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'You're in the alcohol Matrix, then you unplug from it, and you're like 'Wow''': exploring sober women's management, negotiation and countering of alcohol marketing in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Background: Alcohol marketing influences drinking practices, and this helps shape how gender identities are constructed. This paper presents research exploring how women who are sober manage and negotiate their non-drinking and sober identities in neo-liberal contexts that market alcohol products and consumption as a defining feature of feminine identities.

Methods: Semi-structured in-depth interviews ($n = 15$) and online content produced by sober women active in the positive sobriety community on the social media platform Instagram were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings: Women negotiated marketing messages within their everyday experiences of sobriety, with associations between drinking and *motherhood*, *female friendship* and *empowerment*, discussed as impacting their drinking, lived experience and sense of self. They negotiated such messages, and created alternative ways of 'doing femininity' as sober women, through distancing themselves from their previous drinking identities; rejecting, reworking and countering marketing that links alcohol use to femininity; and alternative consumption practices.

Conclusion: Instagram allowed women to publicly critique and counter marketing messages in ways that unlinked alcohol use, but not consumption more generally, from femininity, in traditional and news ways. Marketing regulation should consider how those experiencing problematic alcohol use may be particularly vulnerable to marketing messages, in ways that are gendered.

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Introduction

Increases in adult women's drinking has been one of the most significant trends in alcohol consumption in the UK over the last few decades (ONS, 2018, 2020; Slade, 2016; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009). There are various reasons for such changes, including the shifting social positions of women ('*Winning the right to drink freely*,' Schmidt, 2014, p. 582); the increased affordability of alcohol; the restructuring of the UK night time environment (NTE) towards deregulation and feminisation; and the targeting of women by alcohol marketing that positions brands and consumption as key markers of femininity and gender equality (Atkinson et al., 2022; Griffin et al., 2013; Schmidt, 2014). Indeed, much research has found that the adoption and rejection of alcohol brands, drinking practices and participation in drinking spaces are important to 'doing gender,' in ways that both challenge and reproduce the expectations inherent in normative and idealised constructions of femininity and masculinity (Atkinson et al., 2012, 2022; Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; de Visser & McDonnell, 2012; Griffin et al., 2013; Measham, 2002; Nicholls, 2019). Here gender is not considered an innate biological attribute (i.e. sex) but is positioned as a 'performance'; as something that we

'do,' rather than something that we 'are' (Atkinson et al., 2012). It is played out and accomplished in situated contexts, and finds stability in the repeated 'doing' of acts and expressions that are considered masculine and feminine, creating differences between genders, usually in binary terms (i.e. man or woman) (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1999). Thus, femininity is ideas, traits, behaviours and practices that society deems 'appropriate' and acceptable for women in their expression of womanhood. Such behaviours include normative and transgressive alcohol-related practice, which the media and marketing are important in reinforcing in gendered ways (Atkinson et al., 2012; Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Emslie et al., 2015; Nicholls, 2019).

The importance of consumption-based practices such as alcohol use to gender identity making is to be expected in a neoliberal society characterised by capitalism and individualism as central to identity making (Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019; Harvey, 2005). Within a supposed 'post-feminist' society in which gender equality is assumed, women's drinking, participation and expression of hyper-sexual or 'girly' femininities in public drinking spaces, have been framed as a form of 'empowered consumption,' and as evidence of social progress and women's right to choose, express and enjoy within

neo-liberal discourses of individualism, choice and empowerment (Gill, 2008; Gill & Scharff, 2013; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019). However, with femininity being a performance that requires consumption, individualism, and self-discipline, women have found themselves judged for making the 'wrong' consumer choices in their role as new consumers (Gill, 2007; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019; Vaadal & Ravn, 2021). Moreover, whilst compared to the past women now enjoy and participate in alcohol use, related leisure and intoxication for friendship bonding, pleasure and the collective expression of femininity (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019), alcohol has long been normatively framed as a masculine practice, and non-drinking associated with femininity (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012; de Visser & Smith, 2007; Schmidt, 2014). For example, women who drink have historically been accused of neglecting the traditional gender roles of wife and mother, for public displays of intoxication, for consuming alcoholic drinks regarded as masculine (i.e. pints), and for acting in ways labelled sexually promiscuous; all characteristics that challenge normative and idealised expectations of femininity that requires control, respectability and responsibility (Atkinson et al., 2022; Emslie et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019). Women must negotiate a complex climate of contradictory expectations that result from the tensions that exist between the demands of traditional 'respectable' femininity (i.e. (sexual) passivity, domesticity, nurturing, control); newer neoliberal and post-feminist expectations of (empowered) consumption, confidence, self-discipline, responsibility, authenticity and individualism; and new contemporary femininities that place emphasis on consumption, empowerment and equality, and in reclaiming the term feminist as a positive identity label (Atkinson et al., 2022; Day et al., 2004; Emslie et al., 2012; 2015; Griffin et al., 2013; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Nicholls, 2019). Against the backdrop of neo-liberalism, women must negotiate these tensions within a climate of pro-alcohol marketing that proliferate everyday life and disseminate a complex mix of traditional and newer feminine values (Atkinson et al., 2022).

In recent years, there is evidence of reductions in youth drinking in many countries (Kraus et al., 2018) and in the UK, there has been a rise of sobriety as a 'lifestyle choice' and the emergence of online 'positive sobriety' communities (e.g. *Sober Girl Society*, *Soberistas*). Such communities tend to be women focussed and emphasise the benefits of not drinking, rather than solely focussing on the negatives of alcohol use, in ways that stigmatise non drinking and label sobriety as a sign of 'addiction' or 'alcoholism.' Alongside the popularity of temporary abstinence initiatives (e.g. *Dry January*, *Sober October*) and the growing market of No and Low or *NoLo* alcohol products (i.e. products between 0.0 and 1.2% ABV), these developments suggest an increasing acceptability of not drinking in the UK and beyond (Alcohol Change, 2022; Davey, 2021; Herman-Kinney & Kinney, 2013; Nicholls, 2021, 2022; ONS, 2018, 2020; Pape et al., 2018; Yeoman, 2019). Research (Nicholls, 2021) has explored how sober women in the UK manage non-drinking identities in a society in which alcohol use and intoxication are otherwise normalised, and highlights that whilst sober women resist paradigms of

consumerism through abstinence, within a neo-liberal ideology, their identities continue to be defined by alternative consumer choices. However, little is known about how women experience sobriety within an environment of omnipresent alcohol marketing messages, and the implications for women who do not 'do' femininity through drinking in the ways marketing promotes.

Alcohol marketing, including that on social media, influences alcohol-related attitudes and behaviours, and this helps shape how gender identities are constructed (Alhabash et al., 2015; Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Carah & Brodmerkel, 2021; Jernigan et al., 2017; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009). In the UK, alcohol marketing is self-regulated through a reactive complaints-led system led by alcohol and advertising industries (e.g. Portman Group and Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)), as well as co-regulation with the Office of Communications (Ofcom). Codes prohibit the use of particular content and associations, for example, linking alcohol with sexual success and attractiveness, and the use of '*gender stereotypes that are likely to cause harm, or serious or widespread offence*' (ASA, 2019). However, these codes are occasionally breached and overall public engagement with the process is low (Alcohol Concern and Alcohol Research UK, 2018; Boniface et al., 2021).

Research is thus needed on how marketing messages are negotiated by those who do not drink, including people with experience of harmful or problematic alcohol use, who may be regarded as vulnerable to, and disproportionately affected by marketing messages (Boniface et al., 2021; Critchlow & Moodie, 2021). A limited number of small-scale studies have explored how non-drinkers interact with alcohol marketing in their everyday lives (Alcohol Health Alliance, 2021; Short et al., 2017). However, there remains a lack of in-depth research exploring how women who are sober negotiate (feminised) marketing messages. A recent analysis (Atkinson et al., 2022) of alcohol marketing posts on social media found that brand content framed alcohol use as an important component of the various traditional, post-feminist and feminist social roles that women occupy (i.e. mothers, friends, partners, workers, independent), and marketing associated alcohol with all aspects of their everyday lives and identities. Marketing content was highly feminised, including the 'pinking' of products (i.e. use of the colour pink to target women) and a focus on appearance, friendship bonding and motherhood, and alcohol use was associated with female empowerment. To date, it is unknown how women who do not drink alcohol negotiate such messages and their identities as sober women in a society in which alcohol use is entangled with the expression of femininity. Taking the perspective that femininity is a performance that can be enacted and accomplished through alcohol-related practice, and that this gendered identity work is neo-liberal and bound to consumption (Atkinson et al., 2021; Emslie et al., 2015; Nicholls, 2019), we draw on interviews with women who participate in the positive sobriety community on Instagram in the UK to address a number of questions. Firstly, we shed light on how women manage the omnipresence of alcohol marketing in their everyday lives, in ways that are gendered. Secondly, we explore how in doing so, women negotiated, reworked and

resisted alcohol marketing messages that position alcohol use as important to the performance of consumer based feminine identities. Thirdly, we outline how women actively aimed to counter commercial marketing messages through their online presence, and alternative consumption practices.

