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‘Me time’ or coping mechanism? Women, alcohol and gendered modes of ‘time out’

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Introduction

It is widely recognised that the consumption of alcohol is bound up with the transition to ‘leisure time’ in Western contexts, yet experiences of drinking and ‘time out’ remain highly gendered.

Drawing on qualitative research exploring the role of alcohol in women’s lives in UK contexts ranging from ‘girls’ night out’ to global pandemic, this chapter demonstrates how alcohol facilitates leisure and time for relaxation, escape and friendship in light of the increasing demands placed on women. Yet whilst alcohol consumption could be valued as a source of pleasure and release, its framing as gendered ‘coping mechanism’ bypasses opportunities for a more radical restructuring of work and leisure, presenting women with an individualised way to ‘cope’ with delivering the paid labour, relational work and caregiving upon which a late-capitalist society depends.

In contexts such as the United Kingdom, the consumption of alcohol is often synonymous with leisure. Drinking alcohol is an expected element of participation in bars, clubs and pubs, with the Night Time Economy (NTE) representing a ‘liminal’ space of pleasure and excitement (Hayward and Hobbs 2007) for ‘unburdening’ and escaping the mundane realities of everyday life (Winlow and Hall 2009). Alcohol consumption in bars functions as a conscious strategy to achieve ‘time out’ from everyday responsibilities and differentiate drunken leisure time from routine duties and obligations (Zajdow and MacLean 2014). Waitt and De Jong argue that our understandings of the ‘weekend’ are produced through relationships between bodies, space and time that are often mediated by alcohol, with drinking playing ‘a key role in differentiating the working week from weekend leisure time’

(2014: 116). Participation in the NTE is often ‘kept rigorously separate’ from everyday life and work (Smith 2014: 152) and alcohol is widely used in the NTE and the home to signify the transition to the end of the working day/week (Nicholls and Conroy 2021). Drinking is also recognised as a reward for ‘hard work’ (Haydock 2015), a tool to facilitate relaxation (Matsinhe 2009) and a way to bond with friends (Niland et al. 2013).

However, it is important to acknowledge that both ‘leisure’ and drinking are highly gendered, and gender may actively shape the ways in which and the extent to which some groups and individuals are able to use alcohol in crafting ‘time out’. An ‘add women and stir’ approach (Kovac and Trussell 2015) that compares women’s leisure to existing understandings of men’s experiences risks neglecting the specific constraints that impact upon women’s ability to enjoy ‘time out’. Women not only experience less leisure time than men (Herridge et al. 2003), but they continue to be expected to fit this around the ‘double shift’ of employment and domestic caregiving (Caluzzi et al. 2022) and may experience guilt when taking time for themselves (Stevens et al. 2003). At the same time, leisure remains highly important for women and may function as a potential source of resistance or empowerment. Postfeminist conceptualisations also stress women’s ability to ‘have it all’ in relation to employment, leisure and families, position leisure as women’s ‘entitlement’ (Lazar 2009) and compel women to actively participate in leisure as ‘good’ postfeminist consumers (Genz 2015).

Drinking may be a source of pleasure and relaxation for women, a way to bond with female friends and enjoy ‘time out’ and leisure across the lifecourse (Nicholls 2019). Such framings push back against traditional conceptualisations of female drinking as problematic or a ‘threat’ to femininity and motherhood which cast the drunken mother as a risk to her children (Simon 2014). Drinking has even been conceptualised as an act of transgression, rebellion or embodied resistance (Papagaroufali 1992), with some research arguing women may be empowered through participation in ‘gender atypical’ activities such as public alcohol consumption (Henderson and Gibson 2013) or strategically use drunkenness to permit transgressive behaviour such as initiating sexual contact (Peralta 2008).

As Shaw (2001) explains, some feminist post-structuralist theorists also identify women's leisure as offering freedom to develop new identities and practices, with research suggesting alcohol consumption in particular presents opportunities to challenge traditional gendered norms (Pini 2001).

