



## Exploring the influences of country-level factors on mature-aged women's drink driving attitudes



H. Watling\*, K. Armstrong

Centre for Accident Research and Road Safety – Queensland (CARRS-Q), 130 Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove, QLD 4059, Australia

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### ABSTRACT

The current study examined drink driving attitudes among mature-aged women in Sweden and Australia, two countries with a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) limit of 0.02% and 0.05%, respectively. The study aimed to identify attitudes that might influence drink driving tendency among this group of women and further show how these attitudes vary across countries. Using an ethnographic approach, 15 mature-aged women (Sweden: mean age = 52.5 years,  $SD = 4.8$ ; Australia: mean age 52.2 years,  $SD = 3.4$ ) were interviewed in each country. General patterns and themes from the data were developed using thematic analysis methods. The findings indicate that while women in both countries viewed drink driving negatively, the understanding of what the concept entailed differed between the two samples. The Swedish women appeared to cognitively separate alcohol consumption and driving, and consequently, drink driving was often spoken of as driving after *any* alcohol consumption. The Australian women's understanding of drink driving was more closely related to the legal BAC limit. However, for some Australian women, a "Grey Zone" existed, which denoted driving with a BAC of just above the enforceable limit. While illegal, these instances were subjectively seen as similar to driving with a BAC of just under the legal limit and therefore not morally reprehensible. The practice of cognitively separating drinking from driving appeared to have implications for the tendency to drink and drive among the interviewed women. These findings are discussed in relation to current policy and legislation in Australia and the need for further research into mature-aged women's drink driving is outlined.

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### 1. Introduction

Drink driving continues to be a major cause of traffic-related mortality and morbidity across the world (Global Road Safety Partnership, 2007), and accordingly, has generated a substantial amount of attention in the research literature. However, few studies have examined drink driving from a uniquely female perspective, despite a recorded increase in women's drink driving rates over the past decades (e.g., Perreault, 2013; Wylie, 1995). In an effort to address this gap, the current study investigates drink driving beliefs and attitudes among mature-aged women, a group that comprise a substantial proportion of all female drink drivers (Armstrong, 2013; The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention., n.d.).

The acute effect of alcohol has been shown to impact on a range of physical skills and cognitive abilities that are critical to driving. At the lowest measurable consumption level alcohol increases reaction times and impedes visual accuracy, the

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 7 31380527.

E-mail addresses: [hanna.watling@qut.edu.au](mailto:hanna.watling@qut.edu.au) (H. Watling), [ka.armstrong@qut.edu.au](mailto:ka.armstrong@qut.edu.au) (K. Armstrong).

ability to track objects, and to divide ones attention between competing tasks (Friedman, Robinson, & Yelland, 2011; Ogden & Moskowitz, 2004). The relationship between Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) level and the probability of being involved in a crash was first quantified in the 1964 Grand Rapids Study (Borkenstein, Crowther, Shumate, Zeil, & Zylman, 1964). Findings from this study and others like it (e.g., Blomberg, Peck, Moskowitz, Burns, & Fiorentino, 2009) showed that a significant increase in crash risk occurs at a BAC of around 0.04% and continues to rise exponentially as consumption increases.

Historically, drink driving has been seen as a male problem, as drink driving apprehension rates as well as alcohol-related crashes are more likely to involve men than women (Impinen et al., 2009; Kelley-Baker & Romano, 2010). However, in parallel with increases in women's alcohol consumption (McPherson, Casswell, & Pledger, 2004) and driving exposure (Robertson, Liew, & Gardner, 2011) the ratio of male-to-female drink driving has been slowly shifting. In many countries, drink driving rates among women have increased during the past three decades while there has been stabilisation or decrease in male drink driving (The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention., 2008; Tsai, Anderson, & Vaca, 2010). The relative increase in the number of women who drive after drinking alcohol has been particularly rapid in the past decade. For instance, in the 11 year period between 2001 and 2011, data from New Zealand, Australia, the UK, Sweden, and the US show increases to women's drink/drug driving that range between 10.5% and 69.1% (Armstrong, Watling, Watson, & Davey, 2014; Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), n.d.; Ministry of Justice, n.d.; Statistics New Zealand, n.d.; The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, n.d.).

