Bournemouth University

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DRINKING AT WORK: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND PREVENTION IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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Executive Summary

This report explores alcohol consumption within the hospitality industry, identifying its causes, consequences, and strategies for prevention. Based on an extensive literature review and qualitative data from the *#AlcoholAwarenessWeek* campaign, the findings highlight that workplace stress, cultural norms, and the availability of alcohol are major drivers of harmful drinking practices in hospitality settings.

The report emphasises that while formal policies exist, informal norms often undermine enforcement, creating environments where drinking becomes normalised. Consequences include compromised employee health, absenteeism, and reputational risks for employers. Recommendations include strengthening alcohol policies, introducing stress management programs, fostering a supportive workplace culture, and partnering with employee mental health initiatives such as The Burnt Chef Project.

Addressing alcohol misuse is critical for safeguarding employee well-being and ensuring a sustainable workforce. Industry leaders, policymakers, and employers must act collaboratively to create healthier, more resilient hospitality workplaces.

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1. Introduction

Alcohol consumption in the workplace has long been recognised as a significant occupational health issue. Within the hospitality industry, this challenge is particularly pronounced. Characterised by intense customer interaction, long and irregular hours, and high-pressure environments, hospitality is consistently associated with elevated rates of alcohol consumption compared to most other sectors (Belhassen & Shani, 2012; Moore et al., 2012). While occasional drinking may be considered a cultural norm in many workplaces, in hospitality, the practice often extends beyond social rituals to become embedded in daily routines and coping mechanisms (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018).

Industry research consistently shows that hospitality workers report some of the highest rates of heavy drinking across occupational groups. Approximately 11.8% of workers in hospitality and food services reported heavy alcohol consumption, higher than any other industry except mining, construction, and arts/entertainment (American Addiction Centers, 2024). In the UK, anecdotal evidence from the Burnt Chef Project's campaigns reveals similar trends, indicating that drinking after service is often perceived as both a reward and a stress release following long shifts. One participant from the *#AlcoholAwarenessWeek* campaign commented: "*I drink to unwind after a 14-hour shift - it's the only way to switch off.*" This illustrates the cultural and affective dimensions of drinking in hospitality, where consumption is not simply recreational but functions as a coping strategy for occupational stress.

The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified these challenges. Lockdowns, financial insecurity, and reduced workforce numbers placed additional strain on employees who returned to work in even more demanding conditions (Giousmpasoglou, 2024). A recent survey by Drinkaware indicates that post-pandemic drinking levels remain above pre-pandemic baselines, with 28% of UK adults reporting binge drinking on typical occasions and hospitality professionals being among those most at risk (Drinkaware, 2024). These findings align with earlier studies suggesting that workplace factors such as job stress, norms, and alcohol availability, significantly shape drinking behaviours (Berger, 2009; Hodgins et al., 2009).

This report is the result of a collaborative initiative between Bournemouth University and The Burnt Chef Project. It seeks to synthesise what is already known from academic research about alcohol consumption in hospitality workplaces and integrate new insights from the 2025 *#AlcoholAwarenessWeek* social media campaign. The dual objectives are to:

- Understand the causes and patterns of alcohol consumption among hospitality employees.
- Propose practical strategies for prevention and support that employers, industry leaders, and policymakers can adopt to mitigate harm and improve well-being.

The following sections present an in-depth literature review, describe the methodology underpinning the social media data analysis, and report findings from both academic and industry perspectives. The report concludes with actionable recommendations designed to reduce the prevalence of harmful drinking in hospitality settings while promoting a culture of health and resilience.

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> " IN THE TRADE, IT WAS ALWAYS, ANYTHING YOU DID WELL IS REWARDED WITH ALCOHOL. "

Kristian O'Connor

A PERSONAL JOURNEY

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2. Literature Review

The hospitality industry is widely recognised as a high-risk environment for harmful drinking practices. This section reviews key academic and industry evidence under four themes: prevalence, workplace norms and cultural acceptance, drivers of consumption, and consequences.

2.1 Prevalence of Alcohol Use in Hospitality

Research consistently places hospitality workers among the top occupational groups for heavy drinking and substance misuse. According to a U.S. national survey, 7.6% of full-time employees were classified as "*heavy alcohol users*," with food service and hospitality workers significantly overrepresented (Frone, 2006; SAMHSA, 2009). Similarly, Australian and European studies confirm that hospitality employees, particularly bar staff and kitchen workers, exhibit higher drinking rates compared to the general workforce (Moore et al., 2012; Ralph et al., 2024).

