of acceptance, and conversely those who refused to drink could be regarded with suspicion. Clearly there is a notion that:

"A real Aussie bloke drinks and enjoys it".

"My dad says that he never trusts a non-drinker."

"You're alright if you have a drink or two with people you've just met."

"If your boyfriend meets your dad for the first time and doesn't have a beer when offered, you feel annoyed with him."

"You get self-conscious around non-drinkers."

"They continually ask you 'why aren't you drinking ... one little one won't hurt you ... I now buy drinks that look like alcohol, just to get them off my back" (non drinker).

Alcohol as Stress Relief

This was mentioned both in terms of the perceived psychological and physiological benefits that alcohol provides. That is, the act of consuming alcohol was generally seen to involve taking a break from something else, and potentially sitting down and relaxing while drinking. Once the drinking begins and the alcohol is then absorbed the feelings of relaxation and stress relief increases. As such, it was strongly associated with providing relief from what otherwise may have been a stressful or busy day or week. For some it has even come to symbolise the end of a working day/week.

“You really have to sit down and relax to enjoy a drink.....it allows you to unwind”.

“I just can’t wait to get home, put my feet up, and have a beer”.

“I always have a few drinks on a Friday after work. It’s a clear divider between the end of the working week, and the freedom of the weekend”.

This notion of alcohol as stress relief was most prevalent amongst both genders in the 25-50 years age range.

Alcohol as A Mood Lifter

Research participants also indicated that there was a clear benefit gained in feeling better from “having a few drinks”. They were adamant that consuming alcohol allowed them to (at least temporarily) forget their problems and to simply enjoy themselves. They were indicating that it made for a better time – effectively increasing the level of happiness and enjoyment with the event. **This was again common across males and females, and across life stages. Older females (50 years and over) for example, mentioned cocktail parties or drinks with lunch, which they looked forward to because they could have “a good laugh” over a glass of wine or two; and younger males clearly enjoyed the change of mood that occurred as a result of drinking.**

“You just feel happier. I find that you smile more and you can’t stop smiling.”

“If you can have a few drinks and forget about your problems, you end up having a good time.”

“After a couple of drinks you get that glow, you just feel better. I don’t know if its relaxed, happy, whatever, you just feel better.”

Alcohol to Celebrate

As has already been indicated, alcohol is strongly associated with the celebration of special occasions – be they general public holidays or more personal events, such as, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, etc. Participants often indicated (or perhaps rationalised) a sense of obligation in helping their friends and family to celebrate these occasions which, inevitably, involved the consumption of alcohol.

This was the case across all lifestages and both genders.

“If some of your friends don’t come out for a drink on your birthday... you do..... feel quite pissed off.”

“You can’t go out for dinner or meet friends at the pub for someone’s birthday and not drink. It’s not right. It’s rude.”

“You might not even feel like going out, but you can’t let people down.”

Alcohol Tastes Good

Interestingly, when participants were describing the benefits or positive aspects of drinking alcohol, the taste of alcohol did not emerge strongly within each group discussion, and on the occasions when it did, it was likely to have been well into the creation of a list of positive outcomes that this aspect emerged. Clearly though, the participants had their favourite types of alcohol which were (to a degree) based on taste.

The notion of taste as a benefit, was overall more likely to be mentioned by older white collar panellists of both genders (aged 40 years or more), particularly in relation to drinking a “good aged red wine”, a good quality French champagne; a top shelf spirit, for example.

Alcohol Gets You Drunk

In terms of taste though, some participants (more likely to be those in their teens or early twenties,) did admit to drinking despite the taste, rather than because of it. That is, they were suggesting that there were definite occasions when they consumed alcohol simply because they wanted to get drunk, and as such they were willing to drink anything that was available to them in order to achieve this. Whilst those aged 18-24 years were also keen to drink to get drunk they would not go to the extent of drinking just anything to achieve that aim. Obviously as they can legally drink they were less likely to find themselves in a situation where they had little choice, unless constrained by budget. However, ‘shot’ drinking was common amongst this age group and most agreed that they didn’t drink ‘shots’ for the taste.

“You’d like to think it’s because you like alcohol, but really it’s to get hammered.”

“There have been quite a few occasions when I find myself drinking all kinds of disgusting spirits, just because there’s nothing else.”

“I wouldn’t say we go out determined to get drunk, but we know it’s going to happen most times.”

“We’ll often have a few rounds of shots to get the nights started, or if we feel like it’s a bit quiet or going a bit slowly”

Alcohol Can Help Your Career

Another reason provided for drinking related to the pressure that some individuals felt within the work environment. They suggested that there can be situations where they felt obliged to drink, just to get along with other staff members and show that they're "one of the team". They were indicating that it was more of an unwritten rule, but something that was clearly recognised within their workplace as a requirement in order to progress through the company. To that end this type of comment seemed to be limited to city based males aged 25-34 years.

The Negatives Associated with Alcohol Consumption

While the research participants were relatively quick to produce a list of reasons for drinking, and the positives associated with it, they were not as quick to nominate the negatives associated with drinking – and after consideration were generally only indicating negatives with being intoxicated, or drinking a lot, rather than with drinking lesser amounts.

The types of negatives to emerge included:

Hangovers

This aspect was mentioned within most groups (of differing age ranges). However, the severity of the hangover they were referring to was not necessarily as consistent. That is, the younger participants were less likely to be affected by severe hangovers, while the older participants indicated that as they aged hangovers became more intense and their body was less capable with dealing with the after-effects of alcohol.

“when I was younger it wasn't such a big deal.....you sort of just bounce back the next day. But now I can really feel bad the day after drinking too much.”

Embarrassment/Shame

Another of the negatives that was revealed was the embarrassment associated with recalling behaviour from the night before. Participants indicated that after a big night they may wake to recall themselves (or be reminded of by others) of things that were said or done while intoxicated the night before. The notion of embarrassment was interesting in that it was a larger issue, or concern, for mature aged drinkers of both genders (eg: those aged 25 years and over), and for younger females. Mature age drinkers like to think they are “beyond the drunken antics” of their youth, whilst younger females seem to be much more scathing of each other and themselves. Younger males (eg; those aged under 25 years) on the other hand seemed to brush any embarrassing situations off very quickly, and in many cases turned these situations into ‘badges of honour’ or great drinking moments to recall and laugh about.

“it's just the worst feeling to wake up.....already feeling seedy....and then be reminded of something stupid you did.”

Memory Loss

Memory loss was another negative aspect associated with drinking alcohol. While for females, particularly those under the age of 30 years, this appeared to be a severe and extremely bad thing to eventuate (due to the safety implications associated with it), males were somewhat less concerned – with some even telling stories of such instances with a real sense of pride. However, all were in agreement that this would only happen when drinking to excess.

