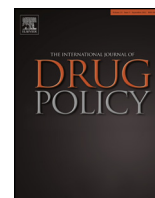




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Short Report

Re-thinking pre-drinking: Implications from a sample of teenagers who drink in private settings



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ABSTRACT

Background: Pre-drinking is often defined as an economically-minded set of drinking practices engaged in prior to attending public entertainment areas, such as licensed venues. This paper explores motivations and practical considerations that a sample of teenagers describes as significant to 'pre-drinking', despite not attending licensed premises during their most recent risky