This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast episode ‘Young people’s shifting relationship with alcohol,’ published on December 1, 2022.

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Dan Merino: Hello, I am Dan Merino in San Francisco,

Gemma Ware: And I’m Gemma Ware in London. Welcome to The Conversation Weekly.

Gemma Ware: Dan, it’s the Christmas season. Lots of parties going on, but I’m pregnant, which is great, but it means I’m not gonna be able to partake in any champagne, mulled wine, eggnog. It’s a bit disappointing.

Dan Merino: Well, you’re ahead of the curve, Gemma, right? Because come January 1st, everyone’s like, I’m never drinking alcohol again, this is the year for health and usually everyone’s super hungover, too.

Gemma Ware: Except that that’s when I’m gonna have my alcohol, because hopefully the baby will have arrived by then and I’ll be sipping a glass of champagne. But as I’ve been ordering non-alcoholic beers in the pub, as my friends have a lovely pint, I’ve been thinking a lot about alcohol, and I was really struck by this story that I saw recently about what’s going on in Japan. They’ve actually launched a campaign to encourage more young people to drink alcohol.

Dan Merino: Wait, what? The government is trying to encourage young people to drink alcohol? But this is the opposite of what governments do. They don’t want young people drinking.

Gemma Ware: Well, actually, they do because they raised quite a lot of money from the sale of alcohol, and it was the national tax agency that were actually behind this one. They wanted to boost Japan’s economy. They’re inviting people to propose business ideas to promote alcohol to young people, and so far, three hundred people have submitted ideas for how to do this, and the government’s going through this selection round this month to choose a couple.

Dan Merino: So why aren’t young people drinking all that much in Japan?

Gemma Ware: Well, in Japan’s case, it’s linked to an aging demographic and also people’s changing habits during the Covid Pandemic. But actually, while Japan’s reaction to this might be pretty unique — trying to get more young people to drink — it’s by no means the only country where young people are drinking less. In many high income countries around the world, particularly in Europe and North America, there’s been a marked decline over the past 10 to 15 years in the amount of alcohol young people drink.
**Dan Merino:** I’ve noticed this. Here in San Francisco, I’ve met a number of young people in their twenties and thirties over the last couple years who don’t drink. And it’s not like they’ve struggled with alcohol addiction in the past or they have health issues, they just kind of prefer to go without and are cruising around and hanging out with the rest of us while we all destroy our livers.

**Gemma Ware:** Yeah, I think this is really interesting, and actually for this episode, I’ve decided to look into some interesting trends that are going on with youth drinking. So there’ve been some marked declines in how much people are drinking in some countries, and we’re gonna get into the reasons for that in this episode. But in some parts of the world, like Africa and Southeast Asia, the opposite is happening: Young people are drinking more than they used to. And I’ve been finding out what these different trends across the last few years and across different regions can actually tell us about the way young people see themselves and their place in the world.

So to start, I called up Amy Pennay. She’s a senior research fellow at the Center for Alcohol Policy Research at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. And she studies alcohol and youth drinking, in particular.

**Amy Pennay:** While I was working at a drug treatment research organization, an advertisement for a PhD appeared in the email to explore heavy drinking practices in the nighttime economy. So, we’re talking about 2003-2004, and this resonated a lot with my current leisure practices. I was going out a lot, hitting the nightclubs, and because I had kind of an insider perspective to this situation, plus the alcohol and drug and criminology background, I thought this was a really nice way to bring together my passions and my discipline.

And this was a time when alcohol and drug use was really peaking in terms of prevalence rates, both in Australia, but other high income countries like the UK. Young people really pursuing heavy intoxication and getting obliterated and annihilated on the weekends. So it was a really perfect time for that kind of work.

**Gemma Ware:** So Binge-drinking?

**Amy Pennay:** That’s right, that’s right. Weekend leisure time drinking amongst 18-24-year-olds.

**Gemma Ware:** It turns out that this very moment when Amy was hanging out in bars and nightclubs in Melbourne in the early 2000’s, was when youth drinking was actually peaking in a number of high income countries like Australia.