Moore et al. (2012) found that 85.5% of surveyed bar-restaurant chain employees reported heavy drinking during non-work hours, and 36.5% admitted arriving at work with a hangover at least once in the previous year. While only 2.7% reported drinking during work hours, the after-hours binge drinking culture has significant spillover effects on workplace safety and performance. These findings are echoed in Belhassen and Shani (2012), who concluded that alcohol use in hospitality is often normalised and sometimes even encouraged as part of the work culture.

2.2 Workplace Norms and Cultural Acceptance

Hospitality workplaces often foster environments where alcohol consumption is culturally embedded. Drinking is not merely a leisure activity but an expression of social bonding and professional belonging (Ralph et al., 2024). The concept of "*affective labour*" is particularly relevant: alcohol is used to create and maintain social atmospheres that benefit both employees and employers by reinforcing camaraderie, loyalty, and morale. Ralph et al. (2024) argue that, in hospitality, "*drinking on-shift was positively framed as creating an affect and atmosphere that appealed to clientele, despite taking a toll on workers' wellbeing*" (p.1460).

Team rituals, such as "*post-service drinks*," further cement this norm (Cooper et al., 2017). Insights from the *#AlcoholAwarenessWeek* campaign revealed similar dynamics, with participants noting that declining to join such gatherings is often perceived as antisocial. This informal pressure illustrates how workplace culture shapes behaviour, sometimes overriding individual intentions to drink less. These norms make abstention socially costly and create barriers to change, even when formal alcohol policies exist (Berger, 2009).

2.3 Key Drivers of Alcohol Consumption

Alcohol use among hospitality employees is influenced by a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and individual factors:

a) Job Stress and Coping Mechanisms

The hospitality sector is characterised by high job stress due to long shifts, customer demands, and unpredictable schedules. Alcohol is often perceived as a coping mechanism, offering temporary relief from physical and emotional exhaustion (Hodgins et al., 2009). Comments from The Burnt Chef Project campaign, such as "*I drink to switch off after a 14-hour shift*", reinforce this interpretation. Research suggests that stress-related drinking is especially prevalent among younger employees and those in customer-facing roles (Moore et al., 2012).

b) Physical and Social Availability of Alcohol

Hospitality workplaces often provide direct and easy access to alcohol. Bars and restaurants, by their very nature, blur the line between professional and social drinking spaces (Berger, 2009). Alcohol's social availability through peer norms and employer tolerance, further amplifies the risk of misuse.

c) Weak Social Control and Policy Enforcement

While most establishments have formal policies restricting on-shift drinking, enforcement is often inconsistent. A study by Berger (2009) found that informal norms and managerial discretion largely determine whether such policies are implemented. Where managers themselves participate in after-work drinking, the effectiveness of policy frameworks is significantly diminished.

