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Narcofeminist affects: Gender, harm and fun in young women and gender diverse people's experiences of alcohol and other drug consumption

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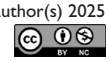
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Abstract

While much sociological research suggests that gender dynamics can make alcohol and other drug consumption settings potentially unsafe, these practices can still be highly pleasurable and meaningful for young people. Analysis of influential understandings of young people's alcohol and other drug consumption highlights how the notion of 'harm' is gendered, with men and masculinity rarely addressed, while women are constituted as uniquely vulnerable. Mobilising a concurrent focus on harms and benefits inspired by narcofeminisms and analysing qualitative interviews with 22 young women and gender diverse people, we examine what they find appealing and concerning about alcohol and other drugs, and how they navigate these dual forces in their consumption practices. Our analysis centres affective dynamics to examine how these practices can form part of meaningful modes of living in a world shaped by persistent concerns about the threat of gendered violence. Our participants characterise the conduct of men as central concerns during consumption events. However, their accounts also highlight the affective appeal of alcohol and other drug consumption in relation to experiencing social connections, embodied pleasures and new ways of being and doing in the world. In navigating this nexus of risk and reward, these young

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people describe efforts to maximise the generative potential of consumption while minimising the harms that men's conduct can pose. We argue that responses to young people's alcohol and other drug consumption could be productively informed by a narcofeminist politics that considers not only the reduction of harm but the desire to live well.

Keywords
affect, alcohol, drugs, gender, harm, narcofeminism, pleasure, young people

Introduction

In Australia, young people's alcohol and other drug consumption is a central policy concern. Identified as a priority population in the current *National Drug Strategy 2017–2026* (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2017), alongside elevated rates of alcohol and other drug consumption,[1] young people between the ages of 10 and 24 are often thought to be especially susceptible to harm. For example, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2024) claims that young people are more 'vulnerable' to alcohol and other drug-related 'behaviours . . . which can lead to adverse health and social outcomes'. Importantly, the kinds of issues that the term 'behaviours' gestures towards are known to be shaped by many social forces – most significantly for our analysis, gender. Experiences of sexual harassment and violence in nightlife settings, for example, are heavily gendered, with men consistently identified as the primary perpetrators and women as the primary targets (Quigg et al., 2020). Despite these trends, recent research demonstrates that many policy responses obfuscate gender. Duncan et al. (2022a), for example, argue that Australian government alcohol policy constitutes a notion of 'alcohol-related violence' that 'coheres to obscure men's contributions to and experiences of violence' (p. 1057). Similarly, media coverage of gendered violence such as 'drink spiking'[2] tends to position young women as a uniquely vulnerable population and seeks to intervene in their conduct by encouraging them to avoid nightlife districts where they may encounter drink spiking and other forms of sexual violence (Clinnick et al., 2024). Focusing on interventions for secondary school age young people, Farrugia (2023) argues that, in its handling of sex and consent, prevention drug education backgrounds gender by centring young people's inability to recognise danger while intoxicated as the primary cause of sexual violence. In this way, while gendered consumption dynamics, especially those stemming from violent masculinities, are sometimes tacitly acknowledged in public health research and by some policymakers, they tend to be 'forgotten' in efforts to address them (Farrugia et al., 2022). At other times, generic public health measures that apply to all are preferred. Efforts to reduce alcohol availability, for example, can be understood as primarily designed to curtail men's violence. However, they do so by asking all, including those who contribute least to this violence, to shoulder the responsibility for reducing it (Duncan et al., 2022b).

Contributing to these debates, we examine how 22 young women and gender diverse people describe their primary concerns when consuming alcohol and other drugs. Inspired by recent work on 'narcofeminism', our analysis articulates a 'double vision' in which harms and benefits are examined concurrently (Dennis et al., 2023a, p. 947). Addressing concerns about harm first, we examine how these young people position

men's conduct as the primary concern during consumption events. In line with established research on the nexus of alcohol and other drugs, gender and harm, our participants report routinely experiencing harassment and unwanted attention from men in different settings such as nightlife districts and private parties. We then examine the appealing dimensions, or affective dynamics, of alcohol and other drugs, despite these potential harms. We focus on two related dynamics: consumption practices implicated in (1) meaningful forms of sociality in which friendships and other social relationships are established and developed (socially oriented affective dynamics) and (2) generative embodied pleasures and new agential capacities for being and doing in the world (personally oriented affective dynamics). Instead of treating these dynamics as mutually exclusive, we approach them as relationally co-produced possibilities that contribute to materialising new selves and worlds. Given the generative potential of consumption for these young people, they also mobilised strategies to promote these positive dynamics while managing the risks that men's conduct can pose. Importantly, unlike many public health efforts in which risks and harms are overdetermined, our participants often sought to *generate positive affective dynamics without sacrificing the potential pleasures and other benefits of consumption*. We argue that their efforts enact a defiant narcofeminist refusal to renounce pleasurable and meaningful practices in the service of managing the risk of violent masculinities. Working through the implications of this approach, we ask whether narcofeminism can inform more nuanced, gender-sensitive responses to alcohol and other drugs in ways that do not dismiss the desires and pleasures of women and gender minorities as readily sacrificed in efforts to reduce harm.

