

Understanding drinking in middle-aged men: a systematic review of qualitative studies

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Aims

The aim of this systematic review is to explore the motivations for, and experiences of, drinking in middle-aged men living in the UK.

Around 2.3 million men in the UK aged 45 to 60 drink more than 21 units a week (increasing risk, or higher risk drinking), causing potential high levels of health harms as well as societal cost. Understanding how these men experience drinking, and the motivations behind it, can help inform interventions to reduce drinking in this population.

Research employing qualitative methodologies can provide an in-depth understanding of participants' motivations and experiences. Qualitative research typically seeks to understand an individual's, or group's, experiences and perceptions, as situated within their social context.

Methods

Database searches of PsychINFO, Medline and Social Science Citation Index were conducted. In addition, searches of key alcohol-related journals and Google Scholar were undertaken. A call for evidence was also issued and key experts in the field were contacted. The reference lists of all included studies were scanned, and forward citation searches conducted.

Screening was undertaken in two stages: title and abstract, and full text. 10% of titles and abstracts were screened by two reviewers, with an inter-rater agreement of 98%. As screening agreement was high, the remaining title and abstract screening was conducted by one reviewer working independently. For full text screening, all papers were screened by two reviewers, with disagreements arbitrated by a third reviewer. Qualitative research studies published since 1995 were included if they could not be excluded on any of the exclusion criteria.

Exclude if:

- Doesn't employ in-depth qualitative methods
- Doesn't offer a substantial exploration of the motivations for, or experiences of, drinking
- Doesn't include male participants living in the UK aged 45-60 years
- Looks exclusively at people with a diagnosis of alcohol addiction or those in treatment
- Looks exclusively at lifetime abstainers
- Reviewers are unable to confidently identify findings relevant to mid-life men without contacting study authors

The CASP qualitative research checklist was used by two review authors working independently to guide quality appraisal of included studies. All data were extracted into a tailor made data extraction table.

A thematic synthesis was performed to analyse the data of the included studies.

Results

A total of 11 papers, representing 6 unique studies, were identified for inclusion in this review.

See PRISMA flow chart (right)

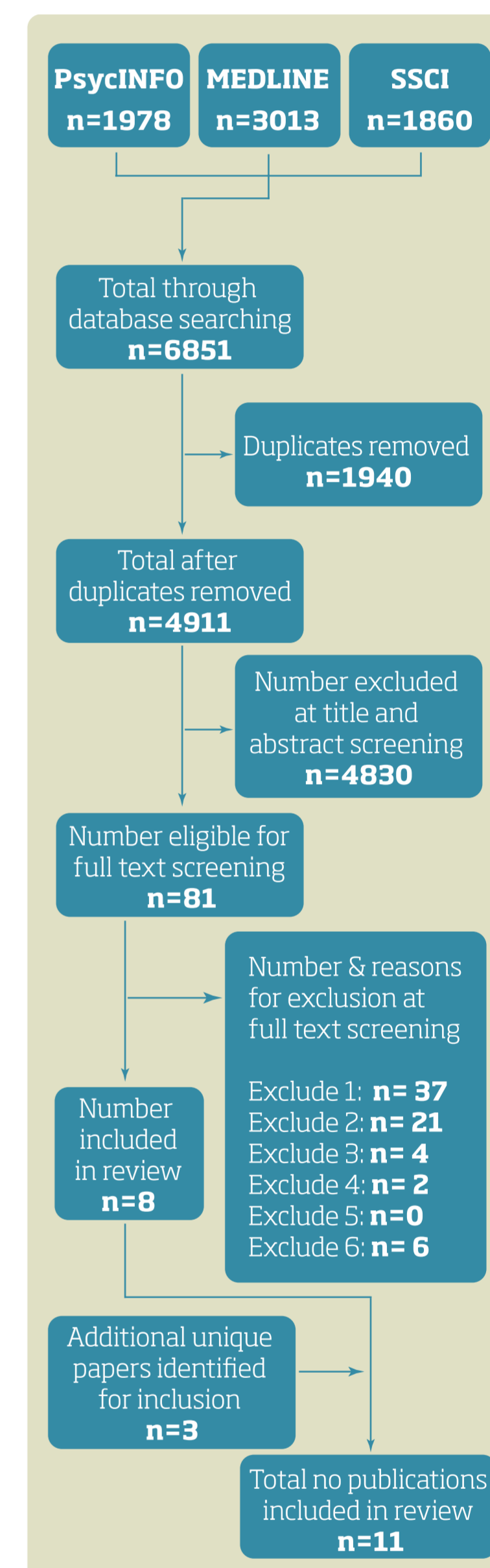
Papers were published between 2002 and 2014. Six publications used focus group methodology to collect qualitative data, three used interviews, and two used both focus groups and interviews. The papers varied in their focus, and included a focus on: older people and alcohol; masculinity and alcohol; drinking locations; wine drinking; alcohol and aggression; and drinking in midlife.

Key themes identified from preliminary analysis are:

Drinking motivations - Drinking played an important role in socialising, it could be seen as an act of friendship, or hospitality. It was also seen as important in enabling men to 'open up', with benefits for mental wellbeing. Alcohol was associated with masculinity, with specific drinking patterns seen as important in maintaining a masculine identity.

Controlled and responsible drinking - Drinking in middle age needed to be planned around responsibilities (e.g. work, childcare, driving). Drinking demarcated a space away from daily responsibilities: 'me-time'. This drinking was seen as facilitating relaxing, not coping. Older drinkers saw themselves as experienced and therefore controlled, contrasting themselves with younger drinkers who had less experience of drinking.

Knowing myself and feeling fine - Drinking guidelines were widely dismissed as being arbitrary and unrealistic. Concern over long-term health effects of alcohol were notable by their absence, with social benefits of drinking generally dominating discourse.



Conclusions

This systematic review can provide a greater understanding of the motivations and concerns of middle-aged men in relation to their high levels of drinking.

The preliminary findings suggest that the perceived social benefits of drinking provide a powerful motivation to drink. Any interventions seeking to reduce social drinking must therefore consider how social interactions can be maintained without alcohol.

There is also a lack of acceptance, or awareness, of the health harms from alcohol. Further, current guidelines are widely dismissed. These findings highlight the need for better education and messaging of health harms and drinking guidelines to this population.

The in-depth knowledge provided from this review will inform development of a Drinkaware strategy for tackling harmful alcohol consumption in middle-aged men.

drinkaware



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References to included papers

Brierley-Jones et al 2014, *Social Health Ill* 36: 1054; Emslie et al 2012, *Social Health Ill* 34: 481; Emslie et al 2013, *Health Psychol* 32: 33; Lyons et al 2014, *Social Health Ill* 36: 264; Foster et al 2010, *J Public Health* 32: 512; Foster & Heyman 2013, *Health Risk Soc* 15: 511; Orford et al 2002, *Addict Res Theory* 10: 347; Orford et al 2009, *J Community Appl Soc* 19:68; Rolfe et al 2006, *J Subst Use* 11: 343; Ritchie et al 2007, *Int J Consum Stud* 31: 534; Wilson et al 2013, *PLoS ONE* 8

Declaration of interests

The Drinkaware Trust is an independent UK-wide alcohol education charity. It is established through an agreement between government and the alcohol industry, and is funded primarily by voluntary donations from UK alcohol producers, retailers and supermarkets. The Drinkaware Trust is governed independently and works in partnership with others to reduce alcohol-related harm by helping people make better choices about their drinking