“it’s scary to wake up the next day and not remember what you did for part of the night.”

“you know you’ve had a big night if you have to rely on somebody else telling you about it.”

Becoming an Alcoholic

This outcome was certainly viewed as being extreme, and something that none of the research participants openly associated with. It was in this sense that some panellists mentioned potential health effects that they related to alcoholism (including liver and kidney disease). These were generally viewed as long-term consequences of drinking to excess – and did not see it as likely to result from their own drinking behaviour (no matter what level that happened to be).

“if you drink enough to become an alcoholic, then you know you’ve got problems.”

Drinking to Forget

Another negative aspect that was mentioned during this part of the discussion was mentioned in relation to ‘older’ people (always ‘older’ than the person mentioning it). This was the thought of people drinking to forget their problems and insecurities – seeing older people getting drunk alone just in order to have something to do, or perhaps to forget the life they have at home and/or to be someone different. In that sense, none of our study participants suggested this was a negative that applied to themselves.

“it’s tragic when you see an old person drunk.”

Non-Drinking Occasions

During the group discussions that took place participants were asked to think of situations where they considered it inappropriate to drink alcohol, and clearly they had difficulty

in coming up with many where they truly felt that this applied. The difficulty that the participants had with this task highlighted the importance that alcohol was seen to have with commonplace activities and occasions.

The one situation that was mentioned by almost everyone was when driving. However, again, thoughts were immediately directed to the situation of getting drunk, rather than just drinking one or two. When considered further, it was considered acceptable to drink alcohol if you were sure to remain under the legal limit.

The other situation that was mentioned with any real consistency was the workplace. But here there were some exceptions to the non-drinking stance. It was not considered acceptable to drink during work hours – unless it was for a work function or lunch. Even in this situation though, most thought that people who undertake manual work (for example operating machinery) should refrain from drinking at all.

The only other occasion that was mentioned was within church. Even here though (while somewhat tongue in cheek) a few participants argued that some religious rituals involved alcohol – and as such it could not be considered to be an alcohol free situation.

Summary of CALD Findings

- First experiences with alcohol were also quite diverse amongst CALD participants. However, many claimed to have tried alcohol at quite an early age (7 to 9 years of age for the Russian participants, for example). Those from a Chinese background were more likely to have tried alcohol later in life (mid to late teens).
- As was found within the main research component, first drunken experiences were viewed as a means of increasing “maturity” and a further step towards being “accepted into adulthood”. So even when first experiences were negative at the time, recollections of these events were not viewed in a negative way.
- In general it was found that pre-recruited ‘lower risk’ drinkers and ‘non-drinkers’ held the most conservative views about alcohol consumption, with these participants coming across as more moralistic, and using quite strong language in relation to the consumption of alcohol.
- The ‘riskier’ drinkers were much more accepting of drinking, and only viewed the state of being ‘totally wasted’ as unacceptable.
- There appeared to be clear double standards in the Serbian community in relation to the acceptability of drinking. Within this community it was seen to be largely a male domain.
- In the Slavic and European communities in particular, alcohol clearly formed a large part of cultural history and identity.
- Alcohol was also described as being entrenched in many social events and community activities, and was seen as a real contributor to a sense of ‘occasion’. To this end such occasions were also seen to create a social pressure to drink (particularly amongst males).

Intoxication And It's Place In Australia's Alcohol Culture

Defining Drunkenness

There was clear evidence to suggest that intoxication or “getting drunk” remains closely aligned to drinking alcohol per se, and therefore to Australian society in general.

As mentioned the very subject of alcohol consumption or drinking alcohol per se, quickly and spontaneously translated to discussions about drinking alcohol in excess or to intoxication.

There were clear differences in the way in which people referred to intoxication and the language they used, with this varying most significantly by age. Words such as “pissed”, “hammered” and “smashed” were more often used by younger respondents (ie. under 35 year olds) whilst somewhat less extreme or brash language was used by older participants such as “over the limit”, “had a few”, “had a few too many”, “had a bit too much to drink”.

Study participants did not spontaneously use the word ‘intoxication’. The term “drunk” was commonly used, however, it had wide ranging meaning. For some, it related to a low level of intoxication (eg. “a bit drunk”) whilst for others, particularly older study participants, it had very negative connotations, whereby to them drunk was someone who had drunk way too much and was out of control in some way. In that sense, younger group participants (those under the age of 35), were more accepting of low levels of intoxication being labelled as drunkenness as they held a more positive view of drunkenness than did older respondents. Older males in particular did not like to think of themselves as getting drunk as they seemed to see it as a point of weakness, i.e., they commonly claim they “can hold their alcohol” and being drunk would suggest they can't, or don't know when to stop.

“I wasn't drunk, just a bit jolly, maybe slurring the odd word.”

“I might have been drunk, but it's not as if I was hammered or anything.”

‘Binge’ or ‘binge drinking’ was a term rarely used by group members, but was clearly more often associated with younger drinkers (aged under 25 years) and teenagers/under-aged drinkers who had not learnt the boundaries of drinking yet, or who could not control their drinking behaviour. Interestingly, binge drinking was therefore seen to relate to drinking a lot of different drinks quickly or “drinking whatever you can get your hands on to get drunk”. It wasn't really associated with drinking a lot on a single occasion, at least when pertaining to adults. In this respect it was very easy for the majority of participants to dismiss the concept of “binge drinking” as not relevant to them or for younger, almost under age drinkers.

“That’s what kids do, they drink to get drunk. I might drink a lot on a night but I don’t set out to do it and I know my limits. I don’t keep drinking until I’m stumbling around or vomiting on someone.”

Given the different ways in which participants referred to being drunk and the different connotations that the different terms held it was not surprising that different groups had different definitions of drunk and levels of drunkenness.

Clearly many females, in particular referred to a stage in between sober and drunk that was pleasurable, although this tended to be females under 50 years of age.

For some this stage was not always indicative of being drunk, as it was often described as “getting a bit tipsy” or “that giggly stage”. Interestingly however this stage did not appear to exist for males or they were reluctant to talk about different stages. For them it was relatively black and white - one was either drunk (pissed, hammered, etc) or sober. However, there did seem to be a discussion of approaching drunkenness, which was described as “having a bit of a glow on” or “being on the way”, although this was amongst males under 40 years of age

When drilling down into the exact behaviours that comprise ‘drunkenness’, it was clear that being drunk or intoxicated was generally not a negative experience, although being “too drunk” could be.

“I like being tipsy rather than blind drunk”

There appeared to be shades of drunkenness ranging from the early stages or the “tipsy” stage where there were felt to be many positive experiences and behaviours that respondents considered acceptable, to the negative behaviours that were unacceptable, and generally considered a result of being “too drunk”.