Gender and risk in consumption settings

A large body of qualitative research in Australia and other Western liberal democracies examines how gender shapes concern about safety when consuming alcohol and other drugs in various settings (e.g. Anitha et al., 2021; Fileborn, 2016a, 2016b; MacLean, 2016; Nicholls, 2017; Tokle et al., 2024; Vaadal, 2020; Wadds et al., 2022). Much of this research suggests that for young women the pleasures and fun associated with nighttime leisure are routinely intertwined with the risk of harassment, assault and unwanted sexual attention. While young women may contest, resent and resist this aspect of their experiences, it remains a ubiquitous part of these events (e.g. Nicholls, 2017; Vaadal, 2020). Indeed, while 'doing drugs' has been approached as a form of 'doing gender' for decades (Measham, 2002), enacting or 'doing safety' is now similarly constituted as part of gender performativity during nights out (Fileborn, 2016b). Much of this research focuses on mainstream nighttime leisure districts and heterosexualised venues and party settings; however, recent scholarship also explores how safety is differentially constituted through gender and sexuality. For example, the heterosexualised male gaze can be an important feature of bars and clubs for queer women (Nicholls, 2017) and managing harassment related to 'masculine cultures of entitlement' has been reported as a routine experience of nightlife for sexual and gender minority young people (Bogren et al., 2024). Relatedly, Grant et al. (2024) argue that by enabling safer spaces for disinhibition, LGBTQ venues shape the character of alcohol consumption for lesbian, bisexual and queer women in multiple ways. Overall, this literature presents a picture in which the vigilance required

of young women and gender diverse people during nights out often impacts and impedes access to the pleasures they seek.

Gender, friendship and fun in consumption settings

Alcohol and other drug consumption is implicated in pleasurable and meaningful forms of sociality for many young people. For example, social research demonstrates that consumption practices can form part of events in which young people deepen their relationships (e.g. Hunt et al., 2019; MacLean, 2016; Nicholls, 2019; Waitt et al., 2011). Importantly, these dynamics are shaped by gender where, for example, a 'girls' night out' can be approached as a practice that is corporeally pleasurable and strengthens social bonds (Nicholls, 2019). Intoxication can also form part of sexual encounters in ways that enable young women to 'perform gender differently' and constitute a more agential sexuality (Bogren et al., 2023). To date, while much of this research addresses gender within a binary of masculinity and femininity, recent research examines how alcohol and other drug consumption can be implicated in meaningful forms of queer community building and the expression of new forms of gender for LGBTQ young people (Grant et al., 2024; Hunt et al., 2019; Pienaar et al., 2020; Race et al., 2023). Together, this research emphasises that despite concerns about the risks of harassment, sexual violence and impositions from men more generally, participation in nightlife, partying and alcohol and other drug consumption more generally can be highly pleasurable and meaningful practices for young women and gender diverse people.

In what follows we build on and extend this scholarship by examining not only the positive and negative dynamics implicated in young women and gender diverse people's alcohol and other drug consumption but how their responses to gendered harms might offer an ethico-political approach that can inform broader efforts to reduce harms.

Approach: A narcofeminist analysis of drug affects

Our analysis is situated within an established area of scholarship that draws on relational theoretical resources to examine drugs and their 'effects' as performatively constituted through encounters with other human and more-than-human forces. Sometimes denoted 'critical drugs studies', this scholarship has mobilised several related concepts such as 'assemblages' (Duff, 2014), 'actor-networks' (Dilkes-Frayne, 2014), 'phenomena' (Fraser & Moore, 2011), 'affordances' (Fraser, 2013), 'habits' (Fraser et al., 2014) and 'affects' (Dennis, 2019) to approach drugs as emergent actors, their effects co-produced through networks of forces, rather than as the inherent pharmacological properties of drugs themselves. In line with this scholarship, we approach alcohol and other drug consumption as a practice that co-produces certain capacities and possibilities, or affective dynamics, for these young people and their social relationships. Importantly, these dynamics are not predetermined options that young people choose, but capacities that emerge relationally in concert with the diverse array of phenomena (themselves relationally produced) through which consumption experiences materialise. We explore how the affective dynamics of consumption shape our participants' capacities to feel, act and be in ways that also inform their intentions and desires (Bøhling, 2017). As our analysis

highlights, these dynamics can be understood as 'socially oriented' insofar as they concern relationships with others, or 'personally oriented' when they index a concern with individual embodiment and agential capacities.

Our analysis of these dynamics is informed by the political and ethical orientation of narcofeminism. A very new concept for alcohol and other drugs scholarship and one which originated in drug user activism, narcofeminism was coined in 2018 by an international network of women and gender diverse people who use drugs at a meeting held by the Association for Women's Rights in Development.[3] Seeking to draw feminist concerns explicitly into political action for drug user rights, activists from Eastern Europe and Central Asia formed a movement that sought to centre the voices and needs of women who consume drugs. As narcofeminist and executive director of the International Network of People who Use Drugs Chang (2020) argues, in bringing feminism into the drug user movement 'NarcoFeminism pushes back against the moral blame and pathologisation of our kind, and aims to construct more positive realities and subjectivities of women who use drugs' (p. 285). In combining drug user activism, feminism and a human rights agenda, narcofeminism agitates for more humane drug policies, expansion of harm reduction initiatives and decriminalisation at a global scale. Importantly, alongside working to dismantle the harmful and uneven gendered effects of drug policies, narcofeminist efforts to construct more 'positive realities' also call for careful attention to desire, pleasure and the positive possibilities of consumption. Crucially then, as a politico-ethical practice and radical social justice movement, narcofeminism seeks to create new realities of drugs concerned with not only reducing harm, but living well.

