

**No Cheers, No Fears: Unpacking Non-drinkers' Survival Tactics in Social Work Events**

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## **No Cheers, No Fears: Unpacking Non-drinkers' Survival Tactics in Social Work Events**

Drinking alcohol is a “pervasive and deep-rooted feature of American life” (Olson & Gerstein, 1985, p. 1). This alcohol culture extends into the workplace, where office happy hours and other alcohol-centric events are often the norm (Grube et al., 1994; Nordaune et al., 2017; YouGov, 2022). However, an estimated 35 percent of U.S. adults abstain from alcohol completely, and 60% drink less than one drink per week, citing health, religion, not liking the taste, and past negative experiences as factors (Gallup, 2023). The rising sober-curious movement and a demographic shift among younger generations indicate that the number of non-drinkers is also growing (Piacenza, 2019; O’Connel-Domenech, 2023). Therefore, non-drinkers may find that work-sponsored alcohol events are exclusionary or face indirect discrimination or stigmatization.

Previous research on workplace drinking norms has primarily focused on two significant issues: (a) how workplace drinking norms may lead to problem drinking for employees (Ames et al., 2000; Ames & Janes, 1992; Bacharach et al., 2002; Grube et al., 1994), and (b) the costs related to workplace drinking (Aas et al., 2017; Schweitzer & Kerr, 2000) focusing on the drinkers themselves. Additionally, some work from the perspective of non-drinkers shows that they experience a stigma, and they sometimes engage in identity management practices to conceal their nondrinking status or even participate in drinking despite not wanting to, to avoid workplace discrimination (Ghumman et al., 2021; Romo, 2015; Romo, 2018). These fears of stigmatization may be warranted, as drinkers often perceive non-drinkers negatively, viewing their abstention as a form of social rejection (Buvik, 2018). Drinkers have reported perceiving non-drinkers as threatening in at least three ways: (a) threat to fun (i.e., being judgmental of people who drink), (b) threat to connection (i.e., bonding occurs over drinks and non-drinkers are not participating), and (c) threat to self (i.e., raising doubts about one’s own drinking practices; Cheers et al., 2021). This can lead to further exclusion from essential networking opportunities and a sense of camaraderie among drinking colleagues (Buvik, 2019).

Yet, researchers have given little attention to how non-drinkers' perceptions of situational factors and their identity management strategies affect outcomes such as workplace authenticity, organizational identification, belonging, and intent to turnover, and what factors might moderate or mediate those relationships. Proposed potential moderators include the reason a person does not drink and how long they have abstained and potential mediators include the identity management strategy they choose when faced with a drinking event. **The aim of this research is to examine the relationships between characteristics of workplace drinking situations and employee outcomes and to identify moderators and mediators of those relationships.** Major outcomes to be assessed include organizational identification, workplace authenticity, and turnover intention. Organizational identification is characterized by the "perception of oneness with, or belongingness to the organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989, p.22). Authenticity is the "unobstructed operation of one's true- or core-self in one's daily enterprise (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 294). By determining empirical associations between situational elements and non-drinkers' perceptions and outcomes, as well as moderators and mediators of those relationships, this research can suggest practical interventions that can lead to substantial improvements in organizational inclusiveness and retention.

**Theoretical Foundation:** This study will be grounded in stigma identity management theory (Jones & King, 2014), which posits that people, like nondrinkers, must decide whether, how, and when to disclose their stigmatized identity. Jones and King examine various identity management strategies, such as concealing, revealing, and signaling. These strategies correspond to the tactics nondrinkers might use to combat stigma in the workplace.

One focus of our hypotheses will consider situational factors within the workplace that are likely to influence non-drinkers' workplace authenticity, organizational identification, and intent to turnover. For example, the frequency and context of drinking events may significantly affect how non-drinkers perceive their compatibility/identification with their organization and authenticity within the

organization. Another set of hypotheses will examine identity management strategies as mediators in the relationship between situational factors and organizational outcomes. The study will also explore potential moderating factors, such as the reasons behind a person's choice to abstain from alcohol and how these reasons influence the effectiveness of different identity management strategies.

**Proposed Method.** This mixed-method study will use a policy-capturing design where each participant views and responds to a series of vignettes, manipulating situational factors related to workplace drinking norms. Our proposed research will use quantitative and qualitative data to examine how the reasons for nondrinking (e.g., health, religion) and the permanency of their nondrinking status affect non-drinkers' strategy selection and what outcomes (e.g., intent to turnover, organizational identification) are influenced by non-drinkers' navigation of drinking norms. Analyses using multi-level modeling will account for the nested data structure.

**Philosophical Perspective.** This study adopts a realist perspective, recognizing the existence of objective social structures, such as workplace norms, and their observable impacts on people. Okasha (2016) explains that a realist perspective acknowledges the existence of objective truths about the world and emphasizes the scientific endeavor to uncover these truths through empirical research. This philosophical stance supports the investigation of how concrete social practices generally influence personal and professional experiences across a broad sample of individuals, particularly for non-drinkers in the workplace (Okasha, 2016).

**Intended Contribution.** The intended practical implications of this research include identifying situational triggers that may induce turnover among non-drinkers, determining whether the situations or coping strategies contribute to intent to turnover and other organizational outcomes, and identifying moderating factors that influence these dynamics. This knowledge will enable organizations to create more inclusive environments that respect and accommodate the needs of nondrinking employees.

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