Set out below is a table of the typical behaviours that comprised each stage of drunkenness:

| Acceptable behaviours | “Grey area” acceptability | Unacceptable behaviour |
|---|--|---|
| Feeling relaxed | Going to sleep/passing out | Vomiting (in public) |
| Greater sense of perceived happiness – lots of laughter, smiling, joking | Saying things you shouldn’t say – embarrassment, being less tactful, “putting your foot in it” | Urinating in public |
| Funny stories, unstructured nights | Slurring words/sentences don’t make sense | Falling over, stumbling |
| Losing your inhibitions – talking to people you don’t normally talk to, talking about things you wouldn’t normally talk about, greater honesty, breaking down the barriers, more interesting topics of conversation | Speaking too loudly/laughing too loudly | Spinning out /head spins |
| Forming friendships – having friends you may not have otherwise had | Kissing/snogging/sex with someone you don’t know or like, or didn’t think you liked! | Getting emotional/crying |
| Greater confidence/self confidence | Smoking | Swearing/foul language |
| Dancing/singing | Vomiting (in a toilet/at home) | Getting aggressive/overly defensive/picking a fight/fighting |
| Flirting/affection/sex | Losing things, eg, handbag, mobile phone, wallet | Getting disapproving “looks” from other people (eg work colleagues/other people in the restaurant, etc) |
| Escape – forget your pain/problems | | |
| A release from the control of society – “it’s almost healthy to let your hair down every now and then” | | |

In further deconstructing the behaviours that were deemed unacceptable (including the ‘grey area’ of unacceptability) three broad classifications emerged:

1. **Feeling unwell physically.** This included behaviours such as vomiting or feeling nauseous, spinning out/head spins, falling over or stumbling and injuring yourself, sleeping/passing out. Again it should be stated that younger drinkers (those aged under 30 years) tended to be more tolerant or accepting of this outcome than did older drinkers, particularly those aged 50 years and over. Females aged 50 and over were clearly the least accepting of this outcome.
2. **Affecting or offending other people.** This included vomiting in public, urinating in public, swearing, getting aggressive, fighting, getting disapproving looks from other people, saying things that might offend or hurt others, speaking or laughing too loudly. Some of these behaviours, for example, urinating in public, swearing, fighting were more often cited amongst males, however females were equally as likely to mention

vomiting in public, getting aggressive, and saying things that might offend others.

- 3. Personal embarrassment or shame.** This included behaviours such as getting overly emotional or crying, kissing/sex with someone you wouldn't normally, losing things, slurring words/not speaking properly. Most of these behaviours were considerably more likely to be cited amongst females and more specifically, younger females (aged under 35 years) who were "risky" and "high risk" drinkers. As mentioned previously older drinkers, both males and females, were concerned about embarrassing themselves as a result of being too drunk, whilst younger females tended to be the most sensitive to drunken acts that led to embarrassment.

Importantly however, the notion of being intoxicated or drunk, at least in the early stages was generally positively received. Indeed, when the groups were asked what it would be like if, for one reason or another, they could never get drunk again many reacted extremely negatively. In fact again the question was met with silence and suspicion. Interestingly, however, there were clear differences between age groups in their reaction to this question. Young drinkers (both males and females) became agitated and suggested that it was their right to get drunk each weekend if they wanted to, particularly in regional areas where they suggested there was little else to do. Older drinkers, however, shrugged it off suggesting that they don't get drunk and as such they would be unaffected.

"I'd be devastated if I couldn't get drunk."

"What do you mean. ... Oh so everyone else has had their go at doing it (getting drunk) so now you going to tell us we can't have our turn. No way, you got your turn and we want ours!"

"What else would we do with our weekends, there's not a lot to do out here you know."

*"Sh*t we'd all have to find a hobby."*

"I'd just find something else. I'd have to move over to drugs I guess."

"Friday and Saturday nights at the pub would be very boring. I reckon we'd all be home early."

This reaction was not surprising given that study participants cited occasions in the past when they had stayed sober whilst their friends were drinking and it was generally not felt to be enjoyable, and overall quite boring. Again, this was more likely to be mentioned by those aged under 35 years, as older drinkers claimed they could, and often did, enjoy themselves without being drunk or without drinking much.

"Being the only one sober is awful."

"The nights on which you have to drive are bloody boring. You always want to go home early but everyone wants to stay. I wouldn't like to be sober too often."

“I hate it when I stay sober ... I don’t go out if I am sober.”

In these instances both younger male and female respondents generally recalled going home early and not having a particularly fun time. They also referred to having to look after their friends and ensure that they didn’t get into trouble – “you have to play mother”. However, young females kept a much closer eye on their friends than did males. That is, young males would ‘look after’ a mate if he got into trouble/a fight, could barely stand, was ill, etc, whereas females tended to step in and intervene at an early stage in their friend’s drunkenness, when possible.

Clearly the absence of intoxication from younger drinkers’ (those aged under 30 years) lives was also imagined to have a major effect on their social lives.

“I would have no social life!!”

“I wouldn’t have half the friends that I have now.”

“If I’m not drinking I think they’re all a mob of idiots.”

Occasions Unacceptable to be Intoxicated

Whilst the total absence of getting intoxicated in their lives was fairly unrealistic and unappealing, there were times in the past when they watched what they drank because they were driving (predominantly) or had things to do the next day, for example, looking after the children, other social events, work commitments, etc. Other occasions when participants would watch what they drank or even refrain from drinking included:

- when they were with people they didn’t know well,
- when their parents or older people were present (amongst younger, under 25 year old respondents),
- if pregnant or for other health reasons,
- when they simply felt tired and “not in the mood”, and
- when they had been drunk very recently or too often (ie, the night/s before).

Occasions or situations where intoxication was felt to be unacceptable were therefore similar to these.

At work

Overall going to work drunk was felt to be unacceptable, particularly in relation to performing manual work or operating machinery. Drinking with work colleagues and the boss was felt to be unacceptable to some, however the majority were happy to drink with work colleagues after work, during lunch or at work social events.

“It’s a great way to get to know work people – helps with bonding.”

Around children

This was generally mentioned by parents in relation to drinking around young children and the associated responsibility of looking after the children. Whilst there were some concerns expressed about acceptable role modelling amongst those with older children (that is children old enough to identify intoxicated behaviour) they were the minority.

“I don’t write myself off in front of the kids.”

In the morning

Generally early morning was felt to be an unacceptable time to get intoxicated, however there were exceptions, for example, continuing “*after a big night*”, champagne breakfasts, recovery parties. However, these exceptions tended to be mentioned by drinkers aged under 34 years, as older drinkers had moved on from “*all-nighters*”, after parties, etc,

Alone

Whilst drinking alone was agreed to be a common social faux pas, many respondents willingly admitted that there were times when they drank alone, for example:

- when chatting on the phone or internet (although many justified this as not really being alone because you are talking to somebody). Most likely to be mentioned by females aged under 24 years;
- watching TV (eg a football match);
- when someone else was due to arrive;
- when preparing (“warming up”) for a big night; and
- after a long day or week at work.