In a twist on traditional depictions of drinking as 'threat' to femininity and motherhood, alcohol consumption is increasingly promoted to women as a tool to help them relieve stress and unwind in the face of the demands of caregiving, paid work and domestic duties under late-capitalism, an era characterised by increasing precarity, lack of stable paid employment and the further decline of the collective/community and welfare state, placing increased burdens on individuals, households – and typically, women - to effectively manage all spheres of their employed and domestic lives with reduced support (Payson and Moore 2022). Harding et al. (2021) interrogate the 'winemom' hashtag and identity on social media (which normalises and celebrates the consumption of alcohol by mothers) and Littler (2020) explores the related 'mother behaving badly' trope, a chaotic and hedonistic figure viewed with humour and affection (Cobb 2023) who uses drinking, partying, female camaraderie and pleasure-seeking to relieve stress and 'push back' against the demands of employment, caregiving and the pressure of being the 'perfect' mother. Other research also suggests alcohol consumption may afford a sense of agency or offer midlife women a way to craft identities outside of motherhood that connect them to their younger self (Emslie et al. 2015). Such drinking practices are not limited to mothers or midlife women but may be used across the lifecourse to manage the demands of paid and unpaid labour and navigate or resist the increasing pressure to be the successful neoliberal/postfeminist consumer-citizen (Lazar 2009).

Whilst consuming alcohol may relieve stress and support relaxation, it may also represent an individualised 'coping mechanism' that ignores or deflects attention away from the wider possibilities for a more radical restructuring of work, leisure and caregiving during a 'crisis' of social reproduction. Under this crisis, late-capitalism demands that women enter the workforce but continue to manage domestic responsibilities in increasing isolation from wider community, social and

structural support (Fraser 2016; cited in Littler 2020). In this way, the potentialities for alcohol to enable true ‘time out’ and/or transgression for women might be limited as it becomes reduced to an individualised solution. Such considerations take on additional significance during periods of economic downturn and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw the burden of domestic and caregiving duties placed on women increase (Cook et al. 2021) and a proliferation of media depictions normalising the gendered use of alcohol to ‘cope’ during lockdownⁱ (Cobb 2023). This renders further research into the contemporary leisure experiences of women – which remain largely ‘hidden’ (Stalp 2015: 261) or conflated with ‘family time’ (Kovac and Trussell 2015) – important and timely. In the face of these questions around alcohol’s potential to enable true ‘time out’ and concerns that it may merely become an individualised coping mechanism, this chapter draws on primary data from two research projects based in the UK that explore the role of alcohol in women’s lives and its links to leisure time and identities.

Methodology

The Girls’ Night Out (GNO) Project

The first project examines the ways in which gender is negotiated in bars, pubs and clubs for 26 young women (aged 18-25) participating in a ‘girls’ night out’ in North-East England in 2013-2014. The interviews focused primarily on nights spent clubbing with female friends, exploring the ways in which femininities were negotiated through alcohol consumption, risk management and dress/appearance in this context (the role of alcohol in young women’s lives more widely was also discussed). Twelve of the participants self-identified as working-class, eight as middle-class and six as ‘do not identify with a social class’. A number had become mothers and/or purchased a house with partners at a fairly young age (or described friends who had); this was disproportionately the case amongst working-class participants who identified as ‘Geordies’ (local to the city of Newcastle in the North-East). Seventeen of the participants identified as straight, five as bisexual, three as lesbian, and one as queer. Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted to elicit rich and detailed data

on individuals' own experiences and practices and the meanings they attributed to these (Warren 2002). All interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded, transcribed and subjected to coding and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The Drinking in Lockdown (DIL) Project

The second project explores drinking practices during the COVID-19 pandemic amongst men and women (with a focus largely on domestic alcohol consumption but also with some discussion of the wider role of alcohol in their lives). The cross-institutional researchⁱⁱ (Conroy and Nicholls 2021) explored the lockdown drinking practices of regular drinkers in the UK using online one-to-one interviews (12) and small household focus groups (4) between the first and second national lockdown in England (May-August 2020). Participants were interviewed between 59 days post- and 138 days post- the start of the first UK lockdown (with pubs initially closed but re-opening on day 100). Optional 'drinks diaries' were also completed by 14 participants to record information and reflections pertinent to all drinking occasions one week pre-interview. Questions focused on drinking/social life before, during and after the pandemic, and the sample included self-reported light, moderate and heavy drinkers. Twelve participants identified as female, with an age range between 26 and 65 (two in their twenties, three in their thirties, three in their forties and four in their fifty-sixties) and a bias towards middle-class respondents. Interview data was again coded and subjected to thematic analysis.

