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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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A qualitative analysis investigating drinking practices and meanings among a sample of Australian working mothers

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite recent increases in alcohol use among Western mid-life women, less is known about working mothers and how their competing social roles and responsibilities might influence their alcohol use. Our study unpacks how the experience of being a working mother creates particular drinking practices and meanings, and how these are influenced by cultural and societal factors.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 22 Australian women aged 36–51 years old. Women were mothers of dependent children who were employed more than 15 h per week, with most being professional workers who identified as Anglo-Australian. We asked participants about their daily lives, their employment, their families, and their alcohol use. Underpinned by critical realism, reflexive thematic analysis was utilized as the data analysis strategy.

Results: Women felt they had to be available to both their employers and their children at the same time. For some, this led to internalized feelings of guilt and fatigue, increasing women's desire to drink, and limiting their capacity to be mindful of the amount of alcohol they were consuming. Women also described feeling overloaded and under-supported, where alcohol was viewed as being relaxing and rewarding, as well as a way to escape, cope, and recover from their day-to-day stressors. Furthermore, through a combination of targeted marketing and broader social normalisation, women felt alcohol was presented as a solution to stress and problems among working mothers.

Conclusions: Addressing commercial and social determinants of health and acknowledging these in potential health promotion strategies is necessary.

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In Australia, most mothers with dependent children are also in paid employment. Among mothers with children aged 5–9 years old, 82% in two-parent households and 72% in one-parent households undertake employment (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022). Working mothers also often face a 'second shift' of unpaid work, such as childcare and household chores (Blair-Loy et al. 2015; Hochschild 1989). Competing contemporary ideals around motherhood suggest that mothers should devote physical and emotional energy towards children, but also strive to be the 'ideal worker' (Blair-Loy et al. 2015; Collins 2019). This disconnect can lead to internalized feelings of failure and create work-family conflict, which can impact women's wellbeing and have downstream effects on health – including drinking practices (Adams et al. 2022; Caluzzi et al. 2022). Indeed, increased alcohol use and binge drinking has been observed among Western mid-life women (Keyes et al. 2019; Miller et al. 2022), where drinking is seen as a normalised social practice (Wright et al. 2022). Yet, little research has paid attention to the interaction between burdens of care, workforce participation, and drinking among this group. In this study, we aimed to examine the meanings and drinking practices of a sample of working mothers.

Among mid-life women, drinking has been presented as a form of reward, self-care, self-medication, and a way to connect with others (Kersey et al. 2022). Mid-life women describe alcohol as pleasurable, relaxing, and rewarding; conversely, women also use alcohol to juggle responsibilities, cope, and to 'manage' and ease affect, especially during mid-life biographical or affective transitions (Emslie et al. 2012; Emslie et al. 2015; Foley et al. 2021; Lunnay et al. 2023). Recent work has also highlighted the importance and ongoing influence of class in shaping mid-life women's drinking, including how affluent women feel greater agency over their relationships with alcohol than working class women (Lunnay et al. 2022) and how purchasing and stockpiling practices differ according to social class (Ward et al. 2022a).

Drinking is also important for women to gain social support, e.g. as an occasion to meet up with friends (Kersey et al. 2022; Wright et al. 2022), and something done around other responsibilities (Jackson et al. 2018; Wolf and Chávez

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2015). For example, a qualitative analysis among Australian women aged between 40–65 years old showed how drinking was frequent, often while cooking dinner or spending time with partners, but limited to only a couple of glasses of wine (Wright et al. 2022). In studies that included working mothers, their drinking was often home-based and planned, scheduled around parenting, chores, and employment (Emslie et al. 2012; Emslie et al. 2015). Indeed, for women in paid employment, the amount of alcohol consumed increases with the number of children (Kuntsche et al. 2012).