Interestingly however whilst many admitted that they did drink alone on occasion, particularly older participants (aged over 50 years) they were somewhat reluctant to admit that they got drunk or intoxicated alone. In that sense, there is recognition and acceptance of the notion that people do drink alone at home, however, getting drunk on one’s own was clearly seen as unacceptable (as it was seen as the territory of alcoholics or “*people with a drinking problem*”).

Around parents/family members

Both younger male and female drinkers (under 25 year olds) suggested that they would be fairly unlikely to get drunk in front of their parents, friends’ parents, or other family members (grandparents, aunts, etc). Reasons for not wanting to be drunk in these situations generally related to not wanting to disappoint or upset their parents/family.

“I like to be in control around my parents, I don’t want them to think I’m always drunk.”

Around people you don't know well

Participants spoke of times and experiences when they had been with people that they did not know well and who they did not want to embarrass themselves in front of, or who they simply did not feel comfortable “*getting drunk with because they wouldn't be there to look out for each other*”. Indeed there appeared to be a certain level of comfort that respondents needed before they felt able to get drunk with someone. Again given that most drinkers had a core group of friends with whom they regularly drank it was not surprising that they preferred to get drunk around those with whom they felt comfortable.

In line with this was the notion that you would need to feel that other people around you were also drinking and getting drunk. The idea of being the only person drinking in the crowd, particularly for older respondents, was a deterrent to drinking large amounts.

“You get a bit self conscious amongst non drinkers.”

This idea was most commonly raised by those under the age of 34 years, as they were more likely to accept that they get regularly drunk, whereas as mentioned previously older drinkers were reluctant to term their behaviour as drunkenness.

Risks Associated with Alcohol

As with other areas of investigation, this line of enquiry led to some obvious answers and then prolonged silence as group participants looked to get beyond the obvious risks associated with drinking.

Clearly drink driving was most top of mind with regard to risks associated with alcohol.

Following drink driving there were aspect such as:

- short term hangovers – headaches, nausea, vomiting,
- “*having to have your stomach pumped*” (mentioned more so amongst younger participants)
- stumbling or walking into traffic,
- walking home alone and potential assault, mugging, bashing, etc, (this was more likely to be mentioned by female participants than males)
- getting into cars with strangers (again more an issue for females),
- alcohol induced fights (mostly a male issue),
“You get a bit bravado when you're drunk”
- longer term weight gain from alcohol and the greasy, unhealthy food that you consume when intoxicated (eg, “kebabs”, “Mc Donald's”, etc),
- long term liver damage (but as mentioned this was a health issue that was associated with alcoholics rather than alcohol per se), and
- longer term – “*killing off of brain cells*”.

Key Differences by Lifestage Segments

18-24 year old, singles

Clearly the majority of 18–24 year olds were regularly drinking to get drunk. Drinkers freely admitted this and the majority agreed that it was an important social activity. Getting intoxicated essentially comprised the major part of their weekend – at least Friday night, Saturday night and sometimes Thursday night.

Social life and friendships to this market segment were very dependant upon drunken nights out, particularly so in rural regional areas where the local pubs and clubs are often the only public venues for socialising.

This segment tended to go out drinking with friends who looked after each other and who often got drunk and potentially embarrassed themselves as well. The notion of shaming yourself and embarrassing yourself with friends was therefore less of a concern because they are amongst people exhibiting exactly the same behaviour, particularly for males.

For this segment also, their behaviour was believed to rarely effect other people – they had no serious responsibilities such as children, a spouse, nor any serious financial commitments yet (e.g. a mortgage).

The negatives associated with getting drunk were few, and could be dismissed easily. Top of mind negatives associated with intoxication were mainly in regard to a hangover the next day and a lack of energy as a result of feeling unwell. However most felt that they could cope with hangovers and that these were often a convenient excuse for taking it easy during the day. Hangovers were acceptable, often amusing excuses for this segment which were referred to with a certain pride and acceptance, particularly amongst males.

The negatives associated with getting drunk at the time of drinking (rather than the day after) were easily dismissed and laughed off.

“I take the pledge (not to drink) every Saturday morning – but it doesn’t work, of course.”

“You might have a really bad experience and swear off it for a while but you’d be lucky if that lasts 2 weeks, let alone a month or two.”

“I tell people things I shouldn’t like “that’s a hideous dress!”

Overwhelmingly the positives of being drunk out-weighed the negatives. Positives included many of the aspects mentioned in the previous section, such as increased happiness, social acceptance/peer acceptance, greater confidence and self-esteem (particularly in this age group who potentially lack confidence and security in themselves), dancing (mainly the females), affection and sex.

“Everyone’s a mate when you’re drunk.”

The 25-34 year olds

(mix of singles and married people with and without children)

For this segment of drinkers, binge drinking or intoxicated occasions were becoming less frequent, however that is not to say that the amount of alcohol consumed over a standard week, for example, would be any less. Intoxicated occasions appeared to be more often limited to special events or celebrations, for example birthday parties, girls nights out, weddings, etc, and there appeared to be more in-home drinking, for example, BBQs at home and drinking at the end of the day, with or without company. This segment also emerged as being more likely to be drinking to get intoxicated when in same sex groups rather than when in mixed company, at least for females.

Within this segment there appeared to be an increase in appreciation for the taste of alcohol, for example, wine, boutique beers, and indeed the quality of alcohol.

This age group were also undergoing significant changes to their overall social lives. Many had long-term relationships or were married, which they felt had affected their frequency of “big nights out” with friends (both males and females). Additionally, whether or not respondents had children was a major contributor to the frequency of getting intoxicated.

“You plan ahead – who’s drinking, who’s looking after the kids tomorrow.”

In terms of the negatives of getting drunk, there was evidence to suggest that there was declining social acceptance of some of the unacceptable behaviours that comprise being drunk, amongst peers, with increased references to “embarrassing yourself” or “acting like an idiot”.

Hangovers were also mentioned considerably more often, both in terms of the severity of the hangovers and having to look after the children. The cost of drinking alcohol was also more often mentioned particularly amongst those who were married and had a shared income:

“It’s not just my money I’m spending.”

Clearly incidence of having children was a major contributing factor to alcoholic drink consumption and behaviour. Those without children were generally acting more spontaneously whilst the drinking occasions for those with children were often planned.

“I’ll organise for my mum to look after the kids in the morning when I know I’m going out”

There were increasing work commitments amongst this segment with many concerned about their work performance the next day, their appearance at work, etc. In this respect there were frequent mentions of “go slow” strategies undertaken, for example, drinking water or watching how many drinks they consumed, to ensure that they did not get too drunk.