Methods

A total of 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews with non-drinking women from the UK who were active in the positive sobriety community on the social media platform Instagram were conducted. As discussed by Davey (2021, p. 2) in her review of the literature on non-12-step online communities, such spaces are female dominated and provide peer support, information and coaching services *'to those who want to renegotiate their relationship with alcohol, irrespective of where they are on the continuum of alcohol consumption.'* An important aspect of our participants' community experience was online documentation of their lived experience of sobriety, with emphasis on the benefits of sobriety rather than a focus on the negatives of alcohol use. Instagram enabled them to provide support to other women abstaining from alcohol as a 'lifestyle choice' or due to self-perceived problematic use. Four interviewees had full time jobs related to sobriety. Three had become 'sober coaches' or 'life coaches' since becoming sober, providing alcohol and mental health support to other women. One participant could be defined as an 'influencer' with a large social media following and one of a small number of innovators of the online positive sober community in the UK. The number of account followers ranged between 1,130 and 171,000. During the interviews, participants were asked to discuss their previous drinking patterns and reasons for abstaining, any barriers and challenges to sobriety, and the perceived positives aspects of not drinking. They were also asked to discuss the role of the online 'positive sobriety' community within their sobriety, the nature and purpose of the content they created and posted, and their views and experiences of how alcohol is marketed particularly towards women. Photo elicitation was used to gain views on examples of marketing extracted from a systematic search and analysis of alcohol brand content targeting women on Instagram and Facebook (Atkinson, 2022). These included images of marketing such as pink products, a focus on appearance, beauty, calories, female friendship and motherhood. Images were shown after women were asked to discuss examples of marketing they perceived as targeting women, to prevent influencing their initial discussion and opinions.

Participants were recruited through the project's Instagram account and using snowballing techniques. We followed participant's publicly accessible pages which were selected through searching Instagram for UK sober accounts. We sent a formal invite via message or the email provided on their Instagram page. A total of 24 women were contacted, with 13 agreeing to take part, and two assisting in arranging interviews with a further two women. One declined to take part due to a lack of time, three agreed but then did arrange a date to partake, and five did not respond to the

invite. Ages ranged between 25 and 50 years (most were in their 30s), and the amount of time women had been sober ranged from 3 months to 5 years. Women were located in various parts of the UK, including the North West and East, Midlands, the South East and Northern Ireland. The majority were white (one was British Asian, one Black British, and one British mixed) and heterosexual (one identified as bi-sexual). Most did not identify with a social class, but two defined themselves as working class and three middle class. Other research suggests that these support communities are generally participated in by the middle classes (Davey, 2021).

All women embraced sobriety as a defining feature of their identities and actively engaged in the positive sobriety community on Instagram. They labelled and presented themselves as 'sober,' to the researchers and in their Instagram content. As discussed, within online positive sobriety communities, the term sober is used in a way that does not necessarily indicate addiction (Davey, 2021; Nichols, 2021). The aim of these communities is to frame sobriety as a positive action and to remove the stigma related to the label, whether the individual has a problematic relationship with alcohol or not. However, all women participating in the research defined their relationship with alcohol as problematic, and considered problematic use as a spectrum and not a binary (Authors, in review; Morris et al., 2022). None reported a physical dependence (e.g. tolerance, withdrawal symptoms), but three self-described themselves as having previously been 'functioning alcoholics,' and one continued to self-define as such and attended the abstinence based self-help support group, Alcoholics Anonymous. Regardless of whether they used the term 'alcoholic,' all regarded their use as problematic in relation to its impact on their mental health, and discussed alcohol use as impacting on their relationships with partners and in some cases friendships, with loved ones expressing concern over their drinking. Mental health issues reported included depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and (social) anxiety. Four recalled receiving support for their mental health and three reported being prescribed anti-depressants. Some reported having drunk two-three bottles of wine per night to self-medicate for depression, (social) anxiety and stress (e.g. managing careers with motherhood), and many reported 'binge drinking' in the night time economy on a weekly (but not daily) basis, to the point of black-out, which heightened anxiety and worsened overall mental health. Those who had stopped consuming alcohol in the last 12 months reported abstaining following an escalation in their alcohol use and declining mental health during the COVID-19 lockdowns, and/or deciding to use the lockdowns as an opportunity to stop drinking. Whilst the nature of their problematic relationship varied, there were no differences in how women spoke about their sobriety in the context of marketing, other than in relation to supermarket shopping, and no differences in how they spoke about gendered ideals in relation to drinking. All used the terms sobriety and non-drinking interchangeably, and this is the approach taken in the analysis.

Other than one interview which was conducted in person, interviews were conducted online by the first and second authors via Microsoft Teams. Interviews lasted between 37

and 90 minutes (mean 63 minutes), which resulted in 16 hours of recorded discussion. Interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams. Automatic transcriptions were used as a guide and the recordings listened back to, and the transcription amended to provide a verbatim account. A thematic analysis was conducted in NVivo to develop patterns, themes and sub-themes through numerous close reading of the transcripts and discussion between researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2014). A coding frame was developed prior to analysis that included broad 'pre-determined' codes related to the research questions. These were initially applied to the data to organise discussions into broad categories, and included 'reasons for not consuming alcohol,' 'the extent and context of exposure to marketing during sobriety,' 'positive and negative attitudes to alcohol marketing,' 'the targeting of women' and 'marketing regulation.' They were then further developed and refined inductively. For example, women were asked their views on how alcohol brands associated alcohol use with motherhood, which were initially categorised as 'views on motherhood marketing.' This code was then refined to reflect the nature of conversations, which were dominated by discussions of what was perceived to be a toxic 'Mummy wine culture.' The code 'views on empowerment messaging' was refined to develop the theme 'a false sense of empowerment,' to capture women's discussions on the sense of empowerment they felt they had gained through sobriety and how this contrasted with marketing messages. Some themes such as 'alternative consumer identities,' were developed inductively. We also collected content posted on participant's Instagram accounts over a 12 month period using Crowdtangle software, which scrapes all textual, visual and interaction data for social media content posted on participants public facing accounts. This resulted in 1640 posts related to sobriety, which were exported into Microsoft Excel but only the textual content subject to same process of thematic analysis as the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2014). An integrative approach to thematic analysis was used, with new codes identified within the interview and Instagram post data, being included into the pre-determined frame, and then applied to previously and yet to be coded transcripts.

Findings

Three interlinked themes are presented. We begin by discussing the omnipresence of alcohol marketing in women's everyday lives and how they managed this in their day to day experiences of sobriety, in gendered ways. We then outline the various ways sober women negotiated, reworked and resisted marketing messages that associate alcohol use with femininity, and how they did so in ways that intertwined aspects of both traditional and newer femininities. Next, we outline how women outwardly discussed countering industry messaging in their online content, and how they established feminine identities through alternative consumer practices. Examples of interview discussions and Instagram posts using pseudonyms are drawn on when discussing each theme.