While recent research has examined drinking patterns among women and mothers more broadly, there is a paucity of literature investigating working mothers specifically. This is important as there may be different experiences and pressures faced by women in dual career and family roles. Identifying the meanings of drinking practices, and the wider social, cultural, and institutional contexts, can help to inform effective prevention and intervention strategies relevant to working mothers (Caluzzi et al. 2022; Wright et al. 2022). For example, previous research has noted that oversimplified health-promotion strategies ignore how women may consider alcohol as meaningful or enjoyable, disregarding their lived experiences (Kersey et al. 2023; Lyons et al. 2014). Moreover, there are structural aspects that shape working mothers' lives and underpin their social roles, including gender expectations that women who do paid work will still undertake the majority of unpaid caregiving duties (i.e. 'double shifts;' Blair-Loy et al. 2015; Caluzzi et al. 2022; Hochschild 1989). This structural patterning can shape experiences of gender and gendered drinking practices among working mothers (Caluzzi et al. 2022) but remains relatively unexplored empirically.

This study aims to better understand the social and material realities of working mothers and how these shape their drinking practices and meanings. It explores how the meaning, role and experience of being an employed mother interacts with alcohol, including the role of cultural, societal, or social factors.

Methodology

Participants

Twenty-two working mothers partook in semi-structured interviews between February and June 2022. Participants were recruited via social media advertising using a convenience sampling method, as well as advertisements shared by alcohol and drug advocacy and education organisations. The inclusion criteria were: if the participant identified as a woman, was employed for ≥15 h per week, cared for one or more dependent children aged six or older, drank at least weekly, was aged between 35–50 years old, currently living in Australia and not being treated for substance use disorder. We specified children aged six or older as this is usually when children enter school, meaning women were more likely to have returned to work. Moreover, women often reduce their drinking during the early stages of motherhood but increase as their children become older and more independent (Leggat et al. 2021). Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of our sample. We note that while we did not measure socio-economic status and ethnicity categorically, the majority of women identified as Anglo-Australian professional workers during the interviews.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

		Number
Age	36–40	5
	41–45	11
	46–51	6
Partner status	Partnered	16
	Separated/not currently partnered	6
State	Australian Capital Territory	1
	Northern Territory	1
	New South Wales	1
	Tasmania	1
	Victoria	17
	Western Australia	1
Education	Diploma or TAFE Certificate	2
	Bachelors Degree	9
	Postgraduate Degree	11
Hours worked per week	11–20	4
	21–30	4
	31–40	8
	40+	6
Number of children	1 child	3
	2 children	12
	3 children	7
Total number of participants		**22**

Note: TAFE (Technical and Further Education) certificates are vocational education and training qualifications in Australia.

Procedure

Interested respondents who met our inclusion criteria were invited to be interviewed over the phone by one of two interviewers. Interviewers were a woman in her early twenties who had been trained in interviewing, and a man in his late twenties who had several years of experience conducting interviews on alcohol use. Once women viewed the participant information sheet and gave verbal consent at the beginning of the phone interview, we asked them about themselves (e.g. hobbies, interests, employment) their relationships (e.g. family, partners, friendships, community networks), their daily lives and routines (e.g. work-life family balance, stress, relaxation), drinking practices (e.g. typical drinking routines, preferences, meanings) and how they felt their responsibilities might impact their alcohol use. Interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed by an external service. Ethical approval was received from the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC21325). This qualitative study was a part of a larger mixed-methods project aimed at examining working mothers' daily hassles, stressors, and uplifts and how this interacted with their drinking practices and meanings.

Theoretical background

We took a critical realist position to acknowledge participants subjective and socially situated perspectives, while sustaining the existence of a singular, independent reality (Bhaskar 2008; Braun and Clarke 2013). A realist approach

highlights the need to understand multi-level factors such as individual living and working conditions, socio-cultural meanings and ideologies, and how these combine to produce particular phenomena and social meanings (Kersey et al. 2023; Maxwell and Mittapalli 2010). In this way, we understand gender as socially constructed, but with very real implications for power relations, norms, and practices that shape women's social, material and affective experiences of gender. By using critical realism, we aimed to examine how working mothers' experiences and roles interacted with alcohol, eliciting certain drinking meanings or practices.

Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was chosen to analyse the data. RTA consists of six phases, generating themes as patterns of broad meaning across cases, where themes are generated as outputs from codes (Braun and Clarke 2022; Byrne 2022). RTA was chosen because we wanted to draw from our reflexive understanding of the data, while staying true to our participants' subjective expressions (Byrne 2022). Thus, our analysis drew heavily on our knowledge of drinking motives and social roles (drawing on our psychological backgrounds), as well as broader social theories of gender and workplace norms. We used an experiential orientation to emphasise how participants views and meanings developed according to their experiences within the broader context of their lives (Braun and Clarke 2022; Byrne 2022). To best represent the meanings highlighted by our participants, we open-coded the data inductively, and coded at semantic (explicit, surface-level data) and latent (implicit data, such as ideologies) levels (Braun and Clarke 2013; Braun and Clarke 2022; Byrne 2022). We used NVivo (QSR International) to organise and analyse the interview data. The lead author undertook coding and initial thematic analysis, and themes developed through discussions with the wider co-authorship team. Participant identities were protected using pseudonyms.

Results

Women's drinking frequencies and quantities varied, ranging from 1–2 standard drinks each week to approximately one bottle of wine each night, with most women drinking approximately two glasses of wine 3–4 times a week. We generated three overlapping themes: first – '*Work like you don't have children, parent like you don't work*' – centred around some participants internalized feelings of guilt and explored how this impacted their drinking practices; second – *Too much on their plate – Overcommitted and Under-supported* – consisted of two sub-themes, and demonstrated how time pressures and social support influenced the meanings women attached toward drinking; third – '*Without a doubt it's the standard*' – *The cultural and social normalisation of drinking among working mothers* – highlighted the broader sociocultural narratives which targeted and normalised alcohol among busy working mothers.

'Work like you don't have children, parent like you don't work'

This theme addressed how some working mothers described internalized guilt, feeling they were not able to do enough in their role as an employee or a mother. This impacted their drinking, as in their attempt to juggle both these roles, they could lose track of their alcohol intake.

The clash between roles and identities was described as a common feature of being a working mother. Some women reported implicitly questioning their value and role in the workplace because they felt 'distracted' by their children, or because they required more flexible work hours. Women described feeling guilty, embarrassed, or uncomfortable, such as not wanting to shift or change meeting times that would be more suitable to their parenting role. For example, participants felt guilty if they were late to work in the morning or finished work earlier (i.e. due to the school drop off and pick up). Conversely, some women also described feeling 'mum guilt' if they felt they weren't meeting their children's needs:

> Mia: … You'll spend your life feeling compromised, doing a half job as a parent, and a half job as a worker …
>
> Interviewer: Is that how you feel sometimes?
>
> Mia: That's how I feel all the time, pretty much. Like it's all one big compromise, I think. I think that's just how it is. (Mia, full-time employed, partnered mother).
>
> … It's that old adage of you're supposed to work like you don't have children, parent like you don't work. Be available to everyone, all the time, and don't make it look like it's hard. (Ella, part-time employed, partnered mother).

As a result of both implicit and explicit pressures, some participants described overcompensating at their workplaces. This included working extra unpaid hours or on their days off or attending online meetings and answering phone calls while looking after children. This contributed to fatigue, but also because of this constant 'juggling', the liminal period between work and home was unclear for some women. For example, Claire talked about being '*… on work emails and things at 6 pm whilst I'm trying to cook dinner, so that kind of juggling, trying to do everything*' (Claire, full-time employed, partnered mother). This blurred the line between working and parenting, as participants did not always have a designated transition time to finish work and unwind.

Rather than demarcating work and domestic responsibilities, drinking could accompany both, with many working mothers feeling the need to be always available to everyone. This meant that some respondents were not watchful or mindful of the amount of alcohol they were consuming. For example, a few participants reflected that they were drinking more than they had initially thought.