**Amy Pennay:** There was a steady increase in the prevalence rates of alcohol and party drug use through the 90’s and into the early 2000’s. And then there was a very strong and heavy focus in policy and prevention on stemming the tide. Around 2003-2004 was the peak in most countries.
So from about 2003, there’s been a very steady decrease, but we didn’t notice it for a long time because it was so gradual. But if you can now look over 15 years, it looks quite steep, because we’re seeing levels below we’ve seen for a very, very long time.

**Gemma Ware:** The first signs that youth drinking was declining emerged in North America and Scandinavia.

**Amy Pennay:** And then it seemed to slowly network out to Western Europe and Australia and New Zealand. And there’s been some decline in Southern Europe. But much less sort of neat in terms of, there’s no, it goes up and down. It’s not so linear.

**Gemma Ware:** So are we talking about these 18- to 20- kind of 2-3-year-olds that you were studying, or is it kind of the younger age groups?

**Amy Pennay:** So the starkest decline is definitely in those under 18. But there is a flow and effect in most high income countries to 18-24 year olds.

**Gemma Ware:** And when we’re talking about this kind of drinking, is it that same binge drinking you were studying in the early 2000’s that’s declining? Or is it that people are not drinking at all?

**Amy Pennay:** So what we are seeing, especially, I know the Australian data best, is that drinking in all forms is going down. Less people are drinking, so abstinence rates are rising, people are drinking less frequently, and people are drinking less on an occasion when they do drink.

**Gemma Ware:** What’s so remarkable about this to researchers like Amy is that the decrease in drinking was very specific to young people, but it was so significant that it actually drove an overall decline in how much populations in these countries were drinking. If you drill down into the data, you can see how the trend is moving through different generations.

**Amy Pennay:** There are some small declines now being observed in 20- and 30-year-olds, but also some increases in the older age groups. So those that were drinking heavily as underage young people and as young adults have continued drinking more as they age.

**Gemma Ware:** So if you were in that cohort in the early 2000’s where you were binge drinking as a kind of a 18-year-old, you’re gonna keep drinking when you are all in your late 30s, 40s…

**Amy Pennay:** Especially women. We’re finding women in their 40s and 50s. They’re the cohort in Australia that are drinking more.

**Gemma Ware:** Do we yet know what’s happened to youth drinking in these high-income countries that have been experiencing the decline during the pandemic?
**Amy Pennay:** We’re really eager to get the next wave of population data in Australia. We know from convenience samples that young people drank a lot less during the pandemic especially. We had quite strict lockdowns in Australia and while some groups were reported as drinking more, particularly people who were homeschooling and women in their 30s and 40s, young people were drinking much less during the pandemic, because their drinking tends to be more social. And so we are really keen to see what happens afterwards and, how that affects trends data. I think we’re all kind of waiting internationally as well. And now we need to get the next sort of wave of data to see what happens post-pandemic.

**Gemma Ware:** Sweden was one of the first countries where researchers began to notice the decline in youth drinking, and a lot of work has been going on there to track how young people’s relationship to alcohol might be changing over time.

**Jonas Raninen:** My name is Jonas Raninen and I’m a researcher at Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, Sweden.

**Gemma Ware:** Jonas has spent the last five years studying the drinking habits of young Swedes.

**Jonas Raninen:** Since 2017, we initiated a longitudinal study where we’re sort of following a generation born in 2001, and we’ll be monitoring them across, as they grow older.

**Gemma Ware:** The researchers survey these young people once a year and also sit down to interview them to find out more about their relationship to alcohol.

**Jonas Raninen:** Today’s adolescents are sort of historical in that there has never been so few that drink alcohol, and also among those that still drink, the levels of consumption are also at sort of an all-time low.

**Gemma Ware:** In previous generations, young people aged around 15 or 16 who didn’t drink may have been marginalized, but today’s non-drinking adolescents don’t seem to have much trouble socializing and making and keeping friends. And Jonas says that not drinking is actually improving other aspects of their lives.