'It's everywhere': managing the omnipresence of alcohol marketing in everyday life

Sobriety led to a heightened awareness of the neo-liberal landscape of consumerism and marketing that dominates everyday life, in gendered ways. All participants expressed increased attentiveness to alcohol marketing, describing marketing messages as being 'everywhere' and 'around every corner,' and as having become 'hyper-aware' and 'tuned in' to the presence of alcohol promotions since becoming sober, and as will be discussed, their gendered nature. This included marketing on TV, radio, social media, billboards and posters, films and retail environments (e.g. supermarkets). They reflected on their past drinking selves in ways that suggested they had been 'blinded' to marketing and the normalisation of alcohol, and had gained agency and awareness since abstaining ('A couple of years ago I would have seen this and not even bat an eyelid,' Katherine, two years sober). This newly found awareness and control is exemplified by Macie (four years sober) who described that when consuming alcohol 'you're in the 'alcohol matrix,' and that 'you just don't see it. Then you unplug from it and you're like 'Wow!'" She went onto explain how she 'never thought of it that way at all. But like when you are aware out of it, you just see it, and also how clearly we are manipulated.' Similarly, Sophie (three months sober) described herself as previously being 'brainwashed' and becoming 'un-brainwashed' since abstaining, and like her, many expressed disbelief ('it's fucked up'; 'It's glamorized everywhere. It's madness') at the extent to which alcohol use is promoted in society. By distancing themselves from their former drinking selves, who they constructed as being influenced and manipulated by marketing, they were able to present their non-drinking selves as relatively informed; in control in ways that reflect traditional notions of femininity; and authentic, in ways that reflect neo-liberal femininities that celebrate individualism and authenticity.

The omnipresence of alcohol in all aspects of everyday life was difficult to escape, and whilst most felt that they had reached a point in their sobriety where they could manage the volume of marketing they were exposed to ('It doesn't really make me want to drink. It makes me sad and frustrated,' Lisa), many spoke of difficulties in the early stages and as struggling in particular (gendered) contexts. For example, some discussed past and ongoing difficulties shopping, and anger towards the visibility and availability of alcohol in supermarkets, stating that 'there's nothing safe, social and restricted about supermarkets selling unlimited amounts of alcohol 24/7' (Sophie, three months sober, online post). Those who used the language of 'alcoholism' to describe their past drinking, discussed having to continue to 'work at' their sobriety in the context of marketing. For example, Laura, who self-defined as an 'alcoholic' and stated that she 'struggled with her sobriety,' explained how at times she 'avoids' supermarket aisles and shopping, and that the presence of in-store alcohol promotions was 'something that I'm so heavily negotiating.' She described how 'this week I haven't even been able to go into the supermarket because the temptation is real,' and further expressed anger at supermarket strategies such as free samples. For example, she recalled having

recently been offered free alcohol *'right at the front door, and you couldn't get into the shop any other way than to go past.* Having made the decision to inform the manager that the store *'need[s] to think that one person could have walked in that store, had that piece of cider, and then lost their whole recovery,'* she remained sceptical that changes would occur due to the economic benefits of such tactics (*'supermarkets are just out to make money'*). As a single Mum it was difficult for Laura to avoid these contexts, and other women who were mothers and in relationships, also held responsibility for domestic shopping. Taking on traditional femininities that assume domestic duties as being the responsibility of women, consequently heightened their exposure to alcohol marketing.

Like others who expressed frustration at the diffusion of alcohol promotions beyond the alcohol aisle through food pairing (e.g. alcohol within 'meal deals') and seasonal displays (e.g. wine in the 'back to school' aisle, Christmas gift aisles), Laura noted how she was *'dreading Christmas because you go in and it's not just on the normal aisles, it's in all the aisles.'* This latter point highlights how participants felt heightened pressure in particular contexts and times of year, with seasonal associations within marketing being discussed as adding to the day to day pressures of being sober in British culture where alcohol is normalised. For example, Katherine, who defined herself as an 'alcoholic,' explained how marketing during the summer led to *'fleeting'* thoughts of drinking, which she described as *'never going away.'* She further expressed irritation at time related marketing, which is a highly gendered and commonly used in female targeted marketing (Atkinson, 2022), noting how *'there's wine o'clock, wine Wednesday, and thirsty Thursday. So basically, every day of the week, isn't it? Sometime Friday, Saturday, Sunday Funday. Like, it's just constant.'* It was not just brand marketing that they negotiated within their sobriety in gendered ways, but the wider consumer market, with many expressing frustration at the gift industry for products such as cards and novelty items, which they felt helped position alcohol use as a key marker of femininity. For instance, Susan (one year sober) discussed how it *'becomes really difficult when the only birthday card I can get one of my closest friends is either a black and white picture of two women that have fallen off a deck chair because they've drunk too much.'* Marketing in all its forms was thus felt to reflect and reinforce the normalisation of alcohol use in British society and feminine identity making, which some discussed as positioning non-drinkers as *'the other'* (Katherine), and as requiring day to day negotiation.

Individualised strategies were employed to manage exposure to alcohol marketing. As discussed, this included avoiding supermarket aisles and shopping, as well as using online advertising blockers to restrict exposure to adverts when using social media and the internet, taking *'social media breaks,'* and unfollowing alcohol-related accounts on social media to create *'sober streams.'* Many placed importance on their own agency in rejecting and critiquing marketing messages, and expressed the importance of *'resilience,' 'self-management'* and *'critical thinking'* in managing exposure to persuasive messages within their wider attempts at *'self-care.'* This focus on the self reflects neo-liberal approaches to

reducing alcohol-related harm through information provision and individual responsibility, and reproduces aspects of traditional and newer neo-liberal femininities that prioritise self-discipline and control. For example, Claire discussed how although she understood why people may block adverts online, she found marketing content *'interesting'* and had *'sort of flip[ped] it in my own head to consciously acknowledge stuff,'* which she expressed as being useful in supporting her abstinence. Similarly, Lisa felt that she was now at a stage where viewing marketing messages *'strengthens'* her sobriety, through providing a constant reminder of the false sense of empowerment associated with alcohol use in marketing. One participant (Samantha, four years sober) had moved to a country in which alcohol marketing was more strictly regulated compared to the UK, and where various forms of marketing were banned. She recalled how this more restrictive regulatory context was beneficial to her day to day negotiation of sobriety, and that she felt *'more protected'* from pro-alcohol messages. In comparison, when returning to the UK, she described how *'you sit on the tube and you're sitting for 20 minutes opposite alcohol ads, you turn on the TV, especially around Christmas, and it's relentless,'* and in turn she was supportive of more restrictive regulation.

Yet, unlike Samantha, most participants were unfamiliar with alcohol marketing regulation and some were initially shocked at what was felt to be a lack of regulation (*'you've just blown my absolute mind,'* Laura's response to the interviewer stating marketing is self-regulated). However, on reflection they expressed a lack of surprise through a capitalist critique (*'and what a surprise [sarcasm] we don't regulate the one thing that brings in a massive amount of income,'* Laura) and an interest in learning more about the self-regulatory system with the intention of placing complaints in the future. Whilst most felt strongly that alcohol marketing should be banned in a similar way to tobacco marketing (and including health warnings and labelling on products), some were of the opinion that alcohol was *'always going to be around'* and that bans were unlikely. As expressed by Laura, many felt that *'in my lifetime the battle won't be won on alcohol, but something somewhere has to be done, and I don't know what that is.'* This suggests a certain degree of acceptance that they must work at their sobriety and negotiate their sober femininities within a culture infiltrated with pro-alcohol messages that promotes consumption as a defining feature of contemporary femininities.

'It's bullshit, we need to stop feeding people bullshit': negotiating and reworking marketing messages that associate alcohol use with femininity

Particular marketing content that embedded alcohol use in the day to day lives and feminine identities of women were difficult for participants to negotiate. They discussed how these messages had impacted on their drinking and sobriety, how they now attempted to resist and rework them, and actively aimed to defy them through sobriety and in their online content. Marketing content that was regarded as most problematic, was that which made associations between

alcohol use and the feminine identities of *mother*, *female friend*, and the *empowered women*. Notions of control, respectability, responsibility, and empowerment were at play in women's negotiation of these messages, and in their performance of femininity as sober women.