> … maybe I'm drinking a bit more than I realised. Yeah, so I'll just pour myself a drink, and usually that's just because everything's going on. There's emails still coming through, I'm sometimes still trying to finish something off, and then the kids need dinner. They eat dinner quite early and my youngest needs dinner now rather than later. So sometimes just that overwhelming period where I've got to do everything … (Claire, full-time employed, partnered mother).

As Caroline noted, this led to a particularly gendered drinking style distinct from men's drinking:

> … We don't sit down and stand around like the boys do drinking, with the beer cans round our feet. We drink a glass of wine while we cook tea. We have a glass of wine while we talk to our husbands about their days. We have a glass of wine while we're sitting doing the kids homework or arguing with them about, 'Where's your sock? Where's your library book?' All that sort of stuff. I think women drink more, because they don't stop to drink […] it makes it very easy to think 'I've only had one glass of wine' when you've had three or four, because you're not mindful of what you're doing. (Caroline, full-time employed, separated mother).

Hence, especially during the late afternoon or early evening period, the responsibilities faced by working mothers overlapped in ways that distracted them. While her drinking was still closely tied to, and limited by, her family responsibilities, Caroline's excerpt highlights how the attention demanded from different social roles meant that women did not always have the time or headspace to be mindful of their alcohol quantity.

Too much on their plate – Overcommitted and Under-supported

Overcommitted

As a result of feeling overcommitted due to all their responsibilities, women described work and time pressure and, at times, felt a lack of control over their lives. This impacted the meanings they attached to drinking, constructing it as an easy solution to escape their stressors and to feel relaxed.

Many women described feeling overcommitted, referring to the complexity of juggling their dual roles, which were akin to having two full-time jobs that could easily interfere with each other. It contributed to making women feel overwhelmed and 'always on' and reduced their capacity to unwind or relax. Particularly, time pressure and a lack of control over how they managed their competing responsibilities were the main sources of continued stress.

> I suppose for me, stress is when you're not in control of something, or maybe stress is that sense of obligation I have, the pressure of work, like your responsibilities. Those would be the main stress things. Stress about if your child's unhappy, or healthy, those kinds of things. (Mia, full-time employed, partnered mother).

As participants felt overcommitted, this contributed to the meanings they attached to drinking. Namely, many women described drinking to feel relaxed and to manage stress. A few women also signaled drinking to escape and forget their problems.

> … I think it's [drinking] stress related and an escape or a relaxing mechanism at the end of the day. (Nina, full-time employed, separated mother).

Most women in our sample associated drinking with 'relaxing' or feeling 'chill' or 'calm'. For example, Danielle highlighted the long-term consequences of drinking on her physical health, but also reported that drinking might actually be beneficial for her mental health and aid in her relationships with her children.

> … I'm concerned what it's actually doing to my long-term health. I know it increases your cancer risk, diabetes - I'm not sure if it's bad for mental health or not. I actually think it might be good for mental health, for mums to actually - I feel it's actually beneficial to me. So, I don't think it's actually bad for your mental health, but I'd like to know the outcomes for that … . (Danielle, part-time employed, partnered mother).

She later added:

> Because it actually helps you relax and you can get into that sleep cycle better, even though it's not great sleep, the initial feeling is you know you can relax and you feel good. You're not going to yell at your children. That's what I feel anyway. (Danielle, part-time employed, partnered mother).

This feeling women described was also linked to the desire to 'switch off' and relieve stress. Women were aware that alcohol would produce the sensation of feeling 'numb' or taking the 'edge off,' relieving them of their day-to-day stress. While women created strategies and routines to manage stress, such as pre-organising their children for school the night before or working nonstandard hours, if an unexpected disruption occurred (i.e. if their child was sick or if there were problems at work), women could feel overwhelmed and out of control. In a habitual and 'automatic' response, some women would turn to alcohol, with one woman explicitly describing drinking as the easiest solution to help her 'forget' and another describing it as part of her calming end-of-day ritual.