Both projects received institutional ethical approval and all participants gave fully informed written consent. In recognition that alcohol consumption can be a sensitive topic, Project Information Sheets were provided which included links to UK-based alcohol support organisations such as Drinkline should participants require any further support, and all participants were able to pause, skip questions or withdraw from the project.

It is important to acknowledge that the findings of the respective projects are shaped by their particular focus and the context in which they were carried out. The research on the girls' night out unsurprisingly highlights the role of alcohol in constructing leisure time in the NTE, whilst research conducted during the pandemic necessarily centres domestic consumption and considers alcohol and leisure time during an unprecedented period when 'time out' was drastically affected and public opportunities for relaxation and leisure severely curtailed. The projects also featured different samples; the first focusing on young women and the second featuring a broader sample with a concentration of participants in midlife. Nonetheless, in both research projects there were commonalities in the ways in which participants framed alcohol as a tool to facilitate leisure and relaxation in the face of the ongoing and gendered pressures of their everyday lives.

Findings: 'Me time', 'girl time' and 'down time'

Transitions to 'Me Time'

Women across both datasets and of a range of class backgrounds talked extensively about the important role alcohol played in facilitating relaxation and marking time away from the constraints of relationships, paid work and caregiving responsibilities. As suggested elsewhere (Zajdow and MacLean 2014; Waitt and De Jong 2014), alcohol was synonymous with a transition to leisure time in bars, pubs, clubs and domestic space:

If I go out with only female friends, we make a bit more of a thing of drinking together [at home] beforehand, and chatting... as in like 'here's a bottle of wine, now let's sit and chat about our lives' (Gail, 24, GNO project)

I think a lot of drinking is kind of like a bit of a ritual... marking that it's a relaxing time and time to myself. Yeah, it signifies that it's time to enjoy whatever is happening (Charlotte, 43, DIL project)

I'll have a walk or whatever in the morning, get my housework done and then what do you do after? It's relaxation time, so it tends to be I'll have a glass of wine (Joan, 65, DIL)

For Gail, Charlotte and Joan, the 'ritual' of having a drink performatively symbolises and materially enacts the transition to leisure time or 'me time'. Whilst alcohol functions slightly differently in these examples, it represents a change of pace or a new phase of the day or week, permission to 'sit', 'chat', 'relax' or 'enjoy' without outside interruption or distraction through establishing 'separation' from other aspects of everyday life (Smith 2014). Both Gail and Joan refer to the consumption of a feminised drink (wine) and there was a clear sense across the GNO data in particular that the consumption of 'girly' drinks (such as wine and cocktails) was desirable and expected (particularly when socialising with female friends). Domestic consumption or 'pre-drinking' (see Wilkinson & Wilkinson this volume) before heading out to bars and clubs was also felt to facilitate intimacy and enhance socialising, with the act of opening and sharing a bottle of wine physically marking out the boundaries of leisure time (see Stepney 2014). Similarly, as the lines between work and leisure became increasingly blurred during lockdown (with many people working from home and experiencing a curtailment of leisure activities), the DIL participants felt alcohol took on a symbolic role in marking the transition to the evening or end of the working day, as indicated by Charlotte and Joan's use of alcohol in the home to mark the completion of feminised caregiving and domestic responsibilities (see also Nicholls and Conroy 2021). This was echoed by others, such as Mel (37, DIL) who described the importance and pleasure of having dinner and a drink in the evening after a

day of work and parenting. Charlotte went on to talk about relaxation and marking time in more detail, as did other participants:

Sometimes if my son goes to bed then we're like, 'Okay, the day is over our work is finished'. And then we can have a drink.... [cut]... And I guess it's like... 'oh it's a different part of the day, of the night. Now we can relax and we can watch TV' (Charlotte, 43, DIL)

I use alcohol very much like [a] pat on your back. You know. 'It's the weekend, this is what you can do'. Or like, 'You're having this because it's your spare time' (Jess, 27, DIL)