In a 2023 edited collection published by *The Sociological Review* critical drug scholars, Dennis, Pienaar and Rosengarten sought to bring the insights of narcofeminism into conversation with scholarly research on alcohol and other drugs. Inspired by the affirmative world-building politics of narcofeminism, the collection set out to shift the 'focus from a feminist sociological concern with drugs as a means of confining minoritised peoples, to explore what drugs can do as a feminist practice' (Dennis et al., 2023b, p. 730). In this way, the political and ethical orientation of narcofeminist-inspired research engages the complexities of drug consumption, holding in dual focus its benefits and rewards, risks and harms, and how people navigate these counterposing forces in their embodied practices. This concurrent emphasis on potential harm and positive realities (or 'double vision' in Dennis et al.'s terms) has important implications for approaching efforts to govern alcohol and other drugs and the people who consume them: it advocates for nuanced responses to alcohol and other drugs capable of attending both to the need to minimise harm *and* the 'creative, life-affirming qualities of drug use' (Dennis et al., 2023b, p. 730). From this perspective, efforts that require young women to shoulder the responsibility of reducing men's violence by, for example, reducing their own alcohol consumption should not be assessed solely by whether they reduce incidences of violence. Rather, a narcofeminist approach asks ethically informed questions about what is lost along the way. We might ask, for example, whether women's access to full, rich experiences and unrestricted pleasures is positioned as expendable by interventions that effectively reduce their opportunity to enjoy the pleasures and intimacy of drinking with close friends in order to minimise the risk of experiencing gender-based violence? Of course, it is possible to argue that the positives outweigh the negatives and while we

do not seek to debate this here, a narcofeminist approach insists that these ethical issues, at the very least, form part of deliberations about addressing harms all too readily attributed to alcohol and other drugs, but which are also imbricated in violent masculinities and gendered systems of oppression.

Part of the radical potential of narcofeminism is its assertion of the rights of women to use illicit drugs and advocacy for especially stigmatised and criminalised consumers (Bessonova et al., 2023). However, as Keane (2023) demonstrates, a narcofeminist approach can be highly generative for less spectacular and less stigmatised forms of consumption such as, for our purposes, young people's drinking, partying and 'recreational' drug use. Keane (2023) uses narcofeminism to examine the restrictive gender norms that are built into understandings of women who drink in private, convincingly arguing that the 'narcofeminist perspective on drug use as a generative and resistant mode of living can contribute important insights into mundane and domesticated forms of psychoactive consumption' (p. 802). Of course, given many of consumption practices examined in this research such as 'underage drinking' or MDMA use are illegal, they may not be quite as domesticated as drinking in private. While we acknowledge that the practices described by these Australian young people are rarely met with the criminalisation and state-sanctioned violence that narcofeminists in many other countries resist daily, narcrofeminism offers a political and ethical analytical tool attuned to participant concerns about experiences of male violence during alcohol and other drug consumption alongside their pursuit of corporeal pleasure, friendship and social connection.

Method

This analysis stems from research conducted for an Australian Research Council-funded project on how gender and sexuality shape young people's alcohol and other drug consumption, their relationship to formal drug education and how related issues are addressed in drug education. The project includes three datasets: a corpus of drug education resources; 40 interviews with young people; and 20 interviews with drug education professionals. In this article, we analyse data generated from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young people living in four of Australia's most populous states: New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia. This article only examines the perspectives of the young women and gender diverse people who participated in the research (22 of 40 participants). Experience of alcohol and other drugs varied considerably among our participants. The dataset included young people who did not consume alcohol and other drugs at all or had limited experience of drinking alongside those who regularly consume a range of drugs including cannabis, MDMA, cocaine, ketamine and psychedelics. Overall, our participants most commonly reported alcohol, cannabis, MDMA and cocaine consumption. While not designed to be representative, our dataset broadly reflects the popularity of drugs among Australian young people (AIHW, 2024), including LGBTQ+ young people (Hill et al., 2021) (further details of participant demographics are included in Appendix A). The research received approval from human research ethics committee at La Trobe University (approval number HEC22188). Recruitment was conducted through social media promotion on several platforms and snowball referral.

All participants were provided with a plain language statement explaining the project and their consent was recorded orally at the start of the interview. Depending on participant preference and geographic location, interviews were either conducted in person or online, and ranged from 30 to 70 minutes in length. All participants were reimbursed with AUD$50 for their time and contribution to the research. Of the 22 interviews reported in this article, 18 were conducted by the first author and four were conducted by a research assistant. Both are experienced interviewers practised in establishing trust and rapport while discussing sensitive issues related to alcohol and other drugs. Given the potentially sensitive character of discussions about alcohol and other drugs, safety, harm and even fun, a protocol was in place if participants experienced distress. As part of this protocol, all participants were routinely reminded of the voluntary nature of participation, invited to skip sections of the interview if they preferred and information about relevant support services was available if required. The interviews addressed: sources of drug-related information; experiences of drug education; experiences of alcohol and other drug consumption; concerns about alcohol and other drugs; motivations for alcohol and other drug use; and understandings of youth alcohol and other drug consumption. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. All participants were assigned a pseudonym and identifying material was removed from the transcripts. The de-identified transcripts were coded using NVivo12 data management software. Using an iterative inductive approach, codes were developed based on themes emerging from the data, relevant literature and the aims of the project. Coding documented similarities, differences and tensions across the dataset. From here, an analytical frame informed by narcofeminism's 'double vision' was used to draw out specific dynamics of harm, benefit and resistance. When quoting from the data in the analysis that follows we include basic demographic details (e.g. gender, age and sexuality) in parentheses after each quote.

