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Alcohol in later life: A qualitative study on alcohol use among older people
in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol use among older people in New Zealand has been identified as a growing issue and contributes significantly to the economic burden on society. Identification of reasons for older people's alcohol use and why they drink in such a way is essential to provide understanding of their drinking behaviours. This study used a social constructionist framework to explore how older people talked about their alcohol consumption. The study aimed to understand why older people drink alcohol by examining discourses they had drawn on to construct their behaviour and subject positions offered by these discourses.

Data analysed in this study were collected as part of the New Zealand Longitudinal Study on Aging (NZLSA). The sample included 18 individuals aged from 53 to 74 years, who were selected on the basis of their reported drinking status (light to heavy drinker), as identified with the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test-C in the 2010 NZLSA survey. Data was analysed using a discourse analysis on the transcribed text. Participants talked about their alcohol use as being an integral part of their social lives and something they do for sociability, to enhance social situation and to help them relax and unwind. They consistently drew on the positive constructions of alcohol use and positioned themselves as good, healthy and controlled drinkers. Participants did not identify with harmful alcohol use. They constructed problem drinking as being younger people's behaviour and a health issue for heavy and excessive drinkers.

Findings indicate that the positive aspects of health messages are taken up enthusiastically to support the positive constructions of alcohol use, as evident in the participants' use of the public discourse on benefits of drinking in moderation. However, negative health messages, such as ones given with medications, are often ignored or seen as outweighed by alcohol desirability. Findings of this study add to knowledge of alcohol use in this population and may be used to support future health promotion initiatives that aim to reduce harmful alcohol use in this population.

Dedication

Dedicated to my children Iva and Luka Aitken.

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