'Mummy wine culture': associating alcohol with the identity and day to day stresses of motherhood

Firstly, associations between alcohol use and motherhood were felt to be particularly problematic. Participants with and without children referred to 'Mummy wine culture' as a feminine trend of concern that was encouraged by alcohol marketing, and consumer generated content on social media (e.g. content related to alcohol created and posted by consumers, including mothers and motherhood 'influencers'). Those who were mothers discussed how the stresses of motherhood had contributed to their own problematic drinking in a number of ways. This included alcohol use as a way of dealing with post-natal depression, mental health breakdowns as a result of managing their children's medical issues, and the general day to day pressures involved in parenting. In some cases, alcohol use provided a means of managing the mental strain that resulted from juggling the traditional domestic demands of motherhood, with the newer femininity of the empowered career women. Many provided examples of brands using the stresses of motherhood in their campaigns and viewed marketing as framing alcohol use to mothers as a form of stress relief. They openly discussed how associations between alcohol use and motherhood in marketing had impacted on their own drinking. *Samantha*, a mother of two children, described herself as a 'mum that had been caught in that Mummy wine culture':

You know, Instagram, especially, and Facebook, just this whole kind of culture, of women drinking around motherhood. And so it felt OK. What you weren't seeing... was the after-effects. So maybe they were only having one gin, but you know I wasn't. I was drinking a bottle of red wine, but it felt like 'yeah it was OK,' and then you sort of had the marketing that was around that as well. That was adding to that sort of acceptability of women kind of self-soothing, essentially the stress of motherhood with alcohol

(Samantha, four and a half years sober)

As shown in the extract above, she explained how associations between alcohol use and the identity of mother, through brand marketing and the 'honest parenting' movement on social media, had normalised and provided a justification for her problematic drinking. She recalled how through conversations with people working in marketing, she had learned that brands had promoted wine drinking in the home as a 'very intentional' attempt 'to attract the female market' and how, 'Mummy wine culture was quite a happy accident [that brands] took hold of and ran with it.' Whilst participants made a distinction between industry and consumer-generated content, they expressed anger at both, and judged and distanced themselves from women who actively participated in such content ('Oh my God let's all have a glass of wine, because we can't stand our own children'... it's actually really unhealthy... it's dangerous,' *Heather* mimicking and

commenting on women who generate such content). Such distancing reflects how women who drink have traditionally been judged for neglecting the gender role of mother, and the labelling of mothers who drink as irresponsible. Sober women presented their non-drinking femininities as controlled and responsibility in comparison, and thus aligned themselves more with traditional notions of femininity than newer femininities that promote alcohol use as a defining feature of motherhood (Atkinson et al., 2022; Emslie et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019).

Emma described how she had previously incorporated alcohol use into her ideal image of motherhood, and as having bought 'into the narrative that we're fed through product TV shows, adverts, soap operas':

So yeah, in my head [it was] 'I can't wait to have my kids then like, I'm gonna be the cool, got it together mum, but I'm also going to be a wild person, I'm not gonna lose my personality' and you know 'that's what we deserve because we're mums and it's really hard isn't it? So I'll definitely be having a wine when he's in bed'

(Emma, two and a half years sober)

Here she recalled how her identity as a mother had incorporated alcohol use as an act of empowerment, symbol of independence ('I'm not gonna lose my personality') and reward for managing the stresses of parenting ('deserve because we're mums and it's really hard isn't it? So I'll definitely be having a wine when he's in bed'). Whilst she aligned herself with newer constructions of femininity, drinking in this way had only exacerbated her problematic relationship with alcohol. Explaining how being sober meant she no longer felt 'impatient,' 'drained' and 'angered' by her son, she distanced her sober self from her drinking self, and framed her abstinence as having allowed her to gain control and agency in caring for her children. She thus aligned her non-drinking femininity as traditionally nurturing, and disentangled motherhood from alcohol use in ways that presented her sober femininity as relatively responsible.

'Mummy wine culture,' fuelled by marketing, was further discussed an impacting on women's experiences of sobriety, in that they had previously 'bonded' with other mothers through drinking and when becoming sober, had realised that they did 'not have much in common, apart from that their kids go to school together and they drink wine together' (*Helen*, two years sober). In turn, some found themselves without a friendship network, and not 'knowing how to make friends' without alcohol. Generally, all felt that within the sober community there was a 'huge huge push about Mummy wine culture,' which was considered a new phenomenon that positioned alcohol as a normalised aspect of contemporary motherhood, and as promoting the idea that 'you can't be a Mum without wine' (*Heather*, one year sober). This was also expressed in how women criticised adverts that linked alcohol to motherhood ('Why does alcohol seem to go hand-in-hand with female empowerment or motherhood?', *Macie*), including *Samantha* who posted that 'Is it any wonder that Mums drink when you see the marketing push that tell us. Mum = wine = it's a joke, it's stress relief, it's a way to bond, it's essential. Mums it's not you, it's alcohol. Alcohol is an addictive, depressant.' She openly discussed aiming to defy such

messaging in her online content, and in turn distanced herself from newer constructs of motherhood which are entangled with alcohol use as an expression of independence, female bonding and stress relief. She explained such defiance as spreading the 'core message of self-care' and countering marketing through messages that highlighted that 'things were better' without alcohol. Along with other women in the community, she discussed 'taking ownership' of messages that associated motherhood with alcohol, by highlighting how sobriety in motherhood could be 'fun and cool' and how not drinking had led to the feeling of being 'liberated,' in ways that contrasted with marketing discourse. She thus rejected the association between alcohol use, empowerment and independence, as key features of newer post-feminist and feminist constructions of femininity. Instead she performed her sober feminine self as more controlled and therefore more traditionally feminine, through connotations of self-resilience, in contrast to her drinking self, which she presented as being manipulated by marketing messages and wider drinking culture.

'False sense of empowerment': sobriety as an empowering act

Secondly, reflecting on their past relationship with alcohol, women discussed how marketing that associated alcohol use with empowerment, had influenced their drinking through informing their perceptions that drinking was an empowering act, and an expression of an empowered femininity. *Macie* discussed having viewed drinking as 'quite empowering and feminist,' and many made reference to the 'ladette culture' of the 2000s, which is popularly regarded as an example of post-feminist discourse (Griffin et al., 2013). Alcohol marketing had fed into the idea that women could be 'emancipated' (*Samantha*) by engaging in activities on equal grounds to men. *Macie* summarised this when explaining that drinking expressed the attitude that 'We can do what the boys can do. We can be as loud, we can be as brash,' and 'that's kind of what I did.' Similarly, *Helen* felt that many women believed alcohol use was a way to 'be equal to men,' which was also expressed by *Heather* who explained how she was 'a product of ladette culture and [drinking] was how I could show that I was empowered, and that's what a lot of this marketing did at the time' (*Heather*). These discussions highlight the importance they once placed on their right to participate in consumption practices and public leisure spaces to an empowered sense of femininity. The form of empowerment felt to be constructed by marketing was described with reference to drinking as an act and sign of being an 'independent,' 'strong,' 'sophisticated,' 'sexy,' 'cool,' 'confident,' and 'glamorous' women. Many drew on the popular TV programme and film *Sex and the City*, to exemplify the empowered femininity that they felt marketing constructed to position brands and alcohol use as a form and reflection of female empowerment and independence. *Macie* posted that in the past she had felt that 'what I drank said something about me,' and that included 'emulating' the drinking styles of characters in the programme, and a sense of

'sophistication.' The concept of specific drinks representing the individual by 'saying something' about the person, hints at the symbolic importance of drinks in feminine identity making, and the significance of lifestyle associations in consumer choices. Critically reflecting on the factors that had led to such association, she asked 'Where did I learn to associate alcohol with these lifestyles I was so desperate to emulate? Clever branding, marketing and advertising on the part of the alcohol industry.'

Others expressed an initial loss of empowerment when first becoming sober and a desire to maintain the youthful carefree identity they had acquired through their drinking and related lifestyles (Emslie et al., 2015). Whilst reporting difficulties ('it's really hard') in losing their previous 'empowered' 'party girl' identities, which were discussed as being curated in a way that falsely presented them as 'confident' and 'outgoing,' they expressed a sense of loss ('Who am I without that?', *Katherine*), and as embarking on a process of 'self-realisation' when becoming sober. In contrast, *Heather* expressed this transition as being less difficult, in that despite not drinking, she still maintained elements of her previous 'party girl' identity, by 'still going to all the parties' but in instead of 'doing the shots of tequila,' drinking 'non-alcoholic drinks... it's not that different.' Here she aligned herself with newer post-feminist and feminist femininities that associate women's participation in public space with female empowerment, and continued to perform her identity through engagement and consumption in with the night-time economy (Banister et al., 2019).