Analysis

Our analysis is organised into four substantive sections. First, we address how participants described their concerns about men's conduct. The next two sections examine affective dynamics classified for analytic purposes according to whether they primarily address relationships with others ('socially oriented') or individual capacities ('personally oriented').[4] Our final analytical section addresses participant strategies for weighing and managing the risk of gendered harms with their desire for generative consumption events.

Gender, harm and safety

Most of the young women and gender diverse people who participated in this research identified unwanted male attention, sexual harassment or violence, and the presence of men[5] more generally as the key concerns they negotiated when consuming alcohol and other drugs.[6] This concern was often described as an atmosphere of danger that made them feel 'really vulnerable' (Mandari, F,[7] 18, heterosexual) and 'unsafe' (Trang, F, 20, bisexual) and informed a general sense of caution when out with friends:

> If a group of men is approaching you, that kind of heightens your awareness of what they might do. (Caitlin, F, 18, heterosexual)

> You always have to have your hand over the top of your drink [. . .] because you don't know who's there. (Cathy, F, 20, heterosexual)

While the character of these experiences varied, they shaped consumption practices by, for example, reducing access to licensed venues and social events or informing decisions to limit consumption. Wilhelmina, for example, described the pleasures of nights out drinking and dancing at length, however, she recently began avoiding nightlife venues because of routine experiences with 'sleazy guys':

> Now I'm very closed off to going out unless I'm around people who I am comfortable with and trust [. . .] I'd rather be at a home if I was to try anything or, you know, be intoxicated. (F, 20, heterosexual)

Focusing on bars, and reflecting concerns about older men discussed by many participants, Kit stressed that they had no intention of visiting a bar again after they 'despised' their first and only experience of one:

> Very unsafe with the men. I mean I'm obviously not saying that women can't make it unsafe, but it was, in that scenario, men who were really quite gross. You know, a 50-year-old trying to buy me a drink, and some bloke who is like 26 when I'm 18 trying to get me to have a cigarette and give me his number. Yeah. Gross. Not going to do that again. (agender, 19, lesbian)

This time discussing private parties, Trang explained that she limits her MDMA consumption in an effort to avoid the risk of sexual assault. Given her experiences, managing safety was integral to her drug consumption practices:

> So the first time that I took [MDMA], I was pretty out of it [. . .] One guy had walked past me and my friend on a bed and then like just reached over and started groping me and I think I sort of felt it, but it just didn't really click with me in that moment until my friend was like, 'Oh, like, you know, what are you doing? Like stop it.' So, I think having that be my first experience as well and just, like, I guess other general experiences happening, when I haven't even been on drugs, about men being unsafe in that way, I've just always sort of tried to make sure I'm not completely out of it. (F, 20, bisexual)

Importantly, many of the young women and gender diverse people interviewed explicitly viewed men as the locus of threat and harm. While they were also cognisant of physical health issues such as the impact of alcohol on the liver or negative effects of intoxication on their brains, these issues were discussed in much less detail and with less concern than potential or experienced harms stemming from men's harassment and violence. In a discussion about the dangers of sexual assault and drink spiking, Quin emphasised that while women and queer people are not safe around men when they are intoxicated, drugs are not the central agent of harm with the implication that pervasive cultures of gendered violence present greater sources of risk:

> I feel like I would never, like, leave one of my friends alone in a place just, like, with a bunch of men who were fucked up [intoxicated] or just in a bunch of men in general. I would always like. . . with a woman or like a queer person, I would like never leave them alone [. . .] it's just not safe. I don't know, yeah, but it's not the drugs that I think are unsafe. (non-binary, 20, queer)

By examining concerns about and experiences of men's unwanted attention, harassment and violence, so far we have addressed one aspect of narcofeminism's double vision. The accounts here emphasise that the threat of men loomed large for these young people. This threat did not stop most of them consuming alcohol and other drugs, yet it did shape their experiences and practices. While narcofeminism generally addresses the governance of illicit drugs, these young people articulate a shared dynamic across substances: a general sense of caution pervades their accounts, one that limited access to certain consumption settings such as bars and clubs and access to acute, and often desired and pleasurable, forms of intoxication (Bogren et al., 2024). Most generally, these concerns and experiences form part of an affective atmosphere that reduces access to the potential life-affirming qualities of alcohol and other drug consumption where fun and hedonistic pleasures are curtailed by concern, anxiety and the need for safety strategies to mitigate unwanted attention from men.