**Jonas Raninen:** Non drinkers are better off on a range of other areas. I mean, with mental health, their school situation, their family situation and stuff like that. Then we’re also seeing among the drinkers that the ones that are drinking are doing that for sort of the same reasons that adolescents have always been drinking alcohol — what’s called social or enhancement motives, hanging out with friends and stuff like that. But then also because it enhances good experiences. So we are not seeing any change in drinking motives, even though drinking is declining.

**Gemma Ware:** And one of the things you’ve found is that people are starting to drink a little bit later in Sweden, is that right?
Jonas Raninen: Yeah, exactly. I would say that 17 is the new 15. And this basically then tells us that the age of onset has been pushed upwards by the decline in youth drinking. So when we sort of looked at Swedish data, we do our major school surveys in year nine and year eleven— when they’re 15-year-olds or when they’re 17-year-olds. And today’s 17-year-olds drink in a similar manner as 15-year-olds did in 2005 in Sweden and this sort of general upwards push. We’re also seeing in other countries, so this is coming through from the US or Australia as well. And sort of at similar rates of a year and a half or two years that the age of onset has been pushed upwards.

Gemma Ware: Jonas is also finding that those Swedish 15-year-olds who were drinking more five years ago are also drinking more as they get older.

Jonas Raninen: We’re seeing that ones who started drinking earlier, they drink twice as much roughly later on. But this is also what we’re seeing then sort of in general population surveys, where we look at different cross sections at different time, and then we can see that sort of 18-24-year-olds are also drinking less than what 18- to 24-year-olds used to do. So it seems to be declining later on as well.

Gemma Ware: Okay. In your data and in the data about this, is there a socioeconomic kind of factor? Like, do people whose families, or they, have less money, are they more or less likely to be drinking younger? Do we know that?

Jonas Raninen: Drinking has a socio-economic patterning, yes. I would say that there’s a higher likelihood, at least in Sweden, to drink if you are from an affluent background than the risk of having adverse consequences because of your drinking might be higher in lower socioeconomic groups. The trends in drinking, though, I would say, are similar in all groups across time.

Gemma Ware: So it’s not that richer kids are drinking more and less well off kids are drinking less. It’s just everyone’s drinking a bit less.

Jonas Raninen: Yes, I would say.

Gemma Ware: Dan, one of the things that I found quite interesting was understanding how they get this data, because I’ve been asked a couple of surveys in my life about how much I drink, and I have to say it was: Fib a little. I don’t quite tell the truth.

Dan Merino: [laughing] That’s a good point. So how do they actually get accurate data? Because, I mean, surveys are just notoriously kind of bad.

Gemma Ware: Yeah, well, researchers know that, right? They know that people will fib a little, but they also know that the amount people fib is roughly gonna stay stable over time, and because of that, they can adjust their results to take that into account.
**Dan Merino:** Okay. So they might not know exactly how much you’re drinking, but if drinking goes up, they can see that. Or if drinking goes down, they can see that.

**Gemma Ware:** Exactly. And this quantitative type of data can help researchers spot trends in overall consumption of alcohol, but they also like to sit down with people and ask them what’s going on. And this qualitative type of data can answer some questions about why young people are drinking less.

**Dan Merino:** Okay, so we’ve heard what the data shows: young people are drinking less. But why? As Amy mentioned, the pandemic definitely had some effect, but this seems to be, as Jonas was showing a larger trend that’s not just related to individual events, but something bigger going on out in the world.

**Gemma Ware:** There is something bigger going on, and researchers have identified four main reasons for what’s going on in these countries. The first one has to do with changes in parenting.

**Amy Pennay:** Parents are having less children, they’re spending more time with the children that they have. They’re communicating more openly. There’s less authoritarian parenting and more kind of, you know, open kind of communication parenting, but there’s also more surveillance. You know, I’ll pick you up then, or, where are you? Those sorts of things. So when I was young, you would say to your parent, I’m sleeping over at so-and-so’s house, and, and that would be all until the next day. Whereas now it’s text messages, there’s Facebook, there’s WhatsApp, there’s Find My Phone, there’s a whole range of things. And parents are more concerned and more aware that they can’t just let their children go out underage for 24 hours and they’ll arrive home safely the next day. There’s generally more concern.