The positives of drinking were very similar to the younger group, but generally this group felt that they were starting to learn what they could and couldn't drink and the effects different alcoholic drinks had on their own body.

"I can't drink champagne – I get shocking headaches."

The 35 years and Over Segment

Whilst this segment includes a broad range of ages, we have grouped these respondents together because they had established very regular drinking patterns and habits. Respondents claimed they knew what they liked, the effect it had on them, and as such they claimed they exhibited some form of control over their drinking.

"It's easier to say no as you get older."

Overall participants aged 35 years and over were getting intoxicated less frequently and generally did not define themselves as binge drinkers or even getting drunk very often. However, this differed considerably by marital status and incidence of having children, with those single or having no children more often exhibiting behaviour more like the 24-34 years group.

Participants aged 35 years and over tended to drink most nights to some degree, and had the odd "big night", although these tended to be special occasions, or occasions that were felt to be "appropriate" or "at a proper time", for example, dinners with friends, reunions, cocktail evenings, backyard BBQs, etc. Indeed amongst the participants aged over 50 years, there appeared to be a decreasing tendency to get intoxicated in public places. The occasions when a greater number of drinks were consumed were usually in their own homes or their friends/families homes or private functions.

The younger end of this group (those aged 35-45 years) were generally very occupied with their children and/or their careers/work.

The males appeared to be working fairly long hours, but still seemed to have relatively regular drinking sessions with their immediate group of "mates" whilst they were also drinking regularly at home but in limited amounts. After work drinks at the pub were still prevalent, particularly amongst blue collar males, however they were generally attended less frequently or they did not stay for very long.

"Occasionally I'll let my hair down – it's almost a treat."

Females in this age group were drinking frequently in the early evening (during meal preparation at home or after work). As with the 24-35 years group, the occasions when they became intoxicated were often with other groups of women, for example, lunches with friends, nights out with the girl's, or work functions.

Alcoholic consumption was almost automatic for drinkers aged over 50 years (both males and females). That is, they potentially do not realise they are drinking as much as they are, but their consumption of alcohol is clearly enjoyed and easily justified in their own minds.

“It’s my vice – I don’t smoke or do anything else, but I love my drink at the end of the day.”

The positives of drinking alcohol were more often aspects such as taste, relaxation/stress relief and to celebrate or socialise, whilst the negatives more often related to the hangover the next day and not being able to recover as well from a heavy drinking occasion as they “used to”. In this respect there was evidence of increasing awareness of the long term health effects of drinking and drinkers frequently mentioned being more conscious or more serious about looking after themselves, for example, going for regular walks, watching their diet, watching how much they drank, etc. Indeed some had first hand experience with people who had “*problems with alcohol*” for example, Cirrhosis of the liver and alcoholism (particularly the over 50 years participants).

“My routine is now a drink every night and you have to have a good hard look at yourself.”

“I’ve decided to have four alcohol free days a week .. to clear my head for studying.”

Some of the older males exhibited a greater sense of having learnt from experience and claimed they now knew their limitations, with regard to drinking.

“We’re not as bullet proof as we were before.”

“You look at younger blokes doing that and think ‘they’ll learn.’”

Females aged 40 years and over differed slightly in the sense that they exhibited greater concern or sensitivity about their physical appearance. There were frequent discussions about the effects of ageing and alcohol consumption of their skin, blood vessels and weight.

Summary of CALD Findings

- Being intoxicated was socially accepted (to varying degrees) within the CALD communities represented. However, this was less likely to be the case within the Chinese and Vietnamese cultures, where there is a risk of 'losing face' within one's community/social group.
- Most participants felt that intoxication was more acceptable within the wider Australian society than it was within their own community groups. The potential exceptions to this were the Russian and Serbian communities who believed that their own cultures had a similar 'relaxed' attitude toward intoxication.
- Overall though, there was a perception that intoxication was a pre-determined goal for many in Australian society, while it was more 'accidental' within CALD communities.
- Potentially because of this belief that intoxication was primarily 'accidental' within their communities, the concept of 'binge drinking' was not seen to be particularly relevant to them.
- Similar to the findings of the main component, CALD participants reacted against the notion of not drinking or becoming intoxicated again.
- In terms of behaviour, being loud, being more social, laughing and joking, or simply consuming alcohol at a family or community-focused celebration were all relatively acceptable. However, being violent, rude or abusive, or getting drunk with strangers who are in respected community positions were less acceptable situations.

The CALD participants were able to list numerous 'risks' or negatives associated with excessive drinking, however, in comparison to the main research findings there appeared to be more of a health focus.

Investigation of Implicit Associations With Alcohol

In investigating the role of alcohol in Australian society it was necessary to be conscious that a lot of work had been previously done in this area and that study participants could get somewhat defensive about their behaviour and the role of alcohol in their lives. In order to get beyond past research and to genuinely identify fertile communication territory a new approach was therefore seen to be required.

This involved use of Woolcott Research's TwoMinds® techniques to explore unconscious associations with alcohol.

Background to the Techniques

In essence, developments in neuropsychology have made it clear that human decision making relies much less on the rational component of the brain than has been thought. Indeed a number of studies have shown that decision making, in individuals whose rational and emotional parts of the brain have been disconnected through injury, is almost impossible¹.

Coupled with this, the latest brain science research shows that we take in and process, very effectively, masses of information without being aware of it². It is now known that much of our decision-making and behaviour is based on intuitive information not necessarily derived from conscious processes. This ability is termed "implicit" learning. Implicit learning is "*learning complex information without complete verbalisable knowledge of what is learned*"³. Our intuitions are formed from implicit memories laid down in this learning process. In that sense, we are building our implicit memory throughout our lives without being aware of it. For example, early experiences in our childhood, whilst unable to be consciously recalled, are stored in our implicit memory and affect the way we feel about and react to different stimuli.

Our implicit memory therefore provides us with most of the associations we have towards the world around us and consequently drives a good deal of our behaviour. Our political bias, our aversion to particular situations, our actions on the environment and, importantly, the choices we make are a result of these associations. And they are often not aligned with what we say we're thinking!

Woolcott Research has drawn on learning from the academic world to develop a number of techniques to uncover these "unconscious" responses. The technique used in this study was a computer-based technique called Relationship Priming that utilises an indirect questioning method.

¹ Damasio, Antonio R. (1994) *Descartes Error*

² Wilson, Timothy D. (2002) *Strangers to Ourselves*

³ Seger, C.A. (1994) Implicit Learning, 'Psychological bulletin', 115, 163-196

The underlying theory behind these methodologies is that the contents of our implicit memory either facilitate or inhibit our behaviour, depending on whether the stored implicit associations are consistent or inconsistent with the proposed behavioural action. The speed with which respondents can complete a range of carefully designed tasks becomes an excellent, indirect, indicator of the contents of their implicit memory. The speed with which response is measured eliminates any ability to “think” an answer.