As drink driving is more common among men, the attention of drink driving research has been largely directed towards this gender. Subsequently, our understanding of drink driving and associated interventions and treatments is largely based on male drink driving behaviours. At the same time, the factors that influence women's drink driving remain relatively unexplored, and treatment programmes targeted at female drink drivers are under-developed (McMurran, Riemsma, Manning, Misso, & Kleijnen, 2011). The need to expand the understanding of on drink driving among women is further compounded by a burgeoning literature which has found important differences between male and female drink drivers. Compared to men, for instance, female drink drivers tend to be detected with lower BAC levels (Armstrong et al., 2014) and are less likely to reoffend (Nochajski & Stasiewicz, 2006; Rauch et al., 2010). Moreover, male and female drink drivers are more likely to have psychosocial problems (LaPlante, Nelson, Odegaard, LaBrie, & Shaffer, 2008; McMurran et al., 2011), to be separated or divorced (McMurran et al., 2011), to be older (Bernhoft, Hels, & Hansen, 2008), and to be better educated but less well paid (LaPlante et al., 2008) than male drink drivers. Arguably, findings such as these suggest that an understanding of drink driving that is based on men's experiences will fail to address the unique needs and circumstances of female drink drivers.

Although different from their male counterparts, female drink drivers should, however, not be regarded as a homogenous group. In a qualitative study examining the life situations and social circumstances leading up to a drink driving offence among female drivers in the U.S., Robertson, Holmes, and Marcoux (2013) found that the characteristics of these events differed across women of different ages. Younger women often reported that they had been arrested after consuming alcohol at house parties and bars, that they experienced social pressure to drink, and that their drinking often was motivated by a desire to fit in. The second group, women with young children, instead reported that they had been drinking as a coping mechanism brought on by depression, loneliness, or isolation. Many of these women had been apprehended relatively close to their homes, often while running errands or picking up their children. Last, older women, many of whom had not been convicted of drink driving until later in life, reported that the catalysts for their drinking had included negative life-events such as divorce, parental illness or death, or sadness associated with their children leaving home. These women most commonly drank at home and often expressed intense feelings of shame and stigma around their drink driving conviction.

In one of the few studies that have compared the circumstances of women's drink driving across different age groups using apprehension records, Armstrong et al. (2014) further found that, compared to younger women, older female drink drivers were more likely to be detected with a low-range BAC ( $0.05 \leq \text{BAC} < 0.08\%$ ), to be apprehended between midday and midnight, and to refuse to provide a breath or blood specimen when requested to do so. Taken together, studies that have examined drink driving from a uniquely female perspective suggest that women's drink driving is not only different from men's but also that it varies among different groups of women. To gain an accurate picture of the underlying cause of women's drink driving, research must therefore consider factors, such as age and drinking motivation, when examining this phenomenon.

### 1.1. The present study

As part of a broader cross-cultural comparison, the current study sought to extend on previously outlined research by providing preliminary findings on the attitudes and beliefs towards drink driving held by mature-aged women in Sweden and Australia. Attitudes, through their influence on the formation of intention, have been theoretically and empirically linked to behaviour outcomes (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Marcil, Bergeron, & Audet, 2001). In relation to drink driving, studies have shown that attitudes towards this behaviour are linked to self-reported drink driving (Freeman & Watson, 2009; Greenberg, Morral, & Jain, 2005) and that compared to community samples, drink driving offenders hold more positive attitudes towards drink driving (Baum, 2000).

The need to understand attitudes towards drink driving among mature-aged women is further evident when alcohol consumption statistics and drink driving data in Sweden and Australia are considered. After an initial decrease in alcohol consumption volume around the age of 30, women in both countries record a second peak in consumption levels/drinking

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