**Gemma Ware:** And did some of the young people mention that to you when you asked them about it?

**Amy Pennay:** Yes, absolutely. My parents won’t let me go out without picking me up, so I don’t want to be drunk when they pick me up, I can’t get away with it. But also that leads into one of the other factors that comes up a lot, which is the technological side of things, and the changes to leisure practices and the way people can socialize without actually being in the same physical space.

And that comes up a lot in young people’s narratives around, I spend my Saturday nights playing video games, but talking to my friends while I’m doing it, or we have a giant WhatsApp or Snapchat group going for the evening because we’ve got exams on Monday, rather than getting together and so in that, in those situations, alcohol is just not as present.
**Gemma Ware:** It’s not just about kind of video games. Is it also about social media as well? Or what role does that play?

**Amy Pennay:** Yeah. So, the quantitative data hasn’t been able to find a link between technology use and declining alcohol consumption, which I think is really interesting. But I think the point we’ve come to is an understanding that social media is something that everybody’s using. So even though it may be important, it’s not able to capture the declines, cuz some people have declined, some people haven’t. But everybody’s using social media.

So the qualitative data, though, points to it as quite important in the way particularly young people navigate new romantic relationships. So alcohol has always been used to decrease inhibitions, and online communication has a similar effect in that you’re one step removed from that person, so you can flirt and get to know each other without having to be slightly inebriated to get those conversations going.

**Gemma Ware:** Amy and her colleagues are finding that another big reason for the decline in youth drinking is the way young people view alcohol and getting drunk.

**Amy Pennay:** Young people are situating alcohol as a risky product in a way that previous generations weren’t. So the data that I drew on in my PhD, young people very clearly talked about spending their weekends deliberately pursuing risk. I’ve spent my whole week laboring, and I just need to turn all that off, pursue hedonism, get annihilated, have a great time, and that will rejuvenate me to come back on Monday and, you know, focus on my work. Young people seem far less — young people today, I mean — seem far less able to switch off their Monday to Friday on the weekend. And I do think part of that is enabled by mobile technologies, where you’re always reachable and therefore unable to switch off your email.

But also, young people seem to be far more worried about work and far more insecure about their futures. So there are more people going to university. There’s more competition to get into university. There’s more competition for skilled labor, and everything’s expensive, and unless you’ve got parents with money, economic precarity is the young person’s norm. So therefore, I can’t really afford to spend my whole weekend switching off, getting drunk, having a great time because I need to spend my weekend either making money or carving out my CV, building it to a point where I’m more employable than the next person by volunteering or being on committees or proving my worth.

**Gemma Ware:** What about for people who aren’t working? So kind of the 16-17-year-olds who are at school? Does that also come out in the conversations you’ve had with them?

**Amy Pennay:** Absolutely. Yeah. So they would spend their weekend either studying, but a lot of them were working part-time and already saving, already worried about money. There seemed to
be this pressure and worried about other things, broader social justice issues compared to previous generations. There seemed to be a lot more concern about volunteering and doing better and helping the planet or helping particular causes.

**Gemma Ware:** I know you’ve written a paper where you say that young people don’t have time for time out. This is the trend you are identifying here, is it?

**17:53 Amy Pennay:** That’s right. So yes, a really excellent paper by one of my PhD students where young people talked about using their free time as either being productive, that is, adding to their CV or free time as being opportunistic, like I’m gonna fit my socializing in between, walking from one class to another, or between work and volunteering, and that is via online communication. Or free time as restorative. I’m so burnt out by all of the extracurriculars I’m doing and all of my work that I’m going to spend the day watching Netflix instead of getting drunk, because that’s what my body needs.

**Gemma Ware:** What have the young people you’ve been talking to actually been saying about this issue of their worries about the future?

