



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:  
The 25th Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Sheffield, UK / 30 Oct - 2 Nov 2024**

## **FIRST GLASS OF WINE IN 8 MONTHS!: AN EXAMINATION OF SOBER CURIOUS COMMUNITIES ON TIKTOK**

Kate Orton-Johnson  
University of Edinburgh

This paper presents findings from an ongoing project focused on sober curious communities on Tik Tok. TikTok has emerged as a dynamic space where users can create and consume short-form videos on a wide range of topics and in recent years has become a significant hub for the sober curious. The term sober curious (Warrington, 2018) refers to those questioning their relationship with alcohol or exploring a life without alcohol for health or personal reasons rather than a tacit acknowledgement of a struggle with alcoholism. In this paper I argue that sober curious communities on TikTok represent a significant cultural phenomenon offering a haven for individuals navigating the complexities of sobriety.

The prevalence of alcohol on social media is well documented. From digital displays of young people's drinking cultures (Goodwin & Lyons, 2019; Niland et al., 2014), to the emergence of the digitally networked "wine mom" (Harding et al., 2021; Newman & Nelson, 2021). In a myriad of ways the sharing of alcohol use online has created an 'intoxigenic' digital space (Griffiths & Casswell, 2010). In this intoxicigenic culture the emergence of sober curious communities raises some interesting questions about evolving identities, processes of cultural normalisation and tensions between the "sober curious" and the "sober serious" (Matei, 2019).

There is a wealth of literature on drinking practices and societal and individual health and welfare outcomes around disordered drinking (Carr et al., 2021; Park & Kim, 2020; Rajput et al., 2019; Rehm et al., 2021; Shield et al., 2020) and on the use of social media in therapeutic support for patients with alcoholism (Coulson, 2014; Gustafson et al., 2011; Yoo et al., 2020). Alongside this is a growing body of literature on sober curiosity as an act of conscious identity construction.

The choice not to drink has been conceptualised in a range of ways; as a form of resistance to dominant norms of excessive consumption (Fry, 2011); as a way of

Suggested Citation (APA): Orton-Johnson, K. (2024, October). *First Glass of Wine in 8 Months!: An Examination of Sober Curious Communities on Tiktok*. Paper presented at AoIR2024: The 25th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Sheffield, UK: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

redefining selfhood (Pennay et al., 2016); as a gendered social act (Conroy & de Visser, 2013) and as a choice that attracts stigma, shame and judgement (Cheers et al., 2020).

In widespread cultures of intoxication, where alcohol is normalised as a substance that facilitates social connections and inclusion (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013), not drinking is a choice that must be defended, justified and legitimised through a complex range of social negotiations (Advocat & Lindsay, 2015; Herring et al., 2014; Supski & Lindsay, 2017). Given these pressures it is perhaps unsurprising that sober curious individuals have found social media platforms to be spaces of solace, support and shared experience. In a mediated ecosystem of sobriety, the labels of “alcoholic” or “addict” that characterise in-person recovery meetings and support groups, are replaced by a more fluid and negotiated continuum of alcohol consumption practices (Davey, 2021).

This research examines the implications of TikTok's emergence as a locus of sociality for the sober curious movement, both in terms of individual well-being and broader societal attitudes towards addiction and recovery. Central to this investigation is an exploration of the creative and expressive practices employed by individuals within sober curious communities and the attitudes and experiences of those who follow them. The overarching research question then focuses on how TikTok functions as a digital tool and as a social space for navigating and negotiating social norms surrounding alcohol consumption.

To address these questions an exploratory qualitative approach was employed, seeking to understand TikTok videos as a social phenomenon with a focus on user behaviour and culture. A systematic content analysis was used to sample TikTok for sober curious content. The first stage was to create a sample frame based on an exploration of hashtags such as #sobercurious, #sobertiktok, #soberjourney #soberlife. Using a new TikTok account (to ameliorate the impact of my existing user profile on the platforms algorithmic curation) I followed 500 users with sober curious account names and during a 4-month period, from October 2023 to January 2024, sampled my main feed (“For You Page”) for algorithmically recommended content around sober curiosity. This resulted in a dataset of 800 videos.