d) Career Stage and Peer Pressure

Younger employees and hospitality students are particularly vulnerable to alcohol misuse, partly due to peer influence and the desire to integrate socially within the workforce (Orlowski et al., 2021). This demographic overlap between early career stages and formative social experiences compounds the risk of harmful drinking behaviours.
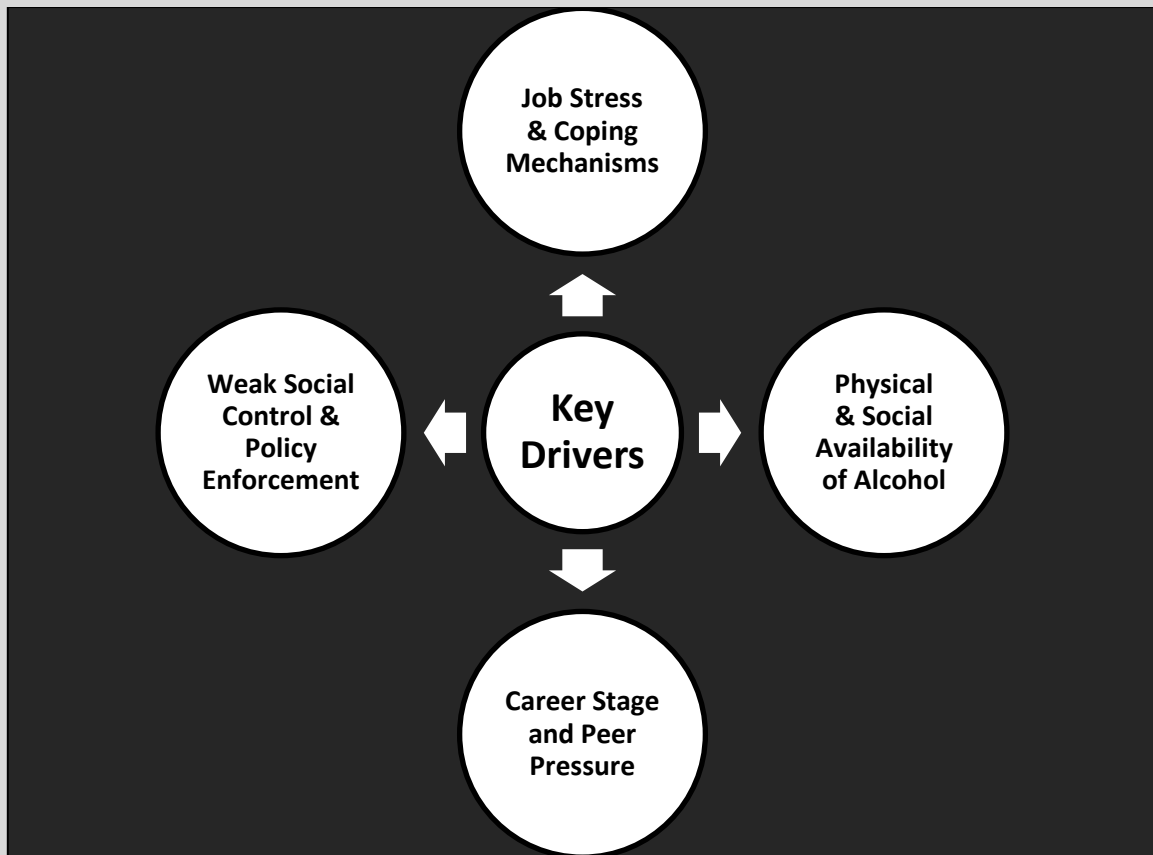
Figure 1: Key drivers of alcohol consumption at work

2.4 Consequences of Workplace Drinking

The repercussions of alcohol misuse extend beyond individual health. On a personal level, employees face increased risks of physical illness, dependency, and mental health deterioration. From an organisational perspective, alcohol-related harm manifests in absenteeism, reduced productivity, workplace accidents, and reputational damage (Hodgins et al., 2009; Drinkaware, 2024).

Financial costs are considerable. In Australia, workplace alcohol consumption is estimated to cost billions annually due to absenteeism and lost productivity (Collins & Lapsley, 2008). In hospitality, where profit margins are often narrow, the impact of alcohol-related absenteeism and turnover is particularly severe. Moreover, the cultural normalisation of heavy drinking can deter employees who seek healthier work environments, exacerbating recruitment and retention challenges in an industry already facing acute labour shortages post-pandemic (Ralph et al., 2024).

To summarise, the existing literature reveals that alcohol misuse in hospitality is a systemic issue rooted in occupational culture, structural conditions, and stress dynamics. Addressing it requires more than individual behaviour change; it demands cultural transformation, stronger policy enforcement, and accessible support mechanisms. The next section describes the methodology used to gather additional qualitative insights from the *#AlcoholAwarenessWeek* campaign, which complements these findings with contemporary, real-world perspectives.

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" LOOKING BACK... I WAS MORE ANGRY, STRESSED, AND SHORT-TEMPERED. "

The impacts of alcohol go beyond the glass. Mental health, relationships, and self-worth are all on the table.

Image Credits: © The Burnt Chef Project. Used with permission.

3. Methodology

This report combines insights from two primary data sources: (1) a review of academic and industry literature on alcohol consumption within hospitality workplaces, and (2) qualitative data from the *#AlcoholAwarenessWeek* campaign conducted by The Burnt Chef Project in July 2025.

Literature Review Approach: Peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2025 were retrieved from major academic databases (ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, Wiley Online Library). The review focused on studies addressing the prevalence, drivers, and consequences of alcohol use in hospitality workplaces, as well as prevention strategies.