**Amy Pennay:** So one of our participants, Frankie, she’s 19, she said, “If you are drinking, well then that’s going to impact your career and that’s going to lead to mental health problems. And so therefore, I don’t want to throw away my future for a couple of years of drinking.”

**Gemma Ware:** That point about mental health seems really crucial here because we’ve talked about parenting, about technology, about changes to young people’s leisure time, but how much of a fact is health, including mental health?

**Amy Pennay:** Yeah, so the health is a really big one. And what we’re finding is that objectively, young people don’t seem to be healthier in terms of nutrition, diet, obesity — those seem to be fairly stable. But young people talk about fitness and wellbeing and mental health a lot. Young people have always been aware of the shorter term health problems from drinking, whether that be embarrassment, shame, regret, injury, you know, those sorts of things that happens on a big night out, driving and those sorts of, you know, one night out can ruin your life. That’s always been there. But the, I’m worried about addiction or long-term mental health problems, cancer, liver cirrhosis, those sorts of things, brain development — those sorts of things are coming out really strongly. But also things around calories and fitness and wellbeing is coming out as well. So health is couched as both things I want to avoid happening, but also things that I’m pursuing, like my fitness and my wellbeing, and that comes from sort of, I think, a lot from online, you know, wellness kind of movements.

**Gemma Ware:** And what are some of the young people actually saying to you about health as an issue that they’re worried about?
**Amy Pennay:** So, Mark said, “I don’t want to get to a point where it’s like I drank so much in my twenties that I’ve now got lifelong health problems.”

**Gemma Ware:** And how old was Mark?

**Amy Pennay:** Mark was 20. And I think these are really things that we don’t remember seeing in the literature from 20 years ago. It was more about, let’s be in the moment, let’s pursue happiness and wellbeing in the moment. Whereas young people now are worried about their health in, in 30 or 40 years, which I think is just another concern, something else in the back of their mind that they’re worried about.

**Gemma Ware:** Over the past few decades, government policy towards alcohol consumption hasn’t remained static. But Amy says those changes can’t fully explain the changes to youth drinking.

**Amy Pennay:** I think what we can sort of safely say with regards to policy is there have been changes in different countries and different states, but this trend is global, and it’s consistent, and so we can’t account it to one policy. What we can say about policy is that when it was peaking, drinking for young people in the early 2000s, there was more media attention. There was more politicians talking about alcohol as a problem amongst young people, and that can have flow-on effects to the media and how much they report to parents and how much they think about it. And there has been an increase in scientific evidence and the dissemination of that evidence. So it’s really hard to evaluate statistically whether that’s had an effect on the community generally. But we couldn’t rule out, kind of, increased attention and focus on alcohol as a factor.

**Gemma Ware:** So of all these kind of interviews you’ve been doing and looking at this data, what’s really surprised you?

**Amy Pennay:** I think the thing that surprises me most as someone who has interviewed young people who think alcohol and party drug use is really important to their social identity and their leisure time, is how much that is the opposite now in terms of the way alcohol is almost demonized. It’s uncool. It’s something my parents did. It’s something me and my friends have no time for. In fact, we laugh at the people doing it, like, why are you ruining your life? There’s a lot of talk about addiction, so it’s really, alcohol has become for young people, in my talkings with them, as something that’s gone from, you know, extremely valorized and a reward and pursued to something that’s really avoided and pathologized.

**Gemma Ware:** So it’s kind of an inverse of the pressure that young people were facing in the early 2000s where, you know, if you didn’t go out binge drinking, you were seen as kind of the odd one out. Whereas now it’s almost the opposite?
**Amy Pennay:** Especially with underage young people, that’s definitely what I’m finding.

**Gemma Ware:** One of Amy’s main conclusions is that the decline in youth drinking that she’s been observing is a symptom of a wider trend.

