



## Beyond *pre-loading*: Understanding the associations between pre-, side- and back-loading drinking behavior and risky drinking



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- 42.1% of the sample reported at least one 'loading' behavior.
- Those reporting loading were on average 12 years younger than those who did not.
- Risky drinking was strongly associated with having pre, side or back loaded.
- Loading behavior varied by age and gender.

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the interaction between pre-, side- and back-loading drinking behaviors and their relationship to risky drinking, modeling to account for demographic characteristics. The study was based on an online non-probability panel survey of Victorian adults (18+) who purchased packaged liquor for off premises consumption in the previous 12 months. Initially, 2545 participants entered the study, with 536 screened out, leaving a sample of 2008 respondents. While pre-loading was the most commonly reported loading behavior, back-loading and side-loading were reported almost as frequently. We found a clear association between loading and risky drinking behavior. Respondents who reported engaging in all loading behaviors were more likely to report regular very risky drinking. Age and sex were significant factors influencing the relationship between loading types and risky drinking behavior; income, marital status, and the interaction between sex and age were not significant factors.

We show a broad range of loading behaviors associated with increased levels of risky drinking. Future research should seek to investigate these loading behaviors among a general population sample.

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### 1. Introduction

Pre-loading is now a key component of the drinking culture for many people who form the "night-time economy" population (Barton & Husk, 2012; Foster & Ferguson, 2014; Miller et al., 2012). Pre-loading (also identified as pre-drinking, front-loading, pre-partying and pre-gaming) refers to alcohol consumption at a domestic residence (or non-licensed venue) prior to attending a licensed venue (Foster & Ferguson, 2014; Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007). This drinking behavior is by no means a recent phenomenon; however, the culture and associated nomenclature is. This drinking culture marks a significant shift from the traditional 'pub-club' drinking pattern to a 'home-pub-club' or 'home-club' pattern (Barton & Husk, 2012).

The majority of available evidence shows that the price differential between alcohol purchased at off-premises and on-premises outlets is a driver for pre-loading (Caudwell & Hagger, 2014; Holloway, Jayne, & Valentine, 2008; Maclean & Callinan, 2013; Miller et al., 2012; Santos, Paes, Sanudo, & Sanchez, 2014; Wells, Graham, & Purcell, 2009). Other drivers cited for pre-loading are socializing, increasing the length of a night out, group bonding and event "priming", or getting in the mood (Forsyth, 2010; Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007; Pedersen, LaBrie, & Kilmer, 2009; Wells et al., 2009). The emphasis placed upon price is interesting in the Australian context, given that drinking at levels that place the drinker at greater risk of injury from a single occasion of drinking tends to be more prevalent among more advantaged groups (Australian National Preventive Health Agency, 2013). This suggests that price is a factor where drinkers are motivated by the desire to achieve a certain level of drunkenness, especially where there are barriers to consumption at the subsequent event (Caudwell & Hagger, 2014). A drinker's income is therefore more likely to determine the

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amount consumed during a pre-loading session (Hummer, Napper, Ehret, & LaBrie, 2013; Maclean & Callinan, 2013; Østergaard & Andrade, 2014b; Wells et al., 2009).

Numerous studies have shown associations between pre-loading and higher levels of alcohol consumption, intoxication and risk taking (Barry, Stellefson, Piazza-Gardner, Chaney, & Dodd, 2013; Foster & Ferguson, 2014; Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, 2013; Hughes, Anderson, Morleo, & Bellis, 2008; Labhart, Wells, Graham, & Kuntsche, 2014; LaBrie, Hummer, Pedersen, Lac, & Chithambo, 2012; Miller et al., 2013; Santos et al., 2014). Those who partake in this kind of drinking behavior generally self-report higher levels of alcohol consumption compared to those who do not pre-load, or compared to drinking occasions when pre-loading did not occur (Barton & Husk, 2012; Hummer et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2013). However, these studies typically target high-school or university college students (Barry et al., 2013; Caudwell & Hagger, 2014; Fairlie, Maggs, & Lanza, 2015; Kenney, Hummer, & Labrie, 2010; LaBrie et al., 2012; Paves, Pedersen, Hummer, & Labrie, 2012; Sheehan, Lau-Barraco, & Linden, 2013) with very few studies using subjects drawn from a general population (see for examples: McClatchley, Shorter, & Chalmers, 2014; Reed et al., 2011; Santos et al., 2014).

Pre-loading tends to be more prevalent among young people in their late teens and early twenties (Paschall & Saltz, 2007; Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007; Wells et al., 2009). Similarly, pre-loading behavior appears to be common to both males and females (DeJong, DeRicco, & Schneider, 2010; Hughes et al., 2008; Miller et al., 2013; Reed et al., 2011). However, recent studies show that males typically drink more during a pre-loading session than females (Foster & Ferguson, 2014; Miller et al., 2012; Østergaard & Andrade, 2014a), while others have suggested that pre-loading may lead women to drinking equivalent amounts to their male peers, or at least be at a greater risk of harm from this type of drinking (LaBrie & Pedersen, 2008; Merrill, Vermont, Bachrach, & Read, 2013).