The Technique

Two versions of the Relationship Priming Technique were used. One version featured the phrase ‘Being Really Drunk’ and the other featured the phrase ‘Getting Drunk Too Often’. A brief description of how these techniques were used is as follows:

Task 1: This involved a series of words appearing on screen for a brief interval and the respondent was asked to indicate whether each word was a good word (e.g. happy) or a bad word (e.g. crime), by tapping on particular keys on the keyboard. At this point respondents were told they didn’t have time to think about each word, rather they were asked to hit the keys as quickly as possible (ideally less than 1 second) - therefore relying on more of an instinctive approach. This task provided a baseline measure of response patterns.

Task 2: The phrase ‘Getting Drunk Too Often’ or ‘Being Really Drunk’ was then put on the screen and Task 1 was repeated allowing comparisons of reaction patterns with those of Task 1, thereby allowing a glimpse into unconscious associations with that phrase.

Unconscious Associations with ‘Being Really Drunk’

A number of key findings emerged from the investigations of implicit or unconscious associations with the phrase ‘Being Really Drunk’. This phrase was chosen because we wanted to unambiguously present the notion of “intoxication” rather than just a little bit drunk. Further we wanted to “tease out” some of the underlying negatives that may potentially be fruitful in developing an angle for future campaign development.

Firstly the term ‘Being Really Drunk’ was strongly associated with four key themes – being ‘unattractive’; ‘ridicule’ or ‘embarrassment’; ‘brainlessness’ and ‘irresponsible’.

Secondly, there were not strong associations with confidence or the notion of fun, as revealed through reactions for the terms ‘confident’; and ‘enjoyable’, ‘fun’, ‘happy’, ‘friendly’, and ‘laughter’.

These are interesting findings as many often argue, particularly those at the younger end of the age spectrum that being really drunk is fun and enjoyable. This suggests that ‘Being Really Drunk’ is not intuitively associated with the cited positives such as ‘enjoyable’, ‘fun’ etc, but rather it is associated with ‘unattractive’ and ‘ridicule’ ‘embarrassment’, suggesting that despite what some might claim rationally, drunkenness is viewed quite negatively

at a deeper level. These findings could also be interpreted as showing that there are indeed negatives associated with being drunk that did not emerge explicitly, and that respondents were unable to express or discuss these feelings because they were not conscious of them. Some of these negative feelings could therefore prove powerful in dissuading intoxication.

Unconscious Associations with 'Getting Drunk Too Often'

A similar pattern emerged from an investigation of associations with 'Getting Drunk Too Often' in that it seems to be strongly associated with some very negative perceptions and has few positive associations. That is, the term was strongly associated the words 'down-market', 'unemployment', 'nuisance', 'alcoholic', and 'unhealthy', whilst there were lower associations with the words 'happy', 'laughter', 'friendly', 'enjoyable', 'confident' and 'popular'.

In an overall sense the strong perceptions for 'Getting Drunk Too Often' seem to be those perceptions that might also be held in regards to someone who is an alcoholic, again suggesting that despite claims to the contrary there are some negative associations that we may be able to be used in a communication context.

The Australian Alcohol Guidelines

Awareness of the Australian Alcohol Guidelines was generally limited, both when participants were simply asked if they had heard about them and when participants were showed the poster regarding low levels of risk for drinking (Appendix One). However, the poster did result in more recall than just the name, with those who did recognise it suggesting they had seen it at pubs/hotels either on the walls or on the back of toilet doors.

There were some differences in awareness according to age, with older drinkers (50+) having little or no awareness, those aged 25-50 showing slightly more awareness (but not a lot) and, younger drinkers (under 25 years) being the most familiar with the AAG, at least in poster format. However, the overall level of awareness amongst younger drinkers was still very low.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, awareness of the concept of standard drinks was much greater across all of our study participants, although the concept of standard drinks was always associated with drink driving. That is, study participants understood the concept of standard drinks as they were very much aware of how many standard drinks they could consume and still be safe to drive. Beyond a desire to stay within the legal blood alcohol limit, the concept of standard drinks had little relevance to study participants. They simply had little or no awareness that standard drinks were also a measure that related to health, or more specifically health risks. In fact, the notion of counting the number of alcoholic drinks (standard drinks) on each or any drinking occasion was somewhat foreign to drinkers, unless they were counting because they were driving and wanted to stay under the limit.

The community's understanding of standard drinks was quite high. The majority of males and a large number of females recognised that a middy or pot of beer was the equivalent of a standard drink or that a schooner was more than a standard drink. Estimations of a standard drink for spirits and wine were less accurate. In terms of spirits, there was general agreement that *"you wouldn't even bother worrying about standard drinks if you were drinking spirits. If you're driving, you're not going to have any spirits"* whilst the recent trend of very very large wine glasses meant that many were shocked by the size of a standard drink for wine.

"Is that really a standard drink for wine. That wouldn't even register in most of the glasses they serve you these days."

"... with the ones I've got at home I'm must be drinking 2 or 3 standard drinks in every glass ..."

As mentioned above, the idea of counting drinks on occasions in which one was not driving seemed very strange, with most questioning why drinks needed to be counted. Again, there was simply no obvious relationship between drinking alcohol and general health.

Study participants recognised that on occasion there were times when they did not want to get drunk or that they needed to stay in control. On these occasions a number of

strategies could be adopted, although counting drinks was not one. In essence, older drinkers felt they were well aware of how much they could drink and when they had had enough to drink, and did not feel they needed any strategies or guidelines. On the other hand, younger drinkers expressed a lack of maturity and control in regards to their drinking behaviour. Consequently younger drinkers had adopted a range of strategies to help maintain some level of sobriety or at least ensure they didn't "go too far and get too drunk":

- Drinking water in between alcohol drinks;
- Ensuring that food is eaten before or during the evening;
- Dancing throughout the evening;
- Volunteering to drive;
- Going outside/getting fresh air;
- Smoking cigarettes (which some girls claimed slow their drinking)
- Being told by friends to "take it easy"/"being told when it's time to go home"; and
- Witnessing a bad event, something such as a friend or someone passing out, was also thought to "sober you up quickly".

As mentioned, health risks were not a top of mind association with alcohol consumption, unless they related to harm that occurs when drunk or long term harm due to alcoholism. The idea that they should monitor what they consider to be quite normal alcohol consumption levels therefore seemed quite strange. In that sense, the notion of the Australian Alcohol Guidelines (AAG) therefore lacked relevance to group participants.

In discussing the AAG recommendations for alcohol consumption it became clear that there were significant differences according to current drinking behaviours.