**Amy Pennay:** I think young people’s trajectories into adulthood have changed substantially. And alcohol and drug use are just a side part of that. So they’re less risky in general. Their health doesn’t seem to be improving objectively, but they seem to be taking less risks. So they’re having sex later, they’re driving later, they’re working later, they’re using less drugs, there’s less truancy, there’s less crime. So I think we’ve decided there’s not one explanation, but it’s a really complex intersectional effect that is changing the way young people kind of move into adulthood.

**Dan Merino:** So this is interesting to me, Gemma, because it’s really the opposite of the kind of culture that I found myself in, in high school. The cool kids drank and partied, and the not cool kids were seen as not doing that. But it makes sense, I feel like because of social media and awareness about mental illness and addiction, I can understand how kids would be much more aware of the harms of drinking and, like, really believe it. There’s a lot of emphasis on health. I do wonder, though, is the same true with marijuana or are kids just smoking more instead of drinking?

**Gemma Ware:** So I actually asked Amy about that, and she told me that there’s no evidence from her data of that actually happening of people replacing alcohol with other recreational drugs. Aside from vaping, it seems that drug use overall amongst young people is going down.

**Dan Merino:** All right, so overall young people are just using less mind-altering substances, whether it’s booze or other drugs.

Gemma, You mentioned earlier that this decline in youth drinking is not happening all over the world. In fact, there are some places where young people are drinking a lot more than they used to. So if we’re starting to understand what’s causing these trends, what’s going on in these other places, and where are they?

**Gemma Ware:** Yeah, it’s a really important part of the story because while there is a conversation going on amongst researchers about this decline that’s happening in high-income countries, in developing countries across Africa and Asia, the opposite is actually happening. And I called up somebody from Nigeria to find out a bit more.

**Emeka Dumbili:** I grew up with that sense of seeing alcohol as something that only adult men should do.
Gemma Ware: This is Emeka Dumbili. He’s a lecturer at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in southeastern Nigeria, and he’s also just finished a fellowship in Germany.

Emeka Dumbili: I grew up in a village called Burutu, in Delta State in the Southern part of Nigeria, the Niger Delta. And in that community, there’s this rite of passage. Every young boy is expected to learn how to tap palm wine. Palm wine is sap from palm tree. There is this culture that if you, let’s assume that I have an elder brother and if I am able to do that, climb palm tree and tap palm wine before him, I have the right over him when elders are talking, because I’ve done something in code, I’ve done something men do that he hasn’t done.

Gemma Ware: The young boy, usually between 13 to 16 years old, brings the palm wine back to his father who says a prayer and then proceeds to drink the alcohol.

Emeka Dumbili: You will not actually drink, because alcohol is not meant for young people. But they will drink and bless you, and it’s like they’ve given you go ahead and prosper in life. So every young boy was looking forward to doing that.

Gemma Ware: Did you do that? Did you climb the tree?

Emeka Dumbili: Yes, actually I climbed the palm tree, but I didn’t tap palm wine because there are actually two things you can do, either caught the palm fruit, it’s also a rite of passage. So you can either do, you can do the two or you do one of them. I didn’t tap palm wine, but I did the other one.

Gemma Ware: So did you ever drink palm wine?

Emeka Dumbili: Of course, growing up I did. You can’t grow up in my village, actually, without drinking palm wine.

Gemma Ware: Emeka told me about one time when he was about 15 or 16, when he came home one afternoon from secondary school. This was during the harmattan, the dry season in Nigeria, when palm wine becomes sweeter.

Emeka Dumbili: My uncle kept a keg of palm wine. I went, and I didn’t tell anybody. I hid and drank because it was very sweet. So I kept drinking and drinking. I didn’t, so I got drunk and I slept till maybe 12:00 AM or 1:00 AM in the morning, and when I woke up, I was very hungry, but I couldn’t ask for food because I know what I did. It was wrong. So if I asked for food, I would be punished. So I didn’t ask for food, and I slept again till the following morning. So I became very much ashamed of myself, and I didn’t discuss it. Funnily enough, they knew what I did, but they didn’t ask me. That was actually one of the things that made me to begin to dread alcohol. Oh, that this is very dangerous. It’s not something that young people should actually do.
Gemma Ware: When Emeka moved to the city to study at university, he found that young people were expected to drink.