The sample of videos was paired with interview data from 28 sober curious TikTok users. Interviewees were recruited by posting to public sober curious Facebook groups and employing a snowball sampling technique. The sample consisted of 15 women aged between 25-65 and 13 men aged between 32 and 68. Respondents came from a diverse range of socio-demographic backgrounds.

Initial analysis of the data indicates that TikTok plays a pivotal role in destigmatizing addiction, fostering empathy, and promoting positive representations of abstinence and resilience among content creators and their audiences. This paper will focus on 3 emergent analytical themes: the value of digital storytelling, the nature of TikTok accountability and the problem of visibility and failure.

The digital storytelling that takes place on TikTok provides a platform for individuals in the sober curious community to share and reflect on their personal journeys. These videos often combine humour and vulnerability creating engaging narratives that

resonate with viewers. By sharing their experiences in public and highly visible ways content creators claim they break down their own stigmas around alcohol by creating positive stories of abstinence. For content creators and their viewers sober curious TikTok is a showcase of what is to be gained from sobriety that in turn becomes a supportive community.

These communities also leverage the platform's affordances to foster accountability and counting practices. Sharing sober journeys on TikTok creates a sense of answerability and commitment for creators and their audiences. The trope of counting sober days also highlights tensions between those on the platform who are perceived to be sober curious *influencers* and those perceived to be sober *serious*. Both attempt to provide realistic and normalised accounts of sobriety but draw on very different narratives of “cheating”, of what “counts” and of relapse and recovery.

The visibility of these failures or relapses on Tik Tok was an important emergent theme. The process of self-presentation and self-disclosure alongside an expectation of “authenticity” was experienced as simultaneously cathartic and claustrophobic. Accompanying the opportunities for visibility, connection and affirmation, there also exists an ever-present risk of failure, rejection, social scrutiny and spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963). The inequalities of visibility were also highlighted with certain voices and experiences within the sober community privileged or marginalized within TikTok's ecosystem.

Combined, these themes speak to TikTok as an important platform for the sober curious. TikTok is pervasive in respondents online and embodied experiences of sobriety. The platform is not simply a technological tool but a complex social space where individuals negotiate and navigate their identities, relationships, and experiences of sobriety. Tik Tok allows the messy, unpredictable, embodied and digital practices and experiences of sobriety to play out. Importantly, for my respondents, it is a space where sobriety is reframed from a “serious”, medicalised fact couched in narratives of addiction, to a more nuanced and freeing set of practices and contexts that enable them to rethink and re-evaluate their relationship with alcohol.

In exploring the affordances of TikTok in the context of sober curious users this study aims to deepen our theoretical understanding of the ways in which social media platforms have become part of a post digital landscape of cultural change.

## References

- Advocat, J., & Lindsay, J. (2015). To drink or not to drink? Young Australians negotiating the social imperative to drink to intoxication. *Journal of Sociology*, 51(2), 139–153.
- Carr, S., Rehm, J., & Manthey, J. (2021). Guidelines and reality in studies on the economic costs of alcohol use: A systematic review. *International Journal of Alcohol and Drug Research*, 9(1), Article 1.

Cheers, C., Callinan, S., & Pennay, A. (2020). The 'sober eye': Examining attitudes towards non-drinkers in Australia. *Psychology & Health, 36*(4), 385–404.

Cherrier, H., & Gurrieri, L. (2013). Anti-consumption Choices Performed in a Drinking Culture: Normative Struggles and Repairs. *Journal of Macromarketing, 33*(3), 232–244.

Conroy, D., & de Visser, R. (2013). 'Man up!' Discursive constructions of non-drinkers among UK undergraduates. *Journal of Health Psychology, 18*(11), 1432–1444.

Coulson, N. S. (2014). Sharing, supporting and sobriety: A qualitative analysis of messages posted to alcohol-related online discussion forums in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Substance Use, 19*(1–2), 176–180.