> Well, I think it's a very easy solution. Not solution, but almost an automatic response to, I need to process this big day but I possibly won't process it, I'll just have a wine instead and forget about it. (Leanne, part-time employed, partnered mother).

> … I think that I reach out to drinking at the end of the day because I'm really quite overwhelmed, or quite exhausted mentally and physically from the day. So, I think I ended up reaching out to that because that's like, this is just going to give me a little calm down hit. It's part of the ritual I think of also this is the end of the day, this is the end of the night. Definitely. I think I drink more if I'm more stressed. Whereas if I'm more chilled out I don't tend to reach for it as much. So, I think it definitely helps to relax me, I think. (Penelope, part-time employed, separated mother).

Thus, working mothers craved immediate stress-relief to forget their day-to-day hassles, highlighting how the meanings associated with alcohol were intertwined with both the desire for comfort and calmness amid feeling overburdened and stressed.

Under-supported

Women indicated that social support was an important factor mitigating against stress. However, some felt under-supported by their social networks, especially when it came to childcare or domestic chores. This led women to drink as a way to support themselves – seeing alcohol as rewarding and recovering.

Many women described taking on most parenting and domestic duties, such as managing children's schooling and routines, and cooking. A few women described feeling

'alone' in their stress, while others felt more supported by their partners and networks. Importantly, for some single mothers and partnered women whose partners were not available to help, both noted increased responsibility and stress. For these women especially, support from families, friends, and networks of other mothers was important.

As well as the general stress of managing multiple responsibilities, many women described post-work routines (i.e. picking up children, preparing dinner, cleaning up, getting children ready for bed) as highly stressful parts of their day, especially after a demanding time at work. Particularly for women who felt under-supported, this increased their desire to drink, and the quantity of alcohol consumed. For some women, this was often spontaneous and unplanned, such as wanting and drinking an extra glass of wine on a night when they felt less supported.

> I think if my husband is working a lot and he can't actually come up and help me, like, at least get the kids ready for bath, I find that really stressful, especially if I've been working the whole day dealing with [people at workplace]. So, yeah, I feel that - like, when that happens or he's actually interstate or something, yeah, I actually drink more then. Yeah, so definitely if I don't have that support, trying to get the kids ready for bed, their books, and putting away the dishes and everything, yes. (Danielle, part-time employed, partnered mother).

This also shaped the meanings they connected to alcohol, with many women describing drinking as something they looked forward to – their 'reward', 'prize' or as a form of recovery. For example, women talked about alcohol as a means to 'get through' the next 3–4 h of parenting and domestic tasks after work. Even women who felt generally supported by their partners agreed on this sentiment when reflecting on previous experiences where they felt lonely or isolated at home (e.g. maternity leave, COVID-19 restrictions).

> Yes, I think if I didn't have so many responsibilities, possibly I wouldn't drink that much, or on an every night basis. I think it tends to set the scene and give me just that little bit of energy, or it's like a prize, a present to myself, a way of keeping on going (Taylor, part-time employed, partnered mother).

As Taylor's account highlights, when women felt under-supported, the 'rewarding' meanings attached to alcohol were amplified.

'Without a doubt it's the standard' – The cultural and social normalisation of drinking among working mothers

Working mothers also discussed wider societal and cultural factors impacting how they viewed alcohol. We explored this as a sociocultural narrative targeted toward mothers through marketing and social media, including how the alcohol industry purposefully produced particular meanings around alcohol.

Women described 'seeing alcohol everywhere', whether that was on social media or in general media such as movies. This contributed indirectly to the normalisation of drinking and, for some women, could be directly triggering.

> I would say the majority of mum movies or movies that are targeted towards women or TV shows, there's a lot of alcohol in those [...] Those things are very triggering, I definitely sometimes see those and I go, 'Oh yeah, that would be nice have a glass of red wine.' So, I do think TV shows and movies tend to normalise having that glass of wine sitting on the kitchen bench when you're dealing with an issue in some of these things. (Penelope, part-time employed, separated mother).