Social Media Data Collection: The Burnt Chef Project launched an awareness campaign across Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook during July 2025, using the hashtag *#AlcoholAwarenessWeek*. The campaign aimed to engage hospitality professionals in conversations around workplace drinking habits and mental health. Responses included comments, reflections, and personal anecdotes.

Engagement varied across platforms, with Instagram generating the highest participation with 119,131 views and 2,107 likes, followed by Facebook and LinkedIn (see Figure 2). Comments were coded thematically to identify recurrent themes, including stress-related drinking, cultural normalisation, and barriers to support. Direct quotes were incorporated into the findings section to illustrate lived experiences.

Limitations: The qualitative data reflects self-selected participants who may not represent the entire industry. Additionally, comments were analysed without demographic segmentation, limiting insights into role-specific or regional variations.
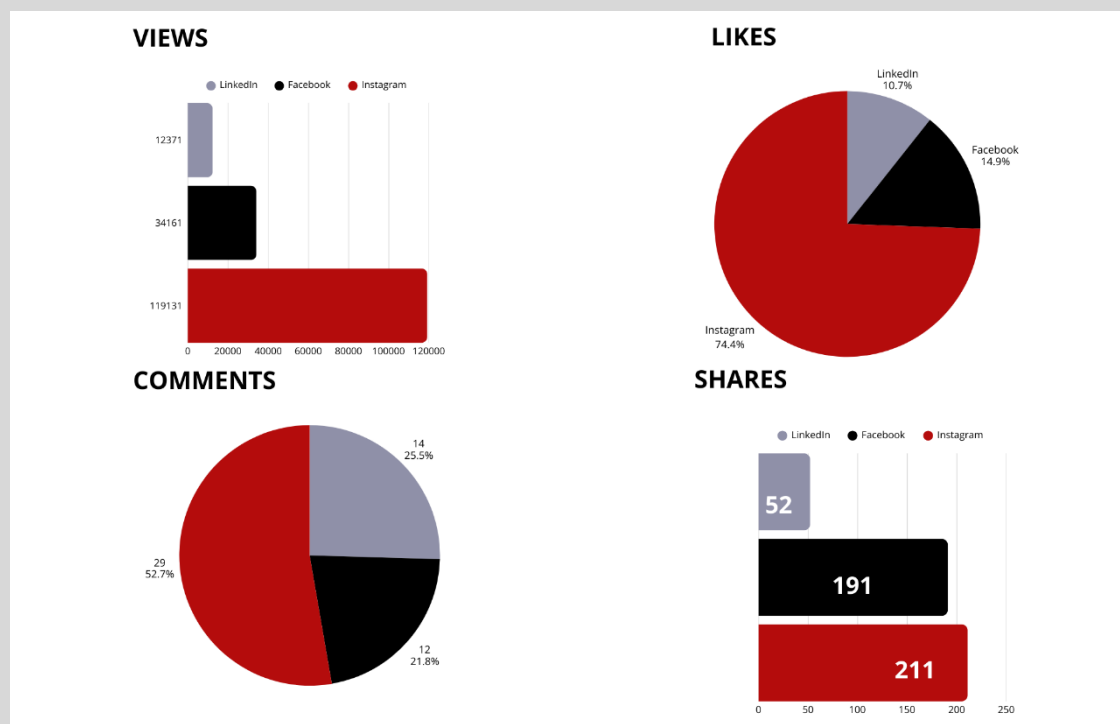

Figure 2: Social Media Engagement

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"

RUBBISH TV, A BOTTLE OF WINE, AND A TAKEAWAY... THEY ALL SAT LOVELY TOGETHER AS A PACKAGE.

"

After work, drinking often becomes part of a "wind-down ritual." It feels harmless — even deserved. But over time, it can take over. When every evening looks the same, ask what it's really helping you escape from.

Image Credits: © The Burnt Chef Project. Used with permission.

4. Findings

The findings presented here combine academic insights with qualitative evidence gathered from the *#AlcoholAwarenessWeek* campaign hosted by The Burnt Chef Project in November 2024. The analysis revealed strong alignment between existing research and the lived experiences of hospitality employees. Three dominant themes emerged from the social media engagement: (1) stress and coping mechanisms, (2) cultural normalisation of drinking, and (3) barriers to change and lack of support.