Non-drinkers and low risk drinkers were quite positively disposed to AAG per se, however, they felt that the recommendations were perhaps a little too lenient, arguing that the levels were quite high.

"Twenty eight drinks is a lot."

"It's like they are encouraging you to drink."

Risky and high risk drinkers on the other hand viewed the recommendations as overly restrictive, particularly those for the number of standard drinks that should be consumed on any one occasion.

"According to those I drink like a man." (female respondent)

"I often have more than six drinks, that's just ridiculous." (male respondent)

"I'm OK except for the more than four on any one occasion." (female respondent)

"Four drinks for girls and six for guys, that's a bit low isn't it. That's either a very short night or a very boring night. No way!"

Having read and discussed the AAG it was clear that drinkers were less than accepting of the recommendations. As such they questioned what the AAG were trying to achieve and what level of 'health' they were designed to maintain, with the suggestion being that *"these are guidelines for fitness fanatics, or athletes not for normal people"*.

"What do they mean low or high risk? Low or high risk of what?"

"If we all followed these we'd be very healthy but very boring too!"

"... but so is souvlaki (not healthy for you). Everyone still eats them."

"Sometimes this health stuff goes a bit far. I can see how drinking a lot every night is not good for you, but surely having more than four or six beers on a Saturday night is not all that bad. As if anyone would listen to these?"

Summary of CALD Findings

- There was minimal awareness of the alcohol guidelines in terms of what constituted a 'standard drink' and what the recommended intake of alcohol was for men and women.
- Most viewed the AAG as unrealistic as they did little to acknowledge the perceived importance of drinker tolerance levels.
- There was also limited awareness of alcohol labels, with lower risk drinkers being most likely to read them.

The Cost of Alcohol To Society

After determining the importance of alcohol within Australian society, and the positives and negatives that go along with it, the discussion process was designed to reveal perceptions of the cost that alcohol has to our society. As has already been indicated however, while health implications were a focus amongst CALD participants, this was not necessarily the case in terms of the participants within the main study component. As such, there was very little unprompted discussion in relation to this aspect, and it wasn't until participants were prompted with specific cost elements that any real reaction could be gauged.

Indeed, the overriding feeling amongst participants (regardless of age or geographic differences) was that we, as a society, don't really have a major problem to address. To suggest (through any line of questioning) that we did need to do something about the consumption of alcohol within Australia was met with initial suspicion.

As has been revealed, alcohol was seen to be an integral part of our society, and was seen to fit with the way that people wanted to see themselves:

- Relaxed
- Casual
- Down-to-earth
- Easy going

Alcohol was also seen to be an appropriate 'escape' - a way of providing release from the pressures of modern day living. As such, it was viewed positively.

"It's healthy to be able to relax with a drink or two. If you didn't you'd just have things build up.....and that can't be good for you."

For some (most likely to emanate from the younger participants) there was also the stance that people have the right to get drunk. They were indicating that it is simply one of life's experiences, and so can be considered to be part of the growing up process.

"I hope you're not suggesting that it's not going to be taken away from young people. Every other generation has had the opportunity to go through the experience without it being a big deal."

"I guess we all went through it.....drinking a lot when you first have the opportunity to."

Following on from this there was also the expression that not to have some sort of excessive drinking experience (and associated story to tell) would be "un-Australian". It was expected that pretty much everyone would have at least one tale to tell with a smile and shake of the head.

"I guess my experience isn't that different to many others....."

Given this sort of setting it was not so surprising to see that the research participants did not see alcohol consumption as needing to be addressed. Given the context of other societal issues (drugs, crime, violence, war, the state of the environment) the 'problem' of alcohol did not appear to be particularly significant.

"It may have it's down-side, but really..... is it that big a deal?"

There were other forms of justification for the relatively lower status and positioning that was being attributed to alcohol. One common one was to compare the alcohol issue here with that of other countries. It was noted that the French, Germans and even Italians had reputations for being relatively big drinkers, and so (for those mentioning this) Australians were not seen to be any worse than they were.

"It's not like Australia has this huge drinking problem."

Ultimately, they were indicating that alcohol can't be a huge issue. The only way that it was seen to be a potential problem, was if/when it starts to impact on other people.

"As long as you're not hurting anyone else, then it's not a problem."

Such an outlook was fairly common, suggesting that few were thinking beyond immediately recognisable outcomes. That is, they were generally not thinking of health costs that individuals could incur even if their direct actions (in drinking) weren't imposing on other people.

When prompted with these financial costs (including loss of production, road accidents, crime and health costs), there were mixed reactions emerging:

- For some it was a bit of an 'eye opener' to think along those lines. They recognised that it would be a big cost for society to bear, and this provided a platform from which it made sense for this issue to be addressed.
- For others there was still some cynicism expressed. Several indicated that it was a little hypocritical to collect taxes from the sale of alcohol, and then to come out and say that we shouldn't be drinking it.
- Several participants recognised the issue, but still failed to see any personal relevance in it.

Summary of CALD Findings

- The issue of the cost to society took on a slightly different angle amongst the CALD participants. While there seemed to be some recognition of the need to address the issue for the wider Australian community, there was some debate as to whether any such problem existed within their own ethnic community.
- In terms of the type of costs involved, again prompting was generally required in order to establish any real findings in this area. However, health, relationships, violence and road incidents were all mentioned.
- The one aspect that differed to the main research findings was the so-called 'emotional cost' of repeated intoxication in terms of the stigma and isolation that could result from their own community.
- In terms of curbing the costs associated with excessive alcohol consumption, more education and enhanced enforcement measures were the most commonly mentioned suggestions.

Stakeholder Feedback

Generally speaking, stakeholders reiterated the comments from the broader community in terms of the perceived 'fit' of alcohol within Australian Society, that is, it was seen to be an accepted part of our way of life.

"It's everywhere, it's something everyone can partake in."

It was also regarded as being intrinsically linked with most social occasions and celebrations. For example, on some of our main public holidays drinking is the main activity of the day eg. ANZAC day, Melbourne Cup.

Some stakeholders felt that these occasions almost provided an excuse to drink, as everyone is out and about and in a good mood. In addition, drinking has become almost a part of today's culture. For example, it is common to have drinks at work on Melbourne Cup day.

"Alcohol has always been there on public holidays, it's associated with socialising and laughter. Without it people wouldn't be relaxed."

There was a feeling that the media plays an important role in the promotion of alcohol, particularly in respect to being drunk, and that the marketing of alcoholic drinks has helped move alcohol consumption to an everyday activity for some.

"People in the media talk about getting wasted. They think it's funny, not serious."

"Drinking is no longer just a social occasion, it's like McDonalds - we can have it wherever and whenever it suits us."