Whilst some women drew on the identity of the 'party girl' 'ladette,' others provided examples of brands 'tapping into feminism and tapping into being an emancipated woman' (*Samantha*). The influence of alcohol marketing in framing drinking as an empowering act and in symbolising an empowered sense of self was further discussed by *Lisa*, who critiqued the concept of 'Gindependent women,' a gendered term drawn on in marketing (Atkinson et al., 2022). She stated that 'gin isn't a personality trait' and described the concept as being similar to the notion of 'Boys will be boys' and as providing an 'excuse' for drinking among women, expressed through the thought process of 'Oh well you know, I'm a Gindependent woman.' Like others, she rejected and distanced herself from the entanglement of the right to consume alcohol with female empowerment and independence, and in turn rejected the performance of newer femininities that are bound up with popular conceptualisations of feminism (Gill, 2016). However, women did not distance themselves from an empowered femininity per se. Instead they contrasted the messages of empowerment in marketing with their lived experiences of drinking, to express how in comparison, alcohol use had led to a false sense of empowerment, which they felt they had reclaimed since becoming sober. Their views on the relationship between alcohol use and empowerment had changed, and on reflection, they felt that 'alcohol does the opposite to empowering us' (*Heather*). For example, *Samantha* described how in contrast to marketing, alcohol use was 'keeping women small,' and similarly *Laura* described alcohol as something that women 'hid' behind. This false sense of empowerment was explained as

providing a *'false sense of confidence.'* For example, *Heather* discussed how the *'Dutch courage'* she felt *'after a couple of drinks'* led to her feeling *'empowered'* but how since not drinking she felt that *'what's more empowering is choosing not to put that mask of alcohol on anymore and actually just being myself in that social situation.'* They discussed gaining self-confidence and acceptance through not drinking, and a sense of pride in their ability to socialise without alcohol. They thus rejected and disentangled associations between alcohol use, empowerment, and independence, and reworked the identity of the empowered women to associate empowerment with sobriety, in ways that were underpinned by self-resilience, confidence, authenticity and the taking up and reclaiming space; discourse prominent in the contemporary feminist movement (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009; Bowles Eagle, 2015).

Yet, the ways in which they distanced their sober femininities from their former drinking selves and *'ladette'* identities, also reflected traditional notions of femininity as controlled, respectable, and responsible. For example, sexual desirability was drawn on when discussing marketing messages in relation to their past drinking. *Laura* contrasted marketing messages that she felt *'pressurized'* women by *'making [alcohol] look sexy'* with her own experiences of drinking. She recalled occasions when drinking as having her *'knickers halfway down [her] ankles in the street having a piss,'* which in comparison to marketing and her current non drinking status, she labelled as *'not very sexy.'* Here she unlinked drinking from a sense of empowerment and sexiness, yet by stating that her past drinking self was not *'sexy,'* she reproduced sexual desirability as an idealised expression of femininity, in ways that reflect newer post-feminist and fourth wave feminist femininities that frame active sexual expression as an act of empowerment (Atkinson, 2022; Emslie et al., 2015). However, by distancing herself from these past behaviours and judging her drinking self for public displays of intoxication that were deemed unsexy, she also performed her sober femininity in a traditional way, by emphasising her current respectability and control through not drinking. Despite judging her past self, she also placed responsibility of the alcohol industry, when reflecting on differences between marketing messages and her own and other sober women's experiences of drinking. She explained that it was *'very irresponsible'* for brands to position alcohol use as empowering through presenting consumption as an expression of *'sexiness'* and *'having it all'* (McRobbie, 2009, 2020; Vaadal & Ravn, 2021). Passionately concluding that *'it's bullshit, we need to stop feeding people bullshit,'* she again contrasted marketing messages with her experience of sobriety, stating that she had gained *'more confidence'* since becoming sober. Here alcohol use is unlinked from post-feminist and feminist discourse that presents drinking as a form of consumption that denotes independence and empowerment. Instead the self-confidence and control gained through sobriety is presented as an empowering alternative, but in ways that are also aligned with traditional notions of femininity as controlled, responsible and respectable.

The impact alcohol had on their sense of self and mental health was also discussed as disempowering, and again

contrasted with the associations between drinking and female empowerment depicted in marketing. This is highlighted by *Katherine* who explained how *'at first [alcohol] empowered me'* through connotations of empowerment through female friendship: *'Because, the girl gang thing, bottomless brunches with my friends, all my girlfriends together, doing the little boomerangs and getting ready and like all that, it does empower you.'* However, she went on to note that alcohol had become *'detrimental to [her self-worth, self-respect and confidence]'* and how it had made her *'anxious [and] depressed.'* By describing those emotions as *'not empowering'* she unlinked alcohol from constructions of an empowered femininity through connotations of lacking control over her emotions and mental health, in ways that reproduced traditional notions of controlled femininity.

In contrast to their drinking selves, sobriety and its expression and celebration on Instagram was viewed as an act of *'empowerment'* and even (feminist) *'activism'* itself. For example, *Samantha* explained how alcohol had kept her *'small and imprisoned'* and had *'stopped me from doing what I wanted to do,'* and how sobriety was *'the most empowering thing you can do as a woman.'* They drew on this message of sobriety as empowering in their online content, with the aim of countering marketing messages and *'empowering women to not drink'* (*Heather*). This is exemplified in how *Macie* discussed her online content as deliberately *'reclaiming... the vibe that we are sold, of what alcohol gives us, [and] that actually you can do this [socialise] and you don't need to pay for alcohol, it's all there within you and you can still have exactly the same stuff.'* She rejected associations between alcohol use and empowerment, but performed an alternative empowered femininity through her sobriety and the self-confidence and strength she presented as being *'within'* her. Again this reflected a contemporary feminist discourse of self-resilience and confidence (McRobbie, 2020), but again, at the same time, allowed her to perform a controlled femininity in a traditional sense.

'I'm with my besties, Girl Power, Girl Gang. It brings people together': promoting alcohol through female friendship

Lastly, marketing was felt to frame alcohol use as an essential component of female friendship and bonding, which inadvertently positioned drinking as crucial to being labelled *'fun,'* and a *'good'* female friend. *Lisa* discussed how marketing presented alcohol as the *'holy grail of friendships'* and *Macie* described marketing as framing alcohol *'as the ultimate bonding tool.'* Overlapping with messages of empowerment, *Melissa* expressed how marketing fed into the feeling of being *'empowered because I'm with my besties, Girl Power, Girl Gang. It brings people together.'* Such marketing had made their sobriety more difficult to navigate, and many discussed friendship associations as acting as a barrier to women reducing their drinking or attempting sobriety, due to fears of being labelled *'boring,'* *'missing out'* and losing friends. A wish to incorporate participation in collective fun in public life and female friendship and even sisterhood, into their femininities, as contemporary post-feminist and feminist women (Gill,

2015), thus implicated their desire to be sober. For example, Heather discussed how *'a lot of people struggle to get sober in the beginning because they worry that they won't have any life if they don't drink,'* and Macie recalled how abstaining was initially not an option for her as *'it would be the end of my social life.'* Others worried about friends changing their perceptions of them, as exemplified by Abby, when recalling how before becoming sober she had wrote a list of *'what's stopping you from not drinking,'* with *'I don't think anyone will like me anymore and people won't want to be my friend'* being placed at the top of her list. Such concerns were further exemplified by Katherine, who explained how when women within the community sought support from her, they often expressed concern over the impact on their friendships:

If you were to pin that down to something, it's stuff like this [marketing], that's reinforcing that belief that you can't go sober, you can't question your relationship with alcohol, because your friends are going to be annoyed at you because you're not going to be able to have crazy nights out anymore, and like chat rubbish in the toilets. And like you know, cry to each other about your problems and have all these heart to hearts. It's reinforcing this idea that everyone needs to drink in order for everyone to have a good time.'