4.1 Social Media Engagement Overview

The campaign generated substantial engagement across multiple platforms, with Instagram producing the highest volume of responses, followed by LinkedIn and Facebook. A total of 55 comments were analysed (see Figure 2). The overall engagement (likes, comments, shares, views) underscores the relevance and urgency of the topic within the industry and highlights employees' willingness to openly discuss challenges around alcohol use.

4.2 Theme 1: Stress and Coping Mechanisms

Stress emerged as the most frequently cited driver of alcohol consumption in hospitality settings. Respondents described drinking as an essential coping strategy after long, demanding shifts:

> "I stopped drinking as a coping mechanism after work when I realised the anxiety was fuelling my mental health issues and burnout. I still partake casually here and there but it's no longer part of my post-work ritual and my mind has thanked me tenfold!"

Comments like these illustrate how alcohol is often perceived as a self-medication tool to manage fatigue, mental strain, and anxiety; however, in reality it often exacerbates these issues rather than alleviating them. These qualitative accounts mirror findings from academic studies that consistently link workplace stress to substance use in hospitality (Hodgins et al., 2009; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018; Moore et al., 2012).

Notably, stress-related drinking was not confined to front-line staff; comments indicated that supervisory and managerial roles also experienced similar pressures. This finding aligns with research suggesting that high responsibility and irregular working hours amplify vulnerability to harmful drinking behaviours (Frone, 2006).

4.3 Theme 2: Cultural Normalisation of Drinking

The second major theme was the cultural entrenchment of alcohol within hospitality workplaces. Drinking was described not merely as a personal choice but as an unwritten expectation, particularly in relation to post-shift socialising. Representative comments include:

"If you don't go out drinking with the team, you're seen as antisocial."

"I was allowed and even encouraged to drink at every single I job I had in Europe for 14 years and even at a few back here. Now I'm paying the price."

Such sentiments resonate with studies such as Cooper et al. (2017) and Ralph et al. (2024), who conceptualise drinking as a form of "*affective labour*", a social practice designed to create harmony and solidarity within teams, often to the detriment of individual health. Informal norms around after-work drinking are so pervasive that abstaining can lead to social exclusion or perceived disloyalty.

Academic literature confirms that these cultural dynamics undermine formal workplace policies aimed at reducing alcohol misuse (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018). Even when official restrictions exist, employees report that managerial complicity or participation in after-work drinking weakens their effectiveness (Berger, 2009).

4.4 Theme 3: Barriers to Change and Lack of Support

The third theme concerned structural and cultural barriers that hinder efforts to reduce alcohol consumption. Respondents repeatedly emphasised the lack of organisational support for those seeking to drink less:

"I lost good jobs, good friends and girlfriends because of my drinking. Thing is no one was pointing out to me what an issue it was because I was one of many people with that problem."

"I've seen it before service, during service and after service. The toxicity of some restaurants is hard to resist. I struggled with it for many years."

This disconnect reflects a broader gap identified in the literature: while awareness of mental health challenges in hospitality has grown in recent years, alcohol and substance use remains a largely unaddressed dimension of workforce well-being (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018). Campaign participants highlighted the absence of alternative social options, noting that efforts to avoid drinking often led to isolation.

4.5 Comparative Analysis with Literature

The qualitative evidence aligns closely with existing research, reinforcing the systemic nature of alcohol misuse in hospitality:

Stress and Working Conditions: Consistent with Hodgins et al. (2009) and Giousmpasoglou et al. (2018), stress-related drinking remains a primary driver of alcohol consumption in hospitality. Long, irregular shifts, high customer demands, and the physical intensity of the job often leave employees seeking quick coping mechanisms, with alcohol perceived as the most accessible option. This reliance on drinking as a stress reliever highlights the intersection of occupational pressures and cultural norms, perpetuating harmful consumption patterns.

Cultural Norms: Academic research consistently shows that hospitality workplaces normalise heavy drinking, often framing it as integral to team bonding and social cohesion (Cooper et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2012). Ralph et al. (2024) describe this as part of "affective labour," where drinking after shifts is viewed as a tool for sustaining morale and fostering solidarity, despite its health implications. These cultural practices create powerful informal expectations, making abstention socially costly and reinforcing patterns of harmful alcohol use.