Notwithstanding the increasing literature on pre-loading, there is limited research examining the broader set of alcohol loading behaviors; that is, pre-, side- and back-loading, or drinking before, between and after attending licensed premises. Previous studies show that while pre-loading is seen as a mechanism for getting the party started, back-loading (i.e., “after partying”) is a way to keep the party going long into the night, and driven in part by the social reasons described previously (Forsyth, 2010; Holloway et al., 2008). ‘Side-loading’, a more recently coined term, refers to the consumption of alcohol when smuggled into licensed premises, such as pubs, bars and clubs (Forsyth, 2010; Miller et al., 2012), or while traveling to and between licensed premises (Wickham, 2012; Gilmore, 2014). Recent research on alcohol use in Australian night-time economies indicates that side-loading is a common practice among those entering venues, and associated with excessive alcohol consumption and harm (Miller et al., 2012).

To date, research on preloading has established that this behavior is predicated upon consumer utilization of both on and off premises alcohol sales, and in effect this interaction is associated with drinking alcohol at harmful levels. Preloading is typically linked to younger drinkers, with the cheaper price of alcohol available from off-premises retailers cited as a cause for this behavior. However, few studies have examined the broader suite of loading behaviors (pre, side and back) and their association with risky drinking and the demographic characteristics that underpin them. This paper examines the interaction between these three drinking behaviors. We also model the findings to account for demographic characteristics that may influence drinking behavior: sex, age and household income. Marital status is also included in the analysis, as studies have shown that drinking behaviors can be mediated by a drinker's relationship status, with single people more likely to drink in a harmful manner than those in relationships (Kim, Tiberio, Pears, Capaldi, & Washburn, 2013; Leonard & Rothbard, 1999; Miller-Tutzauer, Leonard, & Windle, 1991; Temple et al., 1991). Four research questions guide the analyses: (a) What percentage of respondents

engaged in *any* loading behavior (pre-, side- and back-loading)? (b) What percentage of respondents engaged *only* in particular types of loading behavior? (c) What is the nature of the relationship between loading and risky drinking behavior? (d) Does the relationship between loading and risky drinking behavior change when socio-demographic characteristics (sex, age, marital status and household income) are added to the model? If so, what is the nature of the effect?

## 2. Method

Ethics were obtained from Melbourne University HREC in June 2011.

## 3. Sample

VicHealth contracted *Research Now* to conduct an online non-probability panel survey of Victorian adults (18+) who had purchased packaged liquor for off premises consumption in the previous 12 months. ‘Packaged liquor’ refers to alcohol sold from retail outlets for consumption off-premises (Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation, 2015). The survey was in field from July–August 2011 and participants were reimbursed \$2 dollars for completing the survey. Initially, 2545 participants entered the study, with 536 screened out as they had not purchased packaged liquor in the 12 months prior to July 2011, leaving a sample of 2008 respondents. *Research Now* undertook sampling to ensure proportionate weighting across age and gender demographics.

### 3.1. Measures

#### 3.1.1. Loading behavior

Survey measures were developed specifically for the project, and piloted. Of these, three were used for the current analysis to determine pre-loading, side-loading and back-loading behavior of drinkers in the study. Participants were asked:

On any occasion in the last 12 months have you purchased packaged liquor to drink:

- before going to a licensed premises such as a pub, hotel or nightclub?
- while socializing at a licensed premises such as a pub, hotel or nightclub, or while moving from one licensed premises to another?
- after drinking at a licensed premises such as a pub, hotel or nightclub?

#### 3.1.2. Risky drinking – drinking intensity and frequency

This study modified a number of survey measures from the National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2010 questionnaire (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2011). One series of items used for the current analysis included the quantity and frequency of drinking *packaged liquor*, for example: “How many times in the last 12 months you had: 20+, 11–19, 7–10, 5–6, 3–4, 1–2, less than 1 standard drinks?” The response options being everyday, 5–6 days per week, 3–4 days per week, 1–2 days per week, 2–3 days per month, about 1 day per month, less often, never drink this number of standard drinks. Responses are presented with a visual scale of standard drinks. Responses were coded into categories based upon the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) guidelines for risk of injury from a single occasion of drinking (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2009):

- Non drinkers – had not consumed packaged liquor in the last 12 months
- Low risk drinkers – never greater than 5 or more drinks
- Occasional risky drinkers – 5 drinks or more less than 12 times per year
- Regular risky drinkers – 5 drinks or more 12 or more times per year

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