Emeka Dumbili: So it was a strange thing to me. It was this shock from what I experienced where alcohol was dreaded by young people and what I’m seeing now.

Gemma Ware: Since then, Emeka has focused his research on youth drinking in Nigeria. But as he looks on at researchers trying to understand why young people in Europe, North America, and Australia are drinking less, he’s actually finding the opposite is happening in Nigeria. In a 2018 report from the World Health Organization, Nigeria ranked first in Africa for per capita alcohol consumption and prevalence of heavy episodic drinking. Large scale qualitative survey Data in Nigeria is hard to come by, but Emeka says that his research interviewing young people shows how much more they’re drinking.

Emeka Dumbili: I’ve been doing this research since 2012. And there are people that tell you they don’t drink alcohol. They’re in the universities, they don’t drink alcohol. But now almost everybody will tell you, well, I drink small. I drink small amount. And young people, one of the things that are coming up is that they’re initiating consumption either before they come to the university as early as 13 years or even lower than that. And many people who didn’t drink before they got to university began to drink immediately they come into the university. One of my participants in my current study, I like his quote, he’s a Muslim. He told me that, “I know it is wrong to drink, but I will drink and go and ask for forgiveness.”

Gemma Ware: Emeka has also been interviewing young people in their late teens and early twenties who aren’t students at university, such as apprentices, plumbers, nurses. He’s finding out that they’re also drinking more than they used to. So why are countries like Nigeria bucking the trend of declining youth drinking being seen elsewhere in the world? Emeka pointed to the techniques being used by alcohol companies combined with a lack of regulation governing the sale of alcohol. There is a nominal drinking age of 18 in Nigeria, but the alcohol industry is largely self-regulated. The country has none of the restrictions on selling or marketing alcohol, such as standard drink measurements that are found in other parts of the world. And at the same time, the alcohol companies are putting a lot of effort into specific strategies to target their products at young people.

Emeka Dumbili: We explored one recently, one we call strategies of using women, young women to promote beer. And what they do is that they recruit young in quotes, beautiful women and the alcohol companies post them to different alcohol outlets. Alcohol companies are responsible for recruitment and training, and during the training they tell them that you should expect all kinds of abuses. So this strategy, evidence shows that it makes alcohol more available, more accessible, and more affordable, because they do promotions and if you buy three, you get one free. So it makes, so people can drink more through that process.
**Gemma Ware:** Another strategy, which Emeka says he’s only seen in Nigeria so far, involves trucks acting as mobile marketing hubs.

**Emeka Dumbili:** What they do is that they recruit young people, not just women now, young people, so they go on streets with DJs playing music using truck where the products also arranged with the brand, you know, different kinds of t-shirts. And young people will be walking along the sides of the truck. Promoting there is normally done when any product is introduced and marketed. So there’s a point they get to, and they will ask people to volunteer to do drinking games. And if you are able to drink fast, you win maybe one crate people clap for you and the journey continues to another part of the city.

**Gemma Ware:** Strategies like these are paying off for alcohol companies, and many see Africa as a key area for future growth.

**Emeka Dumbili:** Those strategies they developed in low-resource settings are making people to drink more, they may decide to export it to high-income countries where the emphasis is now laid on declines in young people’s drinking.

**Gemma Ware:** Emeka says that alongside the marketing push by alcohol companies, there are other cultural and societal factors that are behind the rise in youth drinking. The young people he’s talking to are saying that they’re feeling more pressure to drink.

**Emeka Dumbili:** Non drinkers are seen as not fashionable currently. So if you want to conform, you have to drink alcohol.

**Gemma Ware:** Another factor is the way drinking is portrayed on screen, both in Nigeria’s homegrown film industry called Nollywood, as well as by America’s Hollywood.