Weak Policy Enforcement: While many hospitality businesses adopt formal alcohol policies, their impact is often diluted by inconsistent implementation. Berger (2009) notes that supervisory practices and informal norms frequently override written rules, creating environments where compliance is optional. Recent industry analysis echoes this concern, emphasising that without strong managerial accountability, policies remain "*tick-box exercises*" with limited effect (Drinkaware, 2024).

Demographic Vulnerability: Research indicates that certain demographic groups within hospitality are particularly susceptible to harmful drinking patterns. Young employees and hospitality students are frequently identified as high-risk due to peer influence, socialisation norms, and transitional life stages (Orlowski et al., 2021). Similarly, low-skilled and migrant workers experience heightened vulnerability, often linked to precarious employment, long working hours, and limited access to health resources (Cooper et al., 2017).

4.6 Emerging Concerns

While traditional narratives often focus on after-hours drinking, some comments hinted at more concerning practices, such as on-shift consumption. Although less frequent, such accounts point to potential risks for workplace safety and customer experience. Furthermore, the normalisation of alcohol consumption as part of career advancement, where socialising with peers and managers often involves drinking, raises ethical and operational questions for employers.

4.7 Summary of Key Findings

- **Stress remains the dominant trigger for alcohol use, often framed as the only viable coping mechanism.**
- **Workplace culture perpetuates drinking norms, making abstention socially costly.**
- **Managerial complicity and lack of structured support hinder harm reduction efforts.**
- **Awareness does not translate into action: initiatives addressing mental health rarely include substance misuse components.**
- **Organisational risks extend beyond health to encompass reputational damage, legal liability, and financial costs associated with absenteeism and turnover.**

These findings underscore the urgent need for holistic interventions targeting both cultural and structural determinants of workplace drinking in hospitality.

THE CULTURE OF
"WORK HARD, PLAY HARD"
CAN LEAD MANY PEOPLE TO
LEAN ON ALCOHOL AS A COPING
MECHANISM.

**IT'S TIME TO TALK OPENLY
ABOUT THIS.**

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5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Alcohol consumption within hospitality workplaces is a complex and deeply embedded issue shaped by occupational culture, structural conditions, and individual coping behaviours. This report has examined the causes, patterns, and consequences of alcohol use in the hospitality sector through a synthesis of existing literature and qualitative data from The Burnt Chef Project's *#AlcoholAwarenessWeek* campaign. The findings reveal a striking consistency: while individual behaviours are significant, they are primarily shaped by systemic factors such as stress, availability of alcohol, permissive norms, and managerial inaction.

Hospitality employees face unique pressures: long hours, emotional labour, and unpredictable working conditions. These stressors create fertile ground for alcohol use as a coping mechanism, a reality vividly captured in campaign comments. Beyond individual harm, workplace drinking poses operational risks, including absenteeism, accidents, reduced productivity, and reputational damage (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018). Ultimately, the combined impact is costly not only for workers and businesses but also for the guest experience, undermining service standards and brand reputation.

Despite growing awareness of mental health challenges in hospitality, alcohol and substance use remains under-addressed. Current interventions often focus on individual responsibility rather than tackling the cultural and structural enablers of alcohol misuse. Effective change requires a holistic approach combining policy, education, cultural transformation, and industry collaboration.

5.1 Recommendations for Employers and Hospitality Leaders

- ***Establish Clear Alcohol Policies and Enforce Them Consistently***

  Policies should clearly prohibit on-shift drinking and outline consequences for violations. Importantly, they must be applied consistently across all organisational levels, including management. Visible enforcement signals organisational commitment to safety and well-being (Berger, 2009).

- ***Promote Stress Management and Resilience Training***

  Training programs can equip staff with healthier coping mechanisms to manage occupational stress (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018). Workshops on mindfulness, time management, and emotional regulation can reduce reliance on alcohol as a stress-relief tool (Hodgins et al., 2009).

- ***Offer Alcohol-Free Social Alternatives***

  Employers should create inclusive team-building activities that do not revolve around alcohol. Offering non-alcoholic beverages during staff events and promoting wellness initiatives sends a powerful cultural message (Moore et al., 2012).

- ***Provide Access to Support Services***

  Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), counselling services, and partnerships with mental health support organisations like The Burnt Chef Project can help employees address alcohol-related concerns confidentially and effectively.