Here, both Jess and Charlotte highlight the ways in which alcohol was used to mark the transition to the evening or weekend during lockdown, with Charlotte going on to describe the evening drinking ritual as 'a way of organising time' and both participants associating alcohol with 'time to myself' or 'spare time'. This is echoed in wider tropes around gender and drinking, where drinking in and of itself is increasingly framed as a form of 'self-care' and 'recreation' for women (Harding et al. 2021) (rather than an incidental part of socialising or other activities). Demarcating drinking time as 'me time' may be particularly important for women when so much of their time is experienced as time for others and when continual parenting duties and cycles of unpaid domestic labour make it difficult to establish a clear distinction between 'work' and 'leisure' (see Stevens et al. 2003). Returning to Joan, drinking a glass of wine at home during lockdown may represent a way for her to signify that enough housework is 'done' for the day (presumably, there is always more that *could* be done). Joan's partner, Nigel (65), participated in the interview too and remarked upon how his own drinking had started earlier in the day during lockdown due to 'boredom' (implying alcohol functions as a way to pass the time rather than a reward for time spent on domestic labour, and there was no mention of Nigel undertaking household chores). Other male participants also discussed the role of

alcohol in symbolising a ‘transition’ to leisure time, but in regard to the end of the ‘official’ working day (i.e. paid employment), with none referencing drinking alcohol on completing caregiving responsibilities or domestic labour.

Other female participants across both studies also discussed the transition to ‘me time’; Nicole described Saturday (which was entirely centred around preparing for and participating in the big night out) as ‘*my day*’ (24, GNO), implying the rest of the week is not experienced as time for herself. In this sense, ‘me time’ and ‘spare time’ may need to be specifically carved out by women as a contrast to other responsibilities and alcohol can help facilitate this. Drinking could also function as a treat or reward, as suggested by Jess above and alluded to by others (for example in the implication that wine could function as a ‘reward’ for completing housework or a long day of work and parenting). This use of alcohol in crafting of ‘me time’ was significant regardless of class background.

Making space for ‘Girl Time’

In addition to the facilitation of ‘me time’, participants in the GNO project positioned alcohol consumption and clubbing with female friends as an important way for them to carve out ‘girl time’ (dedicated to female friendships) irrespective of class background. Alcohol plays a key role here, as indicated by Gail’s suggestion above that ‘drinking together’ at home helps facilitate the ‘doing’ of female friendship (granting women permission to sit together, share alcohol and catch up). Others also talked in detail about alcohol’s role in domestic spaces in creating a sense of connection, intimacy and trust between female friends (Barton and Husk 2014). Carving out time and space for ‘girl time’ could also be experienced as a valuable form of leisure outside of a (heterosexual) relationship:

It means a lot because it's *girl* time, and I think, although I love Sam to bits, and we've bought a house together and we've been together over 3 years, sometimes you just *need* your girl time (Kirsty, 23, GNO)

I think that it's very important, 'cause I've got a boyfriend, so I think it's very important that you *do* go out with just the girls (Sophia, 20, GNO)

The girls' night out is explicitly framed as an 'important' leisure opportunity that sits outside of a heterosexual relationship, with the implication being that this is an 'accepted' form of 'girl time' where it is permissible –indeed compulsory - to exclude one's partner. Sophia even implies here that making time to socialise and drink with female friends can become *particularly* important when one has a partner, suggesting that it might be more difficult to find time to 'go out with just the girls' (see Herridge et al. 2003). As Martinussen (2019) suggests, women remain embedded within a dominant 'heteroromantic order' which compels them to prioritise couple relationships and reduces time with friends to something that is 'bonus' or 'supplementary'. In this context, it is easy to how see carving out leisure time with female friends in the context of the girls' night out can become significant for young women such as Kirsty, even as she works to impress upon the interviewer the 'seriousness' of her relationship with Sam. Interestingly, participants who identified as lesbian, bisexual or queer did not speak specifically about the importance of making space outside of a relationship for the girls' night out, but all still stressed the importance of 'girl time' more generally (as indicated by Gail - who identified as bisexual - earlier in this chapter).