Women described alcohol use among working mothers as being culturally ingrained, with a few participants reflecting on how the alcohol industry deliberately branded alcohol as '*... a solution to stress and problems*' (Ella, part-time employed, partnered mother). For example, some described how alcohol was culturally normalised as the default coping mechanism for dealing with child-related stress, such as tantrums, screaming, or sleep deprivation.

> I think it's very normal. I think it's almost been fetishized a bit because of social media, and that kind of very meme type, 'I've just got to make it through to wine time', 'Mummy's wine time', all that kind of thing ... (Leanne, part-time employed, partnered mother).

However, several women were also critical of how alcohol was depicted as something mothers 'deserved' and was glamorized (by the alcohol industry) as a way to cope with stress. As one participant noted, this influence of marketing was closely intertwined with, and sometimes inseparable from, broader cultural norms:

> I think it's very glamourised or seen as a - absolutely seen as a good option. It's presented as a desirable kind of thing and sold exactly like that, and whether that's done by marketers or whether that's our culture now that it is socially acceptable to be looking to alcohol as a way to cope with stress or whatever ... (Angelica, part-time employed, partnered mother).

These broader cultural norms were connected to social norms around alcohol use, especially when women described networks of other working mothers. Drinking was implicated in building and maintaining relationships and spending meaningful time with friends and partners. Alcohol was also something mothers connected and joked about. For example, women described that drinking was a common and shared experience among their friends, reinforcing that drinking was '*totally*' and '*completely*' normal and expected among other working mothers:

> Without a doubt it's the standard. I have one friend who doesn't drink out of my known acquaintances. So, it's the go-to. (April, part-time employed, partnered mother).

> I think it's incredibly normal because in my workplace we're probably 90% women of between 30 to 45, mostly have kids and it's always a joke. 'Oh god, I'm going to go home and have a drink after the day I've had.' Your kids will send you to drink. It's a bit of a joke, like it's a done thing that people do. (Ava, full-time employed, partnered mother).

As the above accounts highlight, social networks were an important contributor to how normalised alcohol was. Ava's quote in particular uses the same humorous rhetoric that other working mothers noted seeing online, highlighting the link between social and cultural normalisation.

Discussion

This study investigated the social and material realities of working mothers and how this influenced their drinking

practices and meanings. We found that drinking practices were closely associated with feelings of stress, guilt, and lack of support, which also produced meanings around reward and relaxation. These meanings were co-produced alongside broader social and cultural norms that encouraged drinking as a way to deal with the stresses working mothers faced.

Working mothers face pressures around being a 'good mother' and 'ideal worker' (Blair-Loy et al. 2015; Collins 2019; Newman and Nelson 2021). These pressures tend to be highly classed, with middle-class mothers expected to commit time and energy to their children, and professional workers expected to do the same for their employers. The women in our study, predominately working professionals, faced guilt and pressure to conform to these standards, uniquely impacting their drinking practices. Prior research by Wright et al. (2022) showed that mid-life women begin drinking during the transitional period between work and home (5–6pm), demarcating the end of one role (employment) and the beginning of the next (parenting). This period – 'wine-o-clock' – is often structured around women's employment, parenting, and domestic responsibilities (Jackson et al. 2018; Emslie et al. 2015; Wright et al. 2022). However, participants in our study struggled to separate their work and parenting spheres, with drinking often occurring in the blurred transition between the two. The need for constant availability meant alcohol was used to keep up and keep going, especially when their dual responsibilities intersected. While women's drinking was still closely tied to, and bound by domestic responsibilities (Jackson et al. 2018; Wolf and Chávez 2015), the busyness associated with these competing demands meant that women could lose track of their drinking and were not always able to be mindful of their consumption. Role-blurring has been linked to decreased personal and relational well-being among working mothers (Paulin et al. 2017) and here we showed this may also have downstream consequences for drinking.