5.2 Recommendations for Industry Bodies and Policymakers

- ***Develop Industry-Wide Guidelines on Alcohol Management***

  Trade associations should provide standardised best practices for alcohol policies, social event protocols, and staff education (e.g. Figure 3).

- ***Incentivise Health and Well-being Initiatives***

  Governments and accrediting bodies can offer financial incentives or recognition schemes for establishments that implement evidence-based wellness programmes, including substance misuse prevention.

- ***Integrate Alcohol Awareness into Training Curricula***

  Hospitality education programmes should embed substance awareness and coping strategies into their core modules, preparing graduates for the realities of high-pressure environments (Orlowski et al., 2021).

- ***Embed Experiential Learning Standards***

  Accrediting bodies should recognise the pedagogical value of practical experience while ensuring that such environments adhere to strict health and safety standards, including zero-tolerance policies for on-shift drinking.

5.3 A Call for Cultural Transformation

Policy changes alone will not dismantle the entrenched drinking culture in hospitality. The campaign revealed that declining to join post-shift drinking sessions is frequently perceived as antisocial, highlighting the social pressure to conform. Changing this narrative requires leadership at every level. Managers must model responsible behaviours, promote inclusive social practices, and foster environments where opting out of drinking is normalised and respected.

The hospitality industry prides itself on creating memorable experiences for guests, but this commitment must extend to those delivering these experiences. Prioritising staff well-being is not only an ethical obligation but also a strategic imperative for recruitment, retention, and long-term business sustainability.

In summary, the future of hospitality depends on breaking the cycle of alcohol misuse through policy rigor, educational empowerment, and cultural change. By embracing proactive strategies and industry collaboration, employers can ensure that passion for hospitality does not come at the expense of health and dignity. As one participant aptly stated: "*I love this industry, but it shouldn't cost me my health.*"

ALCOHOL AWARENESS & BEST PRACTICES

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Tips for spotting the signs, supporting others, and taking action.,

HOW TO APPROACH

- **SHOW EMPATHY:** Stay compassionate and non-judgemental, even if the topic is difficult or sensitive.
- **ACTIVELY LISTEN:** Give them space to talk. Be present, engaged, and open to what they're saying.
- **BE HONEST BUT SENSITIVE:** Share how you feel without placing blame as this helps avoid defensiveness.
- **BE MINDFUL OF TIME OF DAY:** Pick a moment that wouldn't lead to going for a drink.
- **CONSIDER WHAT IS BEHIND THE BEHAVIOUR:** Is something else going on? Offer them support.

WHAT TO AVOID

DON'T BE JUDGEMENTAL OR ACCUSATORY:
Labels like "alcoholic" can shut down the conversation. Instead, focus on behaviours and feelings.

AVOID MAKING DEMANDS:
Insisting someone stops drinking may not land well. Collaborate on a plan and give them time to digest the conversation.

DON'T BRING IT UP WHILE THEY'RE DRINKING OR HUNGOVER:
Wait until things are calm and clear-headed.

AVOID DRINK-HEAVY SETTINGS:
Choose a private, quiet place where they feel comfortable opening up.

SIGNS YOU MIGHT BE DRINKING TOO MUCH

- **I Increasing consumption:** You may have noticed that your alcohol use has crept up, this can include drinking more often in a week, drinking more on each occasion, and/or drinking at times/places that you didn't typically used to drink.
- **Next day effects:** Feeling tired, irritable, demotivated, experiencing brain-fog and/or anxiety the day after drinking.
- **Thoughts around cutting back:** You find yourself thinking that you ought to cut back on your drinking.
- **Difficulty sticking to goals:** When you do try to cut down, having difficulty sticking to plans or limits you set for yourself.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Track your drinking –** Use a free app or diary to log your alcohol use. Spot patterns, measure units, and stay accountable.
- **Know your triggers –** Stress, social pressure, or certain places can fuel drinking. Recognising triggers is the first step to change.
- **Cut back –** Alcohol often worsens stress, anxiety, and low mood. Reducing or pausing intake can boost wellbeing and tackle root causes.
- **Speak to a professional –** Be honest with your GP about your drinking. They can give safe, tailored advice. If supporting someone else, encourage a check-up and go with them if needed.
- **Get support –** Talk to someone you trust, join groups like AA, or use online forums. You're not alone—help is out there.

Figure 3: Alcohol Awareness and Best Practices

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