(Katherine, two years sober)

She discussed how marketing feeds into these concerns, by framing alcohol use as important to female bonding (*'chat rubbish in the toilets,' 'have all these heart to hearts'*) and friendship fun (*'you're not going to be able to have crazy nights out anymore,' 'It's reinforcing this idea that everyone needs to drink in order for everyone to have a good time'*), and recalled her own concerns of being perceived as *'boring.'* Melissa also reflected on her experiences of friendship when sober, concluding that marketing that presented alcohol use as a defining feature of female friendship and bonding were false (*'That is actually a load of shit'*), and that in reality she had experienced a better connection with friends without alcohol, and had become a *'better'* friend since becoming sober. She thus disentangled alcohol use from friendship, but maintained the importance of being perceived as a *'good'* and *'fun'* female friend to her sense of self and femininity. Whilst many initially felt that sobriety threatened this identity, some had managed these anxieties by continuing to enact their right to consume by participating in drinking occasions with friends, through consuming NoLo alcohol products and *'mocktails,'* which disguised their non-drinking. These alternatives provided a sense of inclusion in the collective performance of femininity, friendship fun and female bonding, that nights out drinking provided, whilst also allowing them to remain in control of their sobriety. This highlights how women who do not *'do'* femininity through (alcohol) consumption practices as prescribed by marketing, actively worked to avoid being negatively labelled as *'boring'* and as appearing *'up for it'* in line with newer post-feminist and feminist constructions of femininity (Griffin et al., 2013; Gill, 2015; McRobbie, 2009), whilst remaining in control in ways that reproduced more traditional notions of femininity.

Women further expressed feeling *'Othered'* and *'shamed'* (*'sober shaming is a real thing'; Jane*) for not drinking and recalled how in the early stages of their sobriety, friends had

been *'surprised'* and *'shocked'* by their decision to stop drinking, and had interpreted it as a *'phase'* and a short term decision. Some discussed how initially friends had placed pressure (*'people would go like you know 'Just have one. You know you'll be fine' Melissa*), often unconsciously, on them to drink in certain contexts (e.g. at weddings) and regularly quizzed them on when they were going to take up drinking again. Such responses were felt to be reinforced by marketing messages that reduce female friendship, social interaction and fun to alcohol use (Atkinson et al., 2022). They discussed how for some women, a fear of missing out and being labelled boring, impeded sobriety with them being *'sucked back into the romanticism of alcohol'* (Poppy, two years sober). They therefore used their online platform to counter marketing messages that equate drinking to fun, to prevent marketing creating anxiety among women and a pressure to drink. They did this by actively addressing the myth of non-drinking as *'boring'* (*#sobernotboring*), emphasising their vibrant social lives as sober women (*'Some people think that going sober will make life boring, well those people are WRONG*

♀ *Your whole life will open up and become so FULL when you stop drinking!!!!'* Katherine, online post) and opening up dialogue on how to manage concerns over changing friendships and pressures from friends (*'Adult friendships quite often become built around alcohol, so when you choose to remove that from your life you may start to feel like your friends are dissolving,' Poppy, online post*). By doing so they prevented themselves from being negatively labelled *'boring'* and disentangled alcohol use from the perception of fun and popularity; instead presenting sobriety and their sober identities in a *'positive'* and *'fun'* manner, again in ways that reflect *'up for it'* and empowered femininities through sociality. Moreover, they actively provided a source of support by contributing to a community where women contemplating or practicing sobriety could make *'new,' 'amazing'* and *'likeminded friends'* through online interaction, and virtual and in person social events. By creating new friendships with women *'like them,'* they were able to enjoy the value these alternative female friendships without fear of social judgement, and performed a collective feminine identity in a way that celebrated, rather than Othered, sobriety.

'Don't mess with the sober community': creating alternative consumption identities and actively countering industry messaging

Given the centrality of alcohol use in UK society, participants were aware that their non-drinking status positioned them outside of normalised and expected consumption practices that link alcohol use to the expression of contemporary neoliberal feminine identities. The pervasiveness of alcohol marketing was perceived as heightening this sense of difference, as expressed by Katherine, who explained that *'because society is set up so that [alcohol] is the norm and everyone else is like the other. And marketing reinforces that, so I'm really, really passionate about defying it.'* In response, all celebrated their sobriety and sober femininities, and actively aimed to highlight the positives of non-drinking, and alternative

consumption practices within their identity making, in their online content as a counter narrative.

Some spoke of embracing their sobriety and referred to it as a 'statement' and a form of 'rebellion' in feminist ways, in that they resisted expected norms and commercial marketing messages that promote alcohol as a defining feature of consumer based femininities. For example, *Samantha* explained how looking back she 'was just following the crowd, you know, it was an incredibly kind of rebellious act to stop drinking that really worked for me. It was just like, 'OK, let's like do this. I'm going to get a tattoo. Do you know I'm gonna' like rock this kind of sobriety'. *Macie* also discussed a resistance to the industry in a way that drew on feminist discourse when discussing feeling empowered by rejecting industry messaging. She stated that with 'the top of the [industry] chain [being] like eight billionaire white men, it kind of feels more empowering, that actually I'm not spending every weekend crying because of a product of theirs that, they're getting financial gain from,' and went onto explain how 'with the money saved, [she was] been able to buy things and feel more financially empowered.' Here we see how despite rejecting alcohol use as a consumer based feminine identity, in a neo-liberal society, their femininities remained defined through market-based goods and acts (Gill, 2015; Nicholls, 2021). As demonstrated, whilst they aligned themselves with more traditional understandings of femininity such as control and rejected alcohol use as a form of consumption, in a market based society, they enacted newer constructions of femininity which emphasised empowerment through the right to consume, but in alternative (gendered) ways. For example, they discussed spending the money saved through not drinking on traditionally feminised consumer items such as makeup, engaging in 'self-care' through yoga, exercise classes and massages, and NoLo use. The latter exemplifies the relationship between resistance and conformity to consumer-based feminine identities. All consumed such products, and felt that they provided a degree of 'inclusivity' through continued participation in the dominant alcohol culture through partaking in group drinking occasions, in feminine ways. This included the individual and collective display of 'aesthetically pleasing' NoLo products in their performance of femininity on social media, in similar ways to their past drinking selves and women who consume what are regarded as traditionally 'feminine' drinks (e.g. pink drinks, cocktails) in their performance of hyper-girlie femininities (Atkinson et al., 2022; Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Emslie et al., 2015).

Yet a degree of resistance was also at play in their accounts of these alternative consumption practices, with the role of 'big alcohol' (i.e. multinational alcohol producers) in the NoLo market being debated. Many drank products produced by the alcohol industry and felt that it had a role to play in the 'movement' and 'revolution,' terms that suggested resistance to the dominant culture, by normalising non-drinking. A small number acknowledged this role, but also resisted alcohol industry involvement and choose not to consume and/or collaborate as 'influencers' with corporations who also produced alcohol. *Macie* used her online presence to instigate debate around this dilemma, asking her large following 'Should we be buying alcohol-free drinks from the alcohol

industry?' She further explained to the researcher that the role of big alcohol in sobriety was 'a really hard one for me because... alcohol free drinks are so important for harm reduction for a lot of people. And if it is by those big brands, it's by those brands... [but] I prefer to support the smaller independent ran [brands]. This is something I'm still working through in my own head.' Others expressed respect at the 'commitment' of such women 'to the cause,' but recalled that they could not personally limit their use of NoLo products to those produced by non-alcoholic companies, expressing that 'I don't think I have that capacity to be able to be that' (*Nicola*, one year sober), as the easy accessibility of NoLos was important in maintaining control in their sobriety. Their feminine identities therefore first appeared to be resistant to commercial messaging, but through their NoLo use and presenting such products as an important feature of sobriety in their online gender performance, they created feminine identities that were controlled and unlinked from alcohol in a traditional sense, but linked to consumption and right to consume in new alternative ways.