Conversely, while drinking practices were embedded in women's busy routines and home lives (see also Lyons et al. 2023; Wright et al. 2022), drinking was also connected to affect, managing emotions or relaxing. Drinking among mid-life woman is strongly connected to emotional states and affective interpretations: for some women, drinking evokes a positive, relaxed, and pleasurable emotional response; others linked drinking to coping, isolation, loneliness and escaping, where they no longer had to 'think' about their responsibilities (Emslie et al. 2015; Foley et al. 2021; Harding et al. 2021; Jackson et al. 2018; Lyons et al. 2014; Lunnay et al. 2023). Our study highlights how the meanings attached to alcohol, both positive and negative, were intertwined. Particularly when working mothers were overwhelmed and felt a lack of control, drinking represented multiple, often conflicting, emotions and meanings, e.g. coping and forgetting, but also relaxation and enjoyment. Women felt alcohol helped them process a stressful day, but also found subjective pleasure drinking alongside their domestic tasks, such as while cooking and cleaning. Alcohol exists alongside other activities and resources that can help women's sense of emotional wellbeing (Ward et al. 2022b). However, the busyness of women's lives in our sample meant that alcohol was constructed as an accessible and appealing way to deal with emotions and unwind – perhaps contributing to its habituality as discussed above. Additionally, discontentment with how much working mothers felt supported by their social relationships, especially partners, could increase stress and drinking, emphasising the importance of spousal support and relationship quality (Jackson et al. 2023; O'Brien et al. 2014). For working mothers who did not have support to manage everyday tasks and chores, strain and affect intertwined with different drinking meanings, such as frustrations managing monotonous tasks and feeling alone in stress.

Finally, drinking was culturally and socially entwined with being a 'modern' mother, with drinking promoted as a way to socially connect and cope with the demands of motherhood (Harding et al. 2021; Newman and Nelson 2021). Many women felt drinking was the norm among working mothers, with some being critical of how marketing played into social and cultural norms. They described the omnipresence of alcohol, such as on social or entertainment media, and the marketing of alcohol to working mothers as a tool for managing stress. Our research draws attention to the commercial interests (i.e. the alcohol industry) that frame alcohol as a symbol of relief and relaxation among working mothers, while ignoring a genuine need for increased support and the long-term impact on women's health (Bosma et al. 2022; Harding et al. 2021; Kersey et al. 2022; Lyons et al. 2023).

Limitations

Our study was limited by our convenience sampling, consisting of predominately well-educated, Anglo-identifying women. Given the importance of class (Lunnay et al. 2022) ethnicity (Miller & Carbone-Lopez 2015) and sexuality (Drabble and Trocki 2014) in women's drinking practices, future research should examine how these might intersect to produce particular drinking patterns and meanings among working mothers. While we focused on working mothers who drank regularly, future research should include participants who do not drink often or at all and investigate individual and social differences. Furthermore, our interviews were conducted shortly after Australian COVID-19 restrictions had eased, and many women were still re-adjusting their routines, which may have impacted our findings. However, women in our sample distinguished between their drinking patterns during and after COVID-19 restrictions, and with a few exceptions, most re-iterated that they returned to their regular pre-COVID-19 drinking practices.

Implications

Cultural, institutional, and social factors need to be addressed to change women's drinking practices (Kersey et al. 2022). This means research and policies addressing both commercial determinants of health (e.g. targeted marketing towards women) and social determinants of health

(e.g. expectations around women's unpaid labour). Health promotion strategies that look at fostering positive alternatives to alcohol should acknowledge the challenges working mothers face and how this has co-produced meanings around alcohol (i.e. stress relief). In continuing this line of research, the interplay between everyday stressors and alcohol use needs to be examined more closely to understand the mechanisms and support working mothers need to manage or reduce their alcohol use.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was received by the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEC21325). The participants of this study did not provide consent for their data to be publicly shared, hence supporting data is not available.

Disclosure statement

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