Other heterosexual participants also felt that alcohol consumption and clubbing helped them to build friendships outside of their relationships. Zoe (23, GNO) described her friendship group as formed of heterosexual couples where the women had only been brought together as the partners of an existing

group of close heterosexual male friends. Consequently, her friendships felt somewhat defined through her relationship, but a girls' night out presented a legitimised opportunity to spend time with these women without their partners, which helped them to feel like 'a proper group of friends' rather than '*just* the girlfriends'. For heterosexual participants, socialising and drinking in this way also presented opportunities to vent or complain about one's partner, reinforcing the implicit notion that the girls' night out is somehow a predominantly heterosexualised experience (Brown 2014) and echoing Green's findings that opportunities for alcohol consumption present contexts – for straight women at least – to 'review the constraints of heterosexuality' (1998: 178). Interestingly, whilst alcohol was still linked to friendship for the male participants in the DiL dataset, they did not explicitly refer to the role of alcohol in carving out time with male friends outside of a relationship. Rather, emphasis was placed on the wider role of alcohol in maintaining friendships, the social role of the pub and the links between alcohol and watching/playing sport (Gee and Jackson 2012; Thurnell-Read 2012).

Returning to the experiences of women, across both datasets, facilitating 'girl time' or 'me time' was depicted as increasingly challenging as women grew older and more entangled in the demands of late-capitalism. Against a backdrop of the decline of wider forms of social and communal support, Mel (37) highlighted how opportunities to socialise with friends were seized when she was able to source childcare for her daughter, while Alison explained:

A couple of my really good friends would say 'oh we haven't got the kids this weekend, do you want to come out, you coming down? Or 'it's a Wednesday night and the kids are at their dad's tonight can you come out?' (Alison, 41, DIL)

Whilst not a parent herself, the rhythms of Alison's social life were still in part shaped by childcare and parenting responsibilities. Similarly, for the participants in the GNO project, drinking and

clubbing with female friends was framed as a way to maintain female friendships from childhood or university in the face of other pressures:

It's, sort of, my way of tryin' to maintain the friends that I've had since childhood. And every time I don't go I feel bad, cause it's like 'ah well I probablies (sic) won't see ya for another month or whatever because you're working full-time and you're practically married' (Becca, 21, GNO)

We all have such busy jobs, such busy lives.... some of us are married, engaged... We've got relationships and things... And it [going out] sort of feels a bit nostalgic too... [cut]... we all really felt like we were ourselves at university, that we were able to express ourselves and our interests, spend time doing things that meant a lot to us... And now, you know, we spend time working 2 or 3 jobs to pay the mortgage, or raising kids (Claire, 25, GNO)

As Northcote suggests, clubbing and drinking play a key role in reaffirming the role of the friendship group as individuals move into young adulthood, when elements of the outside world such as relationships, parenting and career responsibilities 'constantly threaten to break it apart' (2006: 10). This is evidenced here, where the more carefree negotiation of female friendship and leisure in youth was contrasted with a sense of having to make the most of rarer opportunities to socialise as women moved further into their mid (or even early) twenties. Claire draws explicitly on the notion of 'time', indicating how opportunities for activities and hobbies that represent meaningful opportunities for self-expression and 'being oneself' have become replaced by work and caregiving responsibilities. Drinking and clubbing become framed as 'nostalgic' and a way for women from a variety of class backgrounds to make time for friendship, self-expression and identity work in the face of this reduction in leisure time and opportunities.

'Down time': Managing the Stresses of Late-Capitalism

Finally, alcohol consumption was used to manage the specific, gendered stresses of paid work, parenting and caregiving across both datasets:

After I've started working full-time, when you get to a Friday night, you think 'I can't *wait* for a drink!'... I don't drink through weekdays, so a Saturday is my release... Or if you've had a crap week and you think 'I'm just gonna get, you know, absolutely pissed... and just *forget* the week' (Joanna, 24, GNO)

Obviously when I'm with my little girl, I have to be responsible. I have to be a parent. But I feel more like, at the weekends, when I'm free... I don't have to be 'on guard', I don't have to be sensible. I can just be silly and just have fun (Jade, 23, GNO)