More active resistance to commercial messaging as a feature of their non-drinking femininities was observed in how a small number explicitly discussed using their online account to criticise alcohol industry messaging, and when asked, all considered their accounts as counter narratives to industry messaging. As noted, most were not familiar with the self-regulatory system of public complaints, but discussed many examples of women complaining to supermarkets ('people will go out and they will take pictures and they will actually message the supermarkets'; *Jane*), and the sharing of adverts deemed problematic within the community:

Oh yes, don't mess with the sober community. There was one [alcohol advert] recently and it was an aisle of soft drinks, and I think it was gin or something, that they put it within the soft drinks to try and promote it because it was a mixer and it's like 'No, these are soft drinks. It shouldn't go there.' People are definitely becoming more aware

(*Jane*, three years sober)

Here *Jane* gives an example of women taking action and expressing anger within the community towards an alcohol product being placed within food aisles in supermarkets following a specific marketing campaign. Recalling how many women had complained, she concluded that you 'don't mess with the sober community,' suggesting a unified identity representing a collective of women who were willing to question industry tactics. Some expressed a need to hold the industry to 'account,' and drew attention to the harms marketing and industry discourse can cause. For example, they expressed annoyance at the neo-liberal industry narrative of 'drink responsibly,' which was viewed as overlooking the realities of women like them who were unable to control and moderate their drinking, in turn placing blame for problematic drinking onto the individual, and ignoring marketing influence itself. Whilst acknowledging how their drinking transgressed traditional notions of femininity that celebrates control, rather than placing blame on themselves through neo-liberal discourses of individual responsibility, they drew attention to influence of commercial determinants. For

example, Katherine hinted at an inherent contradiction in placing responsibility on the individual in a society in which alcohol is heavily promoted, stating that *'It's like drink this responsibly, but be warned it will make you irresponsible [laughs] It's just so backwards. But obviously, it shifts the blame off them, doesn't it?'*

Despite such negative views towards the industry, Macie highlighted a relative lack of industry critique in the sober community and wider society more generally, and presented her own femininity as feminist in comparison through challenging the status quo. For example, she posted that *'we aren't willing to talk about the alcohol sponsorship of football which feeds the fire, we aren't willing to talk about why alcohol is a feminist issue (clue: because it exacerbates the already disproportionate violence we face as women) and we aren't willing to talk about holding these billion dollar brands accountable. Stating that 'everyone likes to come for Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk but we're letting the billionaire owners of big booze companies (whose products literally kill us) slip under the radar,' she aimed to encourage the community to consider the role of industry in alcohol-related harms. Despite such attempts she expressed a certain degree of dejection with what she felt to be a lack of industry critique within the community relative to other issues, recalling how she had 'tried to get people interested in the social issues side of the alcohol industry. But it's a push... people want the exciting fun side of sobriety. They don't necessarily want to engage in these issues. I genuinely think it's because they're not sexy enough yet.'* In contrast, others appeared to carefully manage their critiques of industry alongside the normalisation of alcohol in society, and although they encouraged sobriety as a valid feminine identity and drew attention to alcohol-related harm, they expressed a desire not to be labelled as *'anti-alcohol'* and *'preachy'* by drinkers. This further suggests a wish not to be labelled *'boring'* (Banister et al., 2019), and an attempt to distance themselves from traditional temperance femininities of advocating and campaigning for sobriety at the population level (Warner, 1997). Therefore, despite some women framing their sobriety as a statement and act of resistance in ways that reflected contemporary feminist femininities, some were more active than others in critiquing industry discourse, and many wished to distance themselves from connotations of sobriety that challenged their *'fun'* and *'up for it'* femininities.

Discussion

The research provides important insight into the day to day negotiation of non-drinking femininities among sober women and considers how such negotiation takes place within the omnipresence of (gendered) alcohol marketing messages (Alcohol Health Alliance, 2021; Short et al., 2017). It further contributes to research exploring how women who self-identity as sober *'do'* and negotiate their non-drinking status (Davey, 2021; Nicholls, 2021) in neo-liberal societies that promote alcohol products and consumption as defining features of feminine identities (Atkinson et al., 2012, 2017, 2022). Unlike other research with non-drinkers that found many actively rejected the *'sober'* label (Banister et al., 2019), all

women in this study had embraced sobriety as a defining feature of their identities. They aimed to celebrate their non-drinking status in ways that were highly gendered, and within a community that was highly feminised, to open up physical and/or digital spaces where sobriety was not judged, and where the positives of non-drinking could be celebrated. However, marketing messages implicated their past and current performance of femininity, and they negotiated, challenged and reworked these in relation to alcohol consumption, in ways aligned with traditional (e.g. control, respectability) and newer post-feminist and feminist constructions of femininity (e.g. empowerment, independence, confidence).

Firstly, they challenged and critiqued marketing that associates alcohol use with women's empowerment and equality, and as such alcohol consumption as a form of empowered consumption (Griffin et al., 2013; Vaadal & Ravn, 2021). They felt that in the past, such messages had influenced them to drink as an expression of empowerment (Nicholls, 2019), and having become sober, they now challenged this notion, and viewed alcohol use and marketing messages as providing a *'false sense of empowerment.'* Instead, the confidence and control gained through not drinking was viewed as empowering, and they aimed to support other women in their sobriety by countering marketing underpinned by empowerment messages, and by promoting non-drinking as an expression of empowerment itself, in their online content. They unlinked drinking with the identity of the empowered women and distanced themselves from their younger past *'post-feminist'* *'ladette'* identities that incorporated consumption as an expression of independence, empowerment, and gender equality (Griffin et al., 2013; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007). Instead they gained a sense of empowerment through maintaining control by non-drinking, but in ways that reproduced discipline as defining feature of traditional and neo-liberal femininity.

Moreover, at times they distanced themselves from their former drinking behaviour in public space when younger, in ways that reflected public discourse that criticises women's public displays of intoxication as *'out of control'* and *'unfeminine,'* and as such transgressing traditional femininity. In turn they positioned their sober femininities as relatively mature, feminine, controlled, respectable and responsible (Griffin et al., 2013), which highlights how gender is performed differently at specific life-phases. These accounts inadvertently reproduced not drinking as a form of self-governance aligned with traditional discourse that equates sobriety with idealised notions of femininity (Emslie et al., 2015; Vaddal & Dahl, 2021a, 2021b), but at the same time, were underpinned by what could be labelled a contemporary neo-liberal feminist discourse, that focusses on individual empowerment, confidence and resilience (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2020; Retallack et al., 2016; Rivers, 2017; Schraff, 2020). For example, women compensated for their lack of drinking through neo-liberal discourses of *'self-care,'* *'self-development'* and *'confidence'* (Atkinson et al., 2022; Gill, 2016; Rivers, 2017) and engaged in alternative consumer practices and products as a form of self-care and expression of self (Nicholls, 2021). This reflects the neo-liberal

underpinning of mainstream contemporary feminism, and how mainstream feminist discourse reflects and reproduces that of post-feminism, in ways that are compatible with neo-liberalism as a form self-governance (Atkinson et al., 2022; Gill, 2016). At the same time, they called into question the increasing use of gender equality messages in female targeted alcohol marketing (Atkinson et al., 2022), and to some extent rejected the commercialisation of women's empowerment as a defining feature of contemporary feminism (Gill, 2016; Rivers, 2017). The findings therefore provide broader insight into the work involved in performing feminine identities in neo-liberal societies dominated by consumption, and in a shifting social-political climate in which post-feminist and new feminist rhetoric co-exist (Atkinson et al., 2022; Gill, 2016; Rivers, 2017; Harvey, 2005).

Whilst rejecting drinking as a defining feature of their feminine identities, some expressed difficulties in transitioning beyond their previous 'party girl' identities and a desire to maintain the youthful carefree identity they had acquired through drinking (Emslie et al., 2015; Vaadal & Ravn, 2021; Vaadal & Dahl, 2021a, 2021b). They discussed having previously worked hard at maintaining this identity when becoming mothers, using alcohol to retain a sense of 'me' and independence. Alcohol use had played an important role in allowing them to juggle multiple co-existing traditional femininities (i.e. mother, party girl) and responsibilities, whilst maintaining a coherent sense of self and independence; a role that marketing was felt to promote. This reflects the work of Emslie et al. (2015), on the drinking practices of women in early midlife. The authors found that drinking both within the home and with friends in nightlife spaces, allowed women to reclaim their former youthful, carefree and independent feminine identities and gain 'time out' from their older responsible and domesticated selves. For the women in our study, this desire to reclaim their past selves had escalated their drinking in ways they described as problematic and incompatible with the demands of motherhood. In turn, they rejected post-feminist discourse that women could '*have it all*' (McRobbie, 2007; Vaadal & Ravn, 2021), whilst distancing themselves from popular critiques of mothers who drink as neglectful of their domestic responsibilities (e.g. 'bad mothers'; Nicholls, 2021). This paradoxically reproduced traditional notions of femininity that prioritise the needs of others (i.e. children) and sobriety as a feminine virtue (Emslie et al., 2015), whilst reclaiming and reworking the feminine identity of the empowered women, through the new discourse of sobriety as empowering previously discussed.