Socially oriented affective dynamics

While concerns about men shaped the consumption of these young people in important ways, they still valued these practices. The contribution of consumption events to meaningful sociality in which friendships were made and strengthened and opportunities for care and intimacy emerged was an especially salient positive socially oriented affective dynamic. Participants routinely spoke about consumption events generating more 'open' and 'deep' communication that contributed to 'bonding', feeling 'connected' and 'closer' with friends as well as romantic partners and family members. Recalling a camping trip in which she drank alcohol for the first time, Aspen described closeness and new forms of communication:

> Really deep conversations would come up and then the filter just disappears and then [my friends] say what they really believe in. So that's kind of how I got to know them better [. . .] It'll be like politics, religion, just all the new things that's arising in the world, like gender and all that. All those conversations that you can't socially have with other people unless you want conflict to arise [. . .] I'd say [I felt] closer [to them] even though my views for some of the things are different. I could still look past that. I just felt more happy that they felt that even in their [intoxicated] state, that they could trust me [and] tell me their views. (F, 19, heterosexual)

Strengthening friendships and other social bonds was discussed in relation to many different substances. While alcohol (e.g. MacLean, 2016) and MDMA (e.g. Farrugia, 2015) are perhaps most associated with these affects, participants also described similar experiences in relation to cocaine, cannabis and psychedelic drugs. Nicole, for example, describes these social dimensions as a 'core' part of smoking cannabis with her friends:

> I think that when you have shared experiences with friends and you are on drugs, typically with marijuana, it makes you more talkative. Your mind is more active, you are thinking about

> maybe more abstract things. I can remember talking about things [with my friends] that we might not talk about when we are sober, like, you know, our sex lives or things that we would normally feel ashamed of [. . .] I think that's a very core experience of it [. . .] I think the shared experience makes everyone a little more open to each other, like, I learnt a lot about all of my friends by, you know, sitting around a table while we are smoking and just having long in-depth conversations, which I think is pretty valuable to the connection between friends. I don't think you have to have drugs involved to have those conversations, but I think it kind of opens the gates up a little to allow people to feel less judged and a bit more open. (F, 19, bisexual)

Socially oriented affective dynamics of consumption were also addressed in Kamryn's discussion of the pleasures of a 'coke chat' she had the first time she tried cocaine – which she described as the 'best fucking night' of her life:

> I was with my friends, and we were all like in this heightened sense of euphoria. We were all, you know, on it [. . .] You know how you have like a coke chat, and you can sit there for hours, and you can talk to each other and everyone's on the same page? [. . .] [In] a coke chat, you kind of get stuck in loops. It's kind of like acid. You kind of get, like, stuck in talking loops and you just feel really affectionate towards each other and love each other so much. Everything you say is, I don't know how to explain it, it's very affectionate, it's very nice. Everyone just fucking loves each other. (F, 20, bisexual)

The feeling of being on the 'same page' or 'level' with others was routinely described as both pleasurable and generative of meaningful social connections. Kamryn's account also emphasises the significance of corporeal pleasure. While in Kamryn's case such pleasures are co-produced with friends, this is not to dismiss the value of individual embodied experiences.

Our participants also discussed the significance of care, which, while not pleasurable in the usual sense, was implicated in meaningful experiences of connection. Although they did not consume alcohol or other drugs personally, Wren enjoyed spending time with intoxicated friends and describes the pleasure associated with witnessing their friends' joy, combined with the knowledge that, by staying sober, they were helping to keep their friends safe:

> I enjoy just getting to have silly conversations that often come from, yeah, like, other people [who are] drunk or high [. . .] About a month ago for like a friend's birthday [. . .] everyone did a mushroom trip except for me. I think with mushrooms in particular, like, obviously there's a lot of sensory things and I loved being able to support people to experience things and watching my friends like twirl a paintbrush on like a canvas and be like, 'This is the best thing ever!' I got a lot of joy out of seeing them get joy and knowing that I was a part of making sure they were all staying safe as well [. . .] I know that they all appreciated having a sober person who could, like, order us dinner when they were all too trippy to be able to figure out what to eat and that sort of thing. So I think like I enjoy being able to support people, but also like people when they have a healthy, fun relationship with drugs and alcohol, it's like a really fun time and I enjoy having a fun time with them. (trans, 20, queer)

For Wren, their sobriety was not an impediment to sharing fun experiences with intoxicated friends. Rather, the forms of attention and care they practised helped generate

affective experiences such as 'silly conversations' and sensory experiences between people in joyful ways. However, meaningful forms of connection were not always straightforwardly fun or joyful. Quin, for example, recounted taking psychedelic mushrooms with a friend and comforting her during a tearful conversation about 'sexual trauma':

> I was just there to be, like, part of it and just, like, be able to make that a safe space. Yeah so, I guess that was like a big bonding [experience], as in, like, pretty much, like, it's a giant amount of trauma coming out and that was very nice to, like, be able to have that experience with her and just be able to, like, hold space with her at that time. So, I guess that's a very intense bonding. (non-binary, 20, queer)

Reflecting other narcofeminist research (Azbel, 2023), the care practices that unfold as part of alcohol and other drug consumption, while perhaps not pleasurable in a traditional sense, remain meaningful and generative, and in this respect are an important source of connection and intimacy. Further, the ethic of care articulated by some of our participants here may contribute to a sense of solidarity, especially important given the concerns about men's violence. Reading these experiences through a narcofeminist lens, we are sensitive to how consumption contributes to the development of valued forms of friendship and social connection. Primarily discussed by our participants in positive terms, these possibilities were a significant motivation for alcohol and other drug consumption.