**Emeka Dumbili:** Nollywood often portrays drinking, intoxication, in negative light, trying to teach you that, for example, you see someone who goes to a club or whatever drinks, he comes back and beats his wife or becomes aggressive. So what, when you see it, what it means that you are likely to, oh, drinking is making people to act aggressively.

**Gemma Ware:** But the opposite is the case in Hollywood films…

**Emeka Dumbili:** American high school movies actually are influencing them. In one research I did in the south, it’s a part of Nigeria, some participants were asking me if young people drink in these high school movies, and why should they be constrained to drinking alcohol? Are they not young people? Are these ones not their counterparts? So what they’re seeing in movies is aspirational drinking being translated to real life.


**Dan Merino:** Okay, so America as usual, exporting its culture to other places, and maybe not for the better, but regardless, we’ve got this situation where across Africa and Asia, young people are drinking more. And in high-income countries like Europe and North America and Australia, young people are drinking less. So are these two trends related somehow? This seems to be maybe less than a coincidence.

**Gemma Ware:** It’s a good question. They could be related, and the reason could be to do with the marketing from the alcohol companies that Emeka was telling me about. Right. So they realized that this peak drinking moment for young people was happening in the global North in the early 2000s, and so they’ve actually shifted their attention to developing countries, countries like Nigeria, as really big growth markets where they can make much bigger profits.

**Dan Merino:** So I guess the question I’m left with here is one of scale, right? A little bit more drinking is not necessarily so bad, but if, like, a binge drinking culture is really starting to develop in these places, that’s gonna be really bad. So what did the researchers say about the harm from this?

**Gemma Ware:** Yeah, it’s a really interesting question and one I wanted to put to them, too. And you know, it kind of depends on what’s happening and where. So Emeka was adamant that the increase in youth drinking that he’s been observing in Nigeria was a bad thing. Totally. Not only can it put others in danger, for example, if you drink and drive, but it’s bad for your health, and that can also be costly in terms of medical bills. And you said that Nigeria was actually sitting on a keg of gunpowder because of this.

**Dan Merino:** Okay, so Nigeria, they’re we’re talking like big increases in alcohol consumption, obviously bad for all the reasons that alcohol is bad.

**Gemma Ware:** Exactly. More drinking is clearly not good for you. But in places where youth drinking is in decline, things are actually a little bit less clear, and those researchers in those countries are pretty conflicted about what to feel about the trends that they’re observing. And that’s because they’re seeing less drinking as a symptom of what could be a bigger problem for young people. And Amy Pennay put it really well.

**Amy Pennay:** I think public health researchers tend to assume that a decline in alcohol consumption can only be a positive thing, especially if then that flows onto lower drinking in adulthood. But I think if we looked at it from a broader sociological or cultural perspective, we can be more critical of that. So mental health problems seem to be increasing and concern and worry about the future, and this kind of idea that I can’t let go and have a good time can be felt as a little bit depressing when you’re talking to young people. I do feel sorry for them a little bit in that respect. I don’t want to assume that alcohol’s an answer or a solution to that, but I think the
factors broader than alcohol that are shaping their attitudes to leisure time seems to be a bit concerning.

**Gemma Ware:** Okay, that’s it for this episode. Thank you to our colleagues, Liam Peterson in Australia, who worked with Amy Pennay on an article about her research. We’ll put a link to that in the show notes. I’d also like to thank Laura Fenton at the University of Sheffield in the UK, and Tim Stockwell at the University of Victoria in Canada, who we also spoke to for this episode.

**Dan Merino:** You can find us on Twitter @tc_audio on Instagram @theconversationdotcom, or email us, podcast@theconversation.com And if you like what we do, please do support our podcast and The Conversation more broadly. Just go to donate.theconversation.com

**Gemma Ware:** This episode of The Conversation Weekly was produced by Mend Mariwany and Katie Flood and written by me. Sound design was by Eloise Stevens, and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Stephen Kahn is our global executive editor. Alice Mason runs our social media and Soraya Nandy does our transcripts. I’m Gemma Ware, the show’s executive producer.

**Dan Merino:** And I am Dan Merino. Thank you so much for listening.