As discussed earlier, alcohol functions as a tool to mark and effect the transition to leisure time and a reward for hard work, but also as a specific form of 'release' or 'stress relief' (see Lunnay et al. 2021). Drinking to the point of intoxication presents a means to 'forget' about the demands of paid employment or 'lose yourself for a little bit' (Megan, 25, GNO); a means 'to soothe the pains of daylight frustration and prepare works... for what lies ahead the following week' (Winlow and Hall 2009: 103). This 'release' may be particularly significant for working-class women (Ward et al. 2022) (such as Joanna, Jade and Megan). For young parents such as Jade, the weekend (and drinking, clubbing and leisure activities) represents 'freedom' and a break from the identity and duties of being a parent. Drinking and clubbing clearly offer what Littler describes as proposed or supposed 'solutions' to the gendered stresses of late-capitalism, including 'short blasts of lifestyle hedonism' (2020: 515) framed around 'female camaraderie' and bonding (as discussed in the previous section) and 'hyper-consumption' i.e. excessive consumption of alcohol and investment in clothing and

appearance (Nicholls 2019). Similarly, in the DIL project, alcohol was positioned as a ‘reward’ after the demands of work and parenting:

I think after a day with a 20-month-old baby, you deserve a bottle of wine... I'm sure that I will go back to how I drank before when I go back to work because you've got to get up and think in the morning haven't you? Whereas for a day with a 20-month-old it doesn't hurt to be a little bit numb... [laughter]... Not that I'm like getting really pissed every night, you know, I don't really have hangovers, because I've not been drinking that much (Mel, 37, DIL)

Here, Mel depicts a bottle of wine as something she ‘deserves’ after a day parenting. She describes drinking more during lockdown whilst furloughed from her job and spending more time at home caring for her daughter, suggesting that whilst drinking is incompatible with having to ‘get up and think’ at work the next day, ‘it doesn’t hurt to be a little bit numb’ (from drinking the night before) when parenting. Mel’s framings intersect with winemom cultural representations of alcohol, whereby drinking is a means of ‘taking the edge off’ modern motherhood (Harding et al. 2021: 9) or rendering it more ‘bearable’ (2021: 6). Such depictions may also devalue parenting as less stimulating and rewarding than paid work, or even something menial and dull where a degree of ‘numbness’ is welcomed. At the same time, parenting is also depicted as exhausting. Returning to Charlotte (43, DIL), alcohol marks a transition to leisure time after a lengthy and hands-on process of getting her child to sleep. She confesses that after she finally settles her son, she usually feels ‘too tired to even get up’. So whilst alcohol had positive associations with relaxing and chatting with her husband, by the time Charlotte sits down with a drink she is already exhausted, fitting in ‘me time’ – and time to work on her relationship – around a long double shift of paid work and parenting. Interestingly, male participants did not use alcohol in the same way and there was little discussion of caregiving and

domestic labour in the data (indeed, one participant with three school-aged children, Robert, described the lockdown period as a bit of a ‘holiday’ for his family!).

Whilst Littler (2020) suggests that the ‘mother behaving badly’ trope may be used to actively resist the demands and expectations of ‘perfect’ parenting, there was little evidence across the data of women explicitly framing alcohol consumption in this way. For example, Charlotte is only able to relax and have a drink when she is already exhausted after completing domestic duties and Mel is keen to stress that she would never get ‘really pissed’ or be hungover whilst caring for her daughter, linking to more traditional conceptualisations of heavy drinking as ‘threat’ to femininity and motherhood (Simon 2014). Similarly, certain modes of drinking (such as drinking *alone* at home) continued to be depicted as problematic for women across both datasets (see Niland et al. 2013). The use of comedy and humour to soften claims was also a common strategy, for example in Mel’s laughter following her point about parenting when ‘a little bit numb’, and in Megan’s depiction of the value of going out and consuming alcohol as a parent:

I think it [going out] keeps us sane. It keeps me from turning into a baby brain... I feel like it’s a way to keep us [me] young and give us something else to talk about! [laughter] (25, GNO)

Here, clubbing and drinking function as a tool to facilitate connection with both one’s youth and other women when faced with the potential isolation of parenting (Emslie et al. 2015), whilst the idea of alcohol as a tool to retain one’s ‘sanity’ links to conceptualisations within winemom culture of drinking as a coping strategy for managing mental health (Harding et al. 2021). Echoing earlier discussions around the loss of opportunities for self-expression and identity work as women grow older, going out also allows Megan to retain an identity outside of being a ‘baby brain’ (a woman

with nothing else to talk about aside from parenting), as also evidenced above through Jade's (23, GNO) depiction of not 'having to be a parent' in these contexts.