Although alcohol was seen to be an accepted part of our way of life, some stakeholders did refer to it in the same terms as other drugs, and all were acutely more aware of the impact it has than the mainstream community. The top of mind associated costs included:

- Extra staffing (security/police/ambulance/medical)
- Legal procedures/processes
- Short term health concerns (eg. physical violence/injuries)
- Long term health concerns (chronic conditions resulting from alcohol use)
- Social problems
- Lost productivity
- Vandalism

There was also specific feedback from each of the stakeholder groups.

Publicans, bouncers, community program organisers

These stakeholders frequently saw drinking leading to being drunk, and tended to experience the short term effects of alcohol consumption:

- Vomiting/sickness
- Fighting
- Causing an unpleasant atmosphere/environment
- Spectator violence
- Verbal aggression

These effects were viewed as being very serious in their particular environment, and pub-crawls in particular were seen as a contributor to intoxication/binge drinking.

Overall these stakeholders welcomed the Responsible Service of Alcohol Rules and were using them to limit unruly behaviour.

“Sorry, we’re not permitted to serve you any more alcohol.”

Drunken behaviour was still experienced but stakeholders mentioned a lessening of patrons thinking they could get a drink on demand or get as drunk as they want.

“They now realise they can legally be rejected for being too drunk.”

As a result they had noticed less fights, a better drinking atmosphere and more business, with pubs becoming more food focused as a result of the legislation. Some also mentioned less need for security in general pubs, however those with nightclubs/later drinking hours still required bouncers to be employed.

Stakeholders also acknowledged other ways of lessening the impact of alcohol such as:

- Not using alcohol as a prize
- Removing ‘happy hours’
- Promoting events such as trivia that are not directly related to alcohol
- More emphasis on food

Police/ambulance workers/health professionals

This group of stakeholders viewed alcohol as a major problem and generally disliked working late Friday and Saturday shifts, which they knew would be busy. Indeed, one Police Officer felt that 90% of his work was a result of alcohol and associated issues.

There was a feeling that most people don’t suffer the serious effects of alcohol, which helps to maintain drinking as a fun, social and relatively harmless activity.

“They just get a hangover, and so they’ve gotten away with it.”

However, the stakeholders did acknowledge that alcohol is linked to other problems/ issues, such as an unstable family environment, where alcohol is viewed as a release or a form of escape.

In addition, they referred to experiences with teens drinking to excess at house parties, schoolies and 18th birthday parties.

“It’s about getting drunk, not just having a few beers.”

It is widely acknowledged that alcohol can distort judgement and lead to a loss of inhibitions, and stakeholders were very aware of an increase in risk taking behaviour when people are drinking or drunk. Examples given included climbing bridges, jumping off or falling off buildings, drink driving and increased promiscuity.

“Things that people would never do if they were sober.”

In terms of effective approaches, stakeholders indicated that they were taking a variety of effective measures including:

- Strict enforcement of liquor laws
- Prosecution of licensees
- Random breath testing
- Preparation for known ‘big days’ eg. create a presence, have extra police on duty

Conclusions

The results of this exploratory research suggest there are a number of key issues that will need to be considered when formulating the communication strategy for the national campaign that is to be undertaken as part of the National Alcohol Strategy 2006-2009 Towards Safer Drinking Cultures.

Acceptability of Intoxicated Behaviour

Firstly, alcohol has an entrenched place in Australian Society, and most in the community become defensive about its role in their lives. In fact, it was seen as having an abundance of positive associations yet very few negative associations. However our implicit investigation revealed that at an unconscious level being very drunk was associated with the following concepts: 'unattractive', 'ridicule' and 'embarrassment', 'brainless' and 'irresponsible'; 'down-market'; 'unemployment'; 'nuisance'; 'alcoholic'; and 'unhealthy'. The defensiveness we encountered and the negative associations we uncovered suggest it will be important that the communication is seen to be targeting behaviour rather than alcohol per se.

Secondly, perceptions of what constitutes drunkenness differed throughout the community, with younger drinkers quite willing to accept their behaviour as drunkenness, whereas older drinkers tended to argue that drunkenness was at the very intoxicated end of the spectrum. It will therefore be necessary to carefully construct phrasing and imagery in any communication, in order to ensure consistency of interpretation across the different audiences (if a single approach is adopted). Alternatively, consideration could be given to applying different messages and imagery to the different lifestage and gender segments.

The most fertile areas for encouraging drinkers to think about their behaviour relate to the extent to which one's behaviour affects others, their personal embarrassment and health. However, our investigation suggests that these fertile areas will have a different level of relevance and appeal to different segments. In fact, we would suggest that the campaign may require different approaches for different segments and would suggest the following approaches be considered:

- The effect of drinking behaviours on other people (for young males);
- The notion of shame/embarrassment/humiliation/making an idiot of yourself (probably more of a strategy for female drinkers but could also be relevant for 25 to 50 year old single males);
- An overall health message for older drinkers (both male and females aged 50 and over); and
- The potential impact of parental drinking and drunkenness on children (for parents).

The Australian Alcohol Guidelines and Standard Drinks

Currently, there is very little awareness or knowledge of the Australian Alcohol Guidelines, whilst there is relatively good awareness of standard drink labels. Further there was little or no awareness that standard drinks were also a measure that related to health, or more specifically health risks. As such, counting drinks was something that was done when one was driving in order to stay under the legal BAC (Blood Alcohol Content) limit.

If the national campaign is indeed aiming to promote the Australian Alcohol Guidelines and standard drink labels and measures, then we should recognise that the community is essentially starting from zero in terms of awareness and understanding of the AAG and their purpose.

The Cost to Society

Similarly the mainstream community had little awareness or knowledge of Alcohol's cost to society. As mentioned, alcohol was viewed positively and Australian's use of it was not seen as something that needed to be addressed, particularly in relation to other larger, more global issues such as drugs, crime, violence, war, the state of the environment, etc. (The CALD community was however more cognisant of the negative impact that alcohol could have on society.) This suggests that the national campaign will need to address the fact that alcohol is a problem in Australian society before we then begin to address personal drinking behaviours.

Reactions to facts and figures about the financial costs of alcohol to society suggest that referring to the financial costs that result from alcohol in a personally relevant way may be a powerful tool highlighting that alcohol usage is an issue that needs to be addressed. Once the community begins to accept this notion, they could then begin to appeal to the individual to look at and consider their own drinking behaviour.

The Overall Strategy

To summaries we are therefore suggesting that development of the campaign should consider a staged and segmented approach that:

- Initially raises the issue of alcohol in Australian society by highlighting the cost to society;
- Then moves into the area of personal behaviour by adopting an approach to target the various segments through the effect of intoxication on other people; shame/embarassment/humiliation; overall health; and the potential impact on children.

At this stage we would suggest that messages regarding standard drinks and the AAG could be introduced during the initial phase, during the second phase, or after the second phase.