Davey, C. (2021). Online Sobriety Communities for Women's Problematic Alcohol Use: A Mini Review of Existing Qualitative and Quantitative Research. *Frontiers in Global Women's Health, 2*. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fgwh.2021.773921>

Fry, M.-L. (2011). Discourses of Consumer's Alcohol Resistant Identities. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing, 23*(4), 348–366.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall.

Goodwin, I., & Lyons, A. (2019). Social Media and Young Adults' Drinking Cultures: Research Themes, Technological Developments and Key Emerging Concepts. In D. Conroy & F. Measham (Eds.), *Young Adult Drinking Styles: Current Perspectives on Research, Policy and Practice* (pp. 133–152). Springer International Publishing.

Griffiths, R., & Casswell, S. (2010). Intoxigenic digital spaces? Youth, social networking sites and alcohol marketing. *Drug and Alcohol Review, 29*(5), 525–530.

Gustafson, D. H., Shaw, B. R., Isham, A., Baker, T., Boyle, M. G., & Levy, M. (2011). Explicating an Evidence-Based, Theoretically Informed, Mobile Technology-Based System to Improve Outcomes for People in Recovery for Alcohol Dependence. *Substance Use & Misuse, 46*(1), 96–111.

Harding, K. D., Whittingham, L., & McGannon, K. R. (2021). #sendwine: An Analysis of Motherhood, Alcohol Use and #winemom Culture on Instagram. *Substance Abuse: Research and Treatment, 15*, 11782218211015196.

Herring, R., Bayley, M., & Hurcombe, R. (2014). "But no one told me it's okay to not drink": A qualitative study of young people who drink little or no alcohol. *Journal of Substance Use*, 19(1–2), 95–102

Matei, A. (2019, July 1). The rise of the sober curious: Having it all, without alcohol. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jul/01/sober-curious-alcohol-abuse>

Newman, H., & Nelson, K. A. (2021). Mother needs a bigger "helper": A critique of "wine mom" discourse as conformity to hegemonic intensive motherhood. *Sociology Compass*, 15(4),

Niland, P., Lyons, A. C., Goodwin, I., & Hutton, F. (2014). 'See it doesn't look pretty does it?' Young adults' airbrushed drinking practices on Facebook. *Psychology & Health*, 29(8), 877–895

Park, S. H., & Kim, D. J. (2020). Global and regional impacts of alcohol use on public health: Emphasis on alcohol policies. *Clinical and Molecular Hepatology*, 26(4), 652–661.

Pennay, A., MacLean, S., & Rankin, G. (2016). Hello Sunday Morning: Alcohol, (non)consumption and selfhood. *The International Journal on Drug Policy*, 28, 67–75.

Rajput, S. A., Aziz, M. O., & Siddiqui, M. A. (2019). Social determinants of Health and Alcohol consumption in the UK. *Epidemiology, Biostatistics, and Public Health*, 16(3), Article 3.

Rehm, J., Casswell, S., Manthey, J., Room, R., & Shield, K. (2021). Reducing the Harmful Use of Alcohol: Have International Targets Been Met? *European Journal of Risk Regulation*, 12(2), 530–541

Shield, K., Manthey, J., Rylett, M., Probst, C., Wettlaufer, A., Parry, C. D. H., & Rehm, J. (2020). National, regional, and global burdens of disease from 2000 to 2016 attributable to alcohol use: A comparative risk assessment study. *The Lancet Public Health*, 5(1), e51–e61

Supski, S., & Lindsay, J. (2017). 'There's Something Wrong with You': How Young People Choose Abstinence in a Heavy Drinking Culture. *YOUNG*, 25(4), 323–338.

Warrington, R. (2018). *Sober Curious: The Blissful Sleep, Greater Focus, Limitless Presence, and Deep Connection Awaiting Us All on the Other Side of Alcohol*. HarperCollins.

Yoo, W., Shah, D. V., Chih, M.-Y., & Gustafson, D. H. (2020). A smartphone-based support group for alcoholism: Effects of giving and receiving emotional support on coping self-efficacy and risky drinking. *Health Informatics Journal*, 26(3), 1764–1776.