Across the data there was limited critique of the depiction and use of alcohol as a gendered solution to the stresses of modern life and parenthood (although this topic was not an explicit focus of either project). One challenge to winemom culture comes from participant Alison (who did not have children herself):

You know like the 'Hurrah for Gin' lady for people who've got kids and they all, like, turn to the bottle, and it sort of normalised it? ... Like that whole ethos of memes and jokes and 'life's a struggle so just turn to alcohol' (41, DIL)

Alison highlights the existence of a problematic discourse that presents alcohol - in this case, another feminised drink has been associated with the 'downfall' of mothers (Flacks 2019) - in a breezy and light-hearted way as a means to relieve the stresses of parenting, referring here to Katie Kirby, author of *Hurrah For Gin: A book for Perfectly Imperfect Parents*. The bestselling book - which features cartoons portraying 'imperfect' parenting and references to alcohol as 'Mummy's special squash' (Littler 2020) - forms part of a wider culture in which Alison identifies the use of comedy to normalise, encourage and celebrate 'turning to alcohol' as a response to the struggles and pressures of daily life. In this way, alcohol consumption may facilitate gendered modes of time out from work, parenting and motherhood and provide individualised moments of respite, yet does not necessarily offer women the potentialities to identify and challenge the structural oppressions and constraints that restrict their time and lives in the first place.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights some of the ways in which alcohol is entangled with the context and temporalities of women's leisure as they negotiate the competing demands of caregiving, relationships and paid/unpaid labour. Alcohol – particularly feminised drinks such as wine - can function as a way to carve out 'me time' against the backdrop of these demands, effecting a transition to leisure time or implying 'permission' to relax or spend time with female friends. It can also operate as a reward for hard work, or a way to make time for female friendships alongside the commitments of (heterosexual) relationships. In reflections of cultural depictions of alcohol such as the winemom and 'mother behaving badly' tropes, drinking may also be experienced by women as a 'coping mechanism' to ease the overwhelming demands placed on them in late-capitalist society (Foley et al. 2021). This normalisation of alcohol as coping mechanism has potential consequences in relation to public health and alcohol harm, minimising the risks of drinking and even romanticising the use of alcohol whilst 'reinforc[ing] the message that women's drinking is not a problem, but rather an amusing pastime to cope with the demands of womanhood and motherhood' (Harding et al. 2021: 6).

In illuminating these findings, this chapter enhances our understandings of 'doing' drinking, leisure and friendship as *gendered* processes, whereby the accomplishment of 'time out' for women is bound up with drinking in gendered ways across settings as diverse as a girls' night out and during the lockdowns of a global pandemic. Whilst consuming alcohol could be experienced as positive and pleasurable, the data also reinforces the notion that the gendered obligations of late-capitalism can be managed through a limited – and individualised - range of solutions. These are arguably more readily available to white, middle-class women (who dominated the DIL sample) who may be permitted to 'behave badly' without the same restrictions or policing that limit such opportunities for women of colour and working-class women (Dobson 2014).

To conclude, whilst women's drinking has been framed not just as a way to facilitate leisure and time out but even a tool for transgression, liberation and empowerment (Papagaroufali 1992; Pini 2001),

its potential as a liberatory tool is not evidenced across the research presented here or within wider winemom culture. Quite the opposite; winemom culture is ‘complicit with, rather than critical of, capitalism and other systems of (classed and racialized) injustice’ (Harding et al. 2021: 8) and alcohol is reduced to an individual ‘coping’ mechanism in response to the gendered burdens, pressures and demands of late-capitalism. This focus on drinking as a coping mechanism places the onus on the individual to ‘manage’ a crisis of social reproduction through personal strategies, deflecting attention from the embedded flaws within the system and doing little to encourage broader social change or challenge to social structures. This continues to reflect an ‘individualising lens where the wider structural reasons women are turning to alcohol are obscured’ (Cobb 2023: 9).

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ⁱ A period of closures of sections of the economy, the ‘furloughing’ (placing on temporary leave) of workers and/or the move to working from home for non-essentialist, non-frontline staff as a strategy to minimise social contact and the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

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