As an extension of associations between alcohol use and empowerment, associations between alcohol use and female friendship (Atkinson et al., 2022) appeared to impede women's sobriety. Not only did participants discuss such messages as a barrier to abstaining in the first instance due to the fear of losing friends, being excluded from social gatherings, and impeding a sense of friendship bonding (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016), but they negotiated such messages on an ongoing basis, and felt they contributed to some women instigating alcohol use after periods of sobriety, despite a wish to abstain. Women countered these messages in their online content to prevent marketing that reduces friendship fun to

alcohol use creating anxiety among women and a pressure to drink. They did so by displaying their active social lives and identities without alcohol, and providing opportunities for women to extend their friendship networks and social capital with other sober women both on and offline (Nicholls, 2021). This, along with ongoing participation in the NTE and NoLo use, allowed them to continue to partake in the collective performance of femininity and benefit from the value of female friendship, whilst avoiding the label '*boring*' and instead maintaining a '*fun*' and '*up for it*' femininity' (McRobbie, 2007; Vaadal & Ravn, 2021), in the absence of alcohol use. Thus, these online communities provided an opportunity for women to successfully '*reclaim*' the traditional messaging of alcohol marketing as essential to female friendship, by creating a counter narrative of how fulfilling, authentic (Nicholls, 2021) and fun, sober friendships could be.

The findings have a number of important considerations for policy. Firstly, they support other research (Nicholls, 2022) that concluded that whilst the expansion of the NoLo market may bring challenges, the potential role of these products in supporting moderate and non-drinking should not be disregarded. NoLos allowed women to continue to engage in alcohol related consumer activities (i.e. inclusion in drinking environments) (Nicholls, 2022), and the expression of femininity through the symbolic meaning attached to 'feminine' drinks (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016). However, Nicholls (2022) found evidence of problematic marketing practices by NoLo brands, particularly for products produced by alcohol corporations, and women in this study similarly debated the role of '*big alcohol*' corporations in the market and sober community more generally. This included the potential harm of 'alibi' marketing (Purves & Critchlow, 2021), which is said to allow companies to promote their alcoholic products and wider brand in new contexts, and to new and potentially vulnerable consumer groups (Nicholls, 2022). The research suggests a need for further consideration of how this new market is regulated (Nicholls, 2022). Future research should consider both the benefits and challenges of the NoLo market, and the use of such products with a larger and more diverse sample of individuals engaged in various forms of support for harmful alcohol use (e.g. mutual aid, community and residential treatment), as well as those not currently engaged in services.

Secondly, the research provides further evidence of how the persistent marketing of alcohol, can impede sobriety (Alcohol Health Alliance, 2021; Short et al., 2017). For example, women expressed pressure to consume alcohol from occasion marketing and seasonal associations, which led to the exposure of alcohol products beyond the alcohol aisle in retail environments. Along with the proliferation of marketing messages through traditional (television, billboards, radio, supermarkets) and social media (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, pop ups), the gift industry, which currently falls outside of regulatory control, also added to the wider environment in which women were exposed to pro alcohol messages in retail settings (e.g. card and gift aisles). With women being more likely to purchase household shopping in retail settings such as supermarkets (Statista, 2020),

they are particularly prone to exposure to marketing messages. Retail marketing and availability is currently being addressed in Ireland through the compulsory separation of alcohol products and advertisements in licensed premises from general grocery areas as part of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act (Department of Health, 2018). As recently suggested by Alcohol Focus Scotland (2022), this approach is an important consideration for UK policy.

Thirdly, participants interpreted alcohol marketing as conveying associations between drinking, 'sexiness', sexual confidence and popularity; associations that would in breach self-regulatory codes that prohibit alcohol from being associated with 'sexual success,' 'attractiveness,' and 'social success,' if confirmed by regulatory boards (ASA, 2022a, 2022b; Portman Group, 2022). Moreover, whilst self-regulatory ASA (ASA, 2020a, 2020b) codes prohibit brands from presenting alcohol use as 'overcome[ing] boredom, loneliness or other problems,' or as 'implying 'therapeutic properties' or 'changing mood,' it is unclear as to whether framing that was interpreted as associating alcohol use with the stresses of parenting, would breach the codes. Such associations should be considered by the Advertising Standards Association as part of their process of evidence base policy making (ASA, 2022c). It is important to add that while women's interpretations of marketing messages appear at odds with a number of self-regulatory codes, they did not provide concrete examples of marketing that would clearly be in breach, and generally were unaware of the existing reactive complaints based system. Women who are sober and actively embracing non-drinking as part of their feminine identities, may have more critical awareness and invested interest in critiquing marketing content and its effect. Yet their general lack of awareness of the current system sheds light on the limits of the effectiveness of a system that depends on public awareness and engagement. Lastly, the research draws attention to the increasing importance of user-generated and 'influencer' content to the industry. For example, content created by women within the online motherhood community has the potential to be more relevant and influential as it is created by women with similar experiences, yet unless shared by or created in collaboration with brands on social media, user generated content currently falls outside of the UK self-regulatory codes (Boniface et al., 2021). Research is needed to explore the role and influence of online parenting communities and content in the normalisation of alcohol within everyday experiences of motherhood, and the value of these grass roots online spaces in disseminating alternative messages.

A number of limitations must be acknowledged. First, images and videos posted alongside text in Instagram posts were not analysed due to time limitations. Second, it is important to reflect on the different purposes and contexts in which interview and Instagram data was created. Both involve identity work on behalf of the participant, but interview data is a product of one on one interaction with researchers who were outsiders to the online sober community, and an outcome of participants being asked to reflect in depth on their lived experience of alcohol, sobriety and marketing, confidentially and for the purposes of research. Instagram posts are short and more concise textual and

image based forms of communication specifically targeted to other sober or sober curious women who participants defined as 'like minded'. In contrast to interview data, Instagram posts rarely overtly discussed the role of alcohol marketing, which suggests a critique of marketing is not currently a common discussion within the community. Despite such differences, there were clear similarities between the topics and issues discussed between both sets of data, for example, both focused on friendship, motherhood and empowerment. Third, whilst the research gained in depth insight into women's experiences, findings cannot be generalised to all women who embark on sobriety and participate in the online positive sobriety community. That said, the findings reflect that of other research (Alcohol Health Alliance, 2021; Nicholls, 2021; Short et al., 2017), and many participants highlighted similarities in the experiences of women in the community, and the value of the community in providing access to others with similar life experiences, lifestyles and views. Last, the experiences of women may differ from those of men and other genders, and it is important that future research explores the intersectional experiences of those participating in these communities, and their relationship with alcohol marketing, to gain insight into the intersectional inequalities at play.

Conclusion

By contributing to the normalisation of alcohol use in society and drinking as important to feminine identity making, alcohol marketing can act as a barrier to sobriety and must be negotiated by women who do not drink in their performance of femininity. Online spaces such as Instagram allowed women to publicly critique and counter marketing messages, and provided a way of creating alternative ways of 'doing femininity' as sober women. Like drinking women, sober women negotiated a complex climate of contradictory expectations in their performance of femininity, that result from the tensions that exist between the demands of traditional 'respectable' femininity, and newer neoliberal, post-feminist and feminist expectations of the empowered women.

Alcohol use was unlinked from femininity in traditional and new ways, but consumption was not (Nicholls, 2021). All considered their online content as aiming to counter marketing messages that promote alcohol as an essential and normalised cultural activity, and as important to women's identity making. The use of online platforms (Davey, 2021) to disseminate alternative messages to those that promote alcohol use, have a role in supporting those who do not drink, drink little, or wish to drink less, and in contributing to the increased normalisation and de-stigmatisation of non-drinking in UK society more generally (Alcohol Change, 2022; Davey, 2021; Herman-Kinney & Kinney, 2013; Nicholls, 2021, 2022; ONS, 2018, 2020). Overall, the findings add to previous research and commentary that suggests that people with experience of problematic alcohol use may be particularly vulnerable to alcohol marketing in gendered ways, due to the disproportionate harm they experience and increased

susceptibility. This should be considered in relation to the current self-regulatory landscape of marketing regulation in the UK (Babor et al., 2017; Boniface et al., 2021; Critchlow & Moodie, 2021).

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Ethics statement

Ethical approval was granted by Liverpool John Moores University ethics committee.

Author contributions

Amanda Atkinson: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Funding Acquisition, Project Administration, Supervision, Writing – Original Draft Preparation.

Beth Meadows: Investigation, Project Administration, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft Preparation.

Harry Sumnall: Supervision, Writing – Original Draft Preparation.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available at present but will be deposited in the UK Data Archive in 2023.

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