Personally oriented affective dynamics

Alongside discussions of social relationships, our participants also described more inward-focused or personally oriented pleasures, desires and affects. Of course, while we acknowledge that these dynamics cannot be straightforwardly categorised as social or personal, it was notable that some participants' accounts focused less on relationships with other people and generally centred on embodied pleasures or new individual agential capacities – abilities to act or be in the world differently. Winona, for example, spoke at length about the fun of getting dressed up alone at home before going out and drinking because she 'enjoy[s] feeling just happy and beautiful' during these events. Her embodiment was key to this enjoyment:

> When I drink I just get to be, like, sitting there on the couch or standing there or dancing there and it's just me and my body [. . .] It just feels like the anxieties go away [. . .] I mean, at all times I have this relationship with my body where sometimes I feel like it is very distinctly a separate entity and that I am in opposition to my body, because it, you know, it looks a bad way or it's not doing the right thing or any of this stuff. But when I drink, I end up dancing and then when I am dancing, it's like there is no shame attached to the way my body looks because people are saying nice things about it or the way my body moves. (F, 19, bisexual)

For Winona, drinking alcohol forms part of practices that generate highly pleasurable and meaningful ways of experiencing her body, practices implicated in a positive embodied sense of selfhood (see Pienaar et al. [2020] for a related analysis examining drug consumption as a technology of the self). While these dynamics are relational and shaped

by the responses of people around her, she articulates much of their value through her embodiment – she no longer feels ontologically distinct or 'separate' from her body. Isla also recounted an experience of dancing, but in her case it was in the context of consuming cocaine alone in her bedroom at home. She described 'really fun' and 'euphoric' experiences where she was able to 'dance and move' in new ways:

> I really liked doing it [coke] alone in my room with my LED lights on a strobe, like, flashing a lot and listening to really intense music. I found that really fun and just dancing in my room. That was, like, the best way to do cocaine [. . .] It's just really euphoric and, like, when you have got the high of the coke you really want to dance and move; and then I mean I guess I am anxious, so I don't like dancing so hard with other people. I guess it's fun to do on my own and for me, like, coke will last like an hour or two, so, like, I won't do that much [coke], so it's fun to just, yeah, be in my room. (F, 18, bisexual)

Unlike Kamryn's description of the 'coke chat', Isla's account of cocaine use is primarily oriented towards herself and her ability to do new things with her body in private. Isla went on to elaborate that part of the euphoria of these experiences was connected to her sexuality. As she explained further, while Isla had previously been chastised for dancing in an apparently sexual manner and trying to 'hook up' with her female friends when drinking at 'sleepovers', she was able to channel some of these desires in private:

> So [dancing] in my room I would be like a lot more sexual, like, taking my clothes off and stuff like that. Then [dancing] with friends, I would just be, like, a lot more contained, but still trying to like look good [. . .] like, just [want to] look hot I guess.

Importantly, Isla contrasts using cocaine and dancing privately with dancing with friends in clubs where she was more motivated to 'look hot'. In this sense, Isla's cocaine consumption at home forms part of a practice that affords a different gender performativity, practices that co-produce a less 'contained' form of sexuality. This resonates with other research that similarly points to the ways in which drug consumption can enable non-normative forms of gender expression and play, and in this respect can be understood as generative of queer identities (Grant et al., 2024; Pienaar et al. 2020, 2022).

Personally oriented affective dynamics were also articulated in depictions of less spectacular consumption practices, ones that are legal and may be more 'domesticated' (Keane, 2023), or even when illicit, described as relatively quotidian, but nonetheless experienced as significant. Participants spoke of alcohol 'slow[ing] things down' and 'feeling relaxed' (Ki, agender, 19, lesbian), for example, or enjoying smoking cannabis and feeling a 'little bit silly' (Steph, F, 20, bisexual). While Harper spoke about the contribution of smoking cannabis to her friendships, she also focused on individual practices that she found pleasurable and meaningful:

> I normally like to, you know, like, I will sometimes get out my journal or, you know, put on a good movie or I will have a nice shower and like just relax a lot [. . .] I think more thought is going into what I [am writing in my journal]. Say, like, if I am stoned, like, I can just write a lot more deeply and, like, from the heart kind of thing and it's, like, more emotional for me. (F, 18, heterosexual)

Harper's account addresses small, routine pleasures such as a enjoying a shower but also a new capacity to write more deeply in her journal and address her emotional life. Examined together, these accounts emphasise valuable and life-affirming personally oriented affective dynamics of consumption. This is not to ignore potential drug-related risks, but as narcofeminism stresses, we cannot assume that they occlude the rewards and benefits of consumption. As these accounts suggest, consumption may form part of practices that co-produce dynamics valued for their contribution to pleasurable and generative forms of embodiment – new ways of affecting and being affected in the world. While such dynamics may be spectacular at times, they may also be more mundane, part of the pleasures of everyday life (Keane, 2023).

Narcofeminist responses to possible harms

A central feature of narcofeminist-informed alcohol and other drug research is to engage with the ways these practices can be generative of 'feminist resistance to dominant regimes' (Dennis et al., 2023b, p. 728). Reflecting this, we now examine how our participants managed and resisted the potential gendered harms that they encountered when consuming alcohol and other drugs. We suggest that, while not explicitly framed as such, a narcofeminist political orientation can be identified within their responses, a stance that emphasises the need not only to address harm but bolster their right to channel desire and experience pleasure. Our first example is found in Kamryn's description of using unprescribed Vyvanse® (Lisdexamfetamine)[8] or cocaine to help her 'stay alert' towards the end of an evening drinking in nightlife districts. As she explained, given a previous assault, she liked these drugs because they were fun but also helped her feel safer:

> So, I've [. . .] [been] way too drunk, passed out, woken up, like, having been assaulted, and from then, it was kind of like 'you can't keep doing this'. Like, you do still want to have fun with your friends, you still want to go out [. . .] but it is a safety thing as well [. . .] [because Vyvanse® or cocaine] do keep you up for more time. It makes it fun. So, as long as I'm in a group and I'm safe and [confident] that I will be looked after. Like, when I was with my male friends, I'll be like, yeah, it's like cool I'll do the coke, I'll have it for fun. Then when I'm with my girlfriends, I'm out, we're all, like, kind of on the same level, we're on the same page of drinking. That's when it's more for safety. Like, someone's got to be alert. Someone's got to be on it to get us out, to make sure we're safe, to make sure we don't lose one another. (F, 20, bisexual)

Depending on the social group, these drugs form part of different practices and have different affects. As Kamryn explained, when she is with her male friends and feels safe, her cocaine or Vyvanse® consumption is primarily about fun, and when she is with her girlfriends – who have also been drinking – and safety is a more pressing concern, the drugs are appealing because they afford alertness to ensure safety. In this sense, Kamryn asserts a narcofeminist right to fun, pleasure and friendship, not by limiting herself by, for example, abstaining from alcohol and other drugs but by adapting her consumption to channel its affects in specific ways.

Winona offered a related example as part of a longer account about the first time she tried MDMA/ecstasy while travelling overseas. She was offered ecstasy by a man while

dancing at what she explained was not a 'kink club' but 'place where it was acceptable to be in states of undress'. After taking the ecstasy she took her 'top off, which was not a weird thing to be doing in the moment'. Following this she spent most of the evening with the man:

> Oh God! We danced, we started making out, I went down on him. I was a little bit too overenthusiastic [and] I threw up, it was a fucking night. [. . .] I was like, 'Oh fuck!' and the guy that I was with, he was really nice, you know, he cleaned himself up and then [we went] into, like, a quieter part of the club. We were both off our tits [acutely intoxicated]. I told him that I loved him [. . .] and we went into, like, a quieter part of the club because I said to him, like, 'I am freaking out' [after having vomited] and he goes, 'Okay, just sit down, breathe.' I distinctly remember thinking, 'Oh shit, like, I definitely need to get some clothes on', because I was topless and eventually [the ecstasy] wore off. (F, 19, bisexual)

Winona and the man eventually left the club together and spent the night at her hotel. Following this, he kept harassing her about sex:

> This man then, not in a way that made me feel threatened, sort of badgered me for the next couple of days. I took him back to the hotel I was staying in. We didn't sleep together, which bothered him and [he] fucking cried about it, and then for multiple times over the next couple of days [. . .] he said, 'Oh, but you told me you loved me' and I wanted to go, 'Well, I was off my tits on ecstasy for the first time in my life, so maybe temper your expectations mate' [. . .] Having to deal with him over those next couple of days was such a fucking nightmare.

Describing this event as 'very funny' and 'valuable' but 'undercut by the many things that could have gone wrong', Winona explained that she had taken some lessons from it:

> When I take substances [now], there are hard lines in my head of like what I will not do. Telling a stranger that you love them is now officially a very hard line of what not to do, as well as sucking someone's dick and throwing up [. . .] Bring a large T-shirt in the event of something happening because the top I was wearing was a corset – very difficult to put back on especially when you are not totally in your mind. That is something that I will always do in the future, like, in any of those situations.

Rather than responding to some of the negative aspects of this event by dramatically limiting herself, Winona, like Kamryn, focuses on how to generate the possible pleasures of desire and drugs. Her subsequent rules seek to facilitate these kinds of experiences more effectively in the future, rather than avoid them altogether. Her first rule not to tell strangers (most likely men) that she loves them is focused on managing other people's (again, most likely men's) potential entitlement and misguided expectations, and her second rule to carry a large T-shirt is focused on making the pleasures of intoxication more convenient and accessible. Importantly, while Winona now avoids performing oral sex in these settings, she remained open to and described subsequent experiences of pleasurable intoxicated sexual encounters. In this sense, Winona's 'hard lines' or rules can be approached as narcofeminist in orientation – designed to help generate the positive affective dynamics of particular consumption practices rather than abstain from them in order to manage risk.

In thinking through ways to reduce harm, some participants like Ash were especially critical of efforts that did not acknowledge gender:

> When people worry about young women drinking, they think something bad is going to happen to them at the hands of someone else. So, I would say to them, 'Shouldn't you be more worried about the young men who are drinking, who are going to like take these actions?' Like, reframing what they're worried about and thinking about it critically [. . .] I mean obviously, I would generally be more worried about young women. You know, I've been on the end of that [male harassment], and I would be more worried about that [. . .] How can we prevent this rather than just [saying] 'Don't do anything [use alcohol or drugs] at all and you'll be fine.' (F, 17, bisexual)

For Ash, offering abstinence as a strategy for young women to avoid men's violence is insufficient. As she argues, such strategies should address men's consumption and comportment rather than reproducing an intervention targeting women's conduct. Together, these young women assert their right to experience the positive affective dynamics of consumption. Reflecting a narcofeminist double vision in relation to alcohol and illicit drugs, their accounts demonstrate a critical perspective on the ways gender shapes experiences of harm while also exploring what consumption can do as a feminist practice, one that affords meaningful social connections, embodied pleasures and other generative capacities that are worth pursuing despite the risk of men's violence.

Conclusion

For many young people, including and perhaps especially women and gender diverse people, danger is part and parcel of the excitement and fun offered by alcohol and other drug consumption. While the young women and gender diverse people interviewed for this research attest to this, they were primarily concerned with a specific set of dangers: men's inappropriate conduct, unwanted male attention and the threat of gendered violence. Concerns about male violence and men's conduct generally shaped decisions about where to drink or take drugs and the character of this consumption, often resulting in restricted access to nightlife venues and the potential pleasures and benefits of different forms of intoxication (Bogren et al., 2024; Nicholls, 2017; Vaadal, 2020). Many policies and interventions are developed to address these harms; however recent analysis suggests that while ostensibly addressing some of the harms of alcohol and other drugs, they can be usefully understood as efforts to reduce the harms of men's violence specifically, without naming it as such (e.g. Duncan et al., 2022a; Farrugia, 2023; Farrugia et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2021). Our analysis has sought to build on these feminist insights, not solely by documenting harms related to men (of which our participants reported many), but by examining the fun, pleasure and other positive affective dynamics that these young women and gender diverse people articulated despite this risk.

For these young people, consumption events often held the promise of generative and meaningful experiences. As we argued, our participants routinely described socially oriented dynamics that contributed to highly valued forms of connection and care. We

also examined personally oriented dynamics that contributed to pleasurable forms of embodiment and the cultivation of valued agential capacities to affect and be affected. We examined these possibilities in the context of concerns about men's conduct to demonstrate the importance of considering what might be lost through interventions that target the consumption and comportment of all consumers as part of a project to address harms stemming from the actions of men. We argue that given this dynamic, responses to alcohol and other drugs may need a broader ambit, not solely invested in reducing harm but – inspired by the double vision of narcofeminism – enabling 'fully-lived' lives (Chang, 2023). In this sense, broad regulatory responses to alcohol and other drugs as well as more targeted youth-focused interventions such as drug education may need to not only acknowledge the potential benefits of consumption but also assume a role in supporting young people to assemble these affects if that is what they seek (see Farrugia [2023] for a related argument about school drug education).

While originating in activist criticisms of the gendered harms that stem from prohibition and governance of primarily illicit drugs, our analysis has begun to explore narcofeminism's potential to interrogate the gendered character of the governance of licit and illicit substances (Keane, 2023). While reducing harm is, of course, a laudable goal, many efforts to address alcohol and other drug-related harms currently position the desires and pleasures of those much less likely to commit violence as at best, less worthy of attention, and at worst, an acceptable sacrifice for a greater public health goal. The political and ethical orientation of narcofeminism offers much when reflecting on how to address this because it:

> . . . is oriented to building realities where women and gender nonconforming people are not only able to exist with drugs, but where their drug practices are valued for opening up new forms of care, connection and kinship. (Dennis et al., 2023a, p. 953)

A narcofeminist understanding of the affective dynamics analysed here demands that we value their role in producing positive, pleasurable experiences, even in efforts to reduce potential harms. As we have argued, a narcofeminist orientation can be identified in some of our participants' efforts to manage harms associated with men's conduct in consumption events. In many cases these efforts artfully managed to avoid sacrificing desire, pleasure and fun as part of reducing harm. Rather, they invested in more effectively and safely generating positive socially and personally oriented consumption possibilities. Inspired by this, we suggest that there is much to be gained by applying this double vision to efforts to address harm more generally. By balancing concerns about harm with the potential contribution of consumption to a meaningful life, such approaches can incorporate a reflexivity about their normative and gendered implications – including those that have ramifications beyond alcohol and other drug practices to inequitably position young women and gender diverse people as responsible for managing the harms of violent masculinities.

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Notes

1. In Australia, young people aged 18–35 are the most likely to report illicit drug consumption, with 35% (about 800,000) using drugs in the past year (2022–2023). Among those aged 14–17, 13.3% (around 200,000) reported drug consumption in the same period. While alcohol consumption has declined, 35% of young women and 27% of young men aged 14–17 drank alcohol in the past year (AIHW, 2024).
2. 'Drink spiking' is a popular term for Alcohol and Other Drug Facilitated Sexual Violence (Clinnick et al., 2024).
3. For up-to-date information about narcofeminist activism see the International Network of People who Use Drugs (INPUD): https://inpud.net/tag/narcofeminism
4. While we acknowledge that such affects are always manifold and do not wish to reproduce an untenable binary, our interpretive categories are a heuristic choice that reflects participant emphasis in descriptions of the capacities and possibilities that emerged through consumption.
5. For our participants, the category of 'men' generally refers to 'cisgender' men.
6. Many of the young men in this research expressed concerns about male physical violence and the risk of male sexual violence committed against young women. The dynamics of this concern require specific analysis that could not be addressed in this article but will be the subject of future analysis.
7. The young women in this research generally described their gender as 'female' or 'woman'.
8. Vyvanse® is a prescription medication used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

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Appendix A. Demographic characteristics of participants (*N*=22).

N=22	*n*
Age	
16–17	3
18–19	10
20	9
Self-identified gender	
Female	18
Non-binary	2
Trans	1
Agender	1
Self-identified sexual orientation	
Heterosexual or straight	11
Bisexual	7
Queer	3
Lesbian	1
State of residence	
New South Wales	7
Victoria	6
Queensland	4
Western Australia	5
Residential location	
Urban	17
Regional	5
Self-identified ethnicity	
Australian	15
Sri Lankan	1
Indonesian	1
Indian	1
Dutch	1
French	1
Lebanese	1
Vietnamese	1
Highest level of education completed	
Year 12	16
Year 11	3
Year 10	2
Year 9	1
Currently studying	
University	12
Secondary school	5
Not currently studying	5
Employment status	
Casual	13
Part-time	4
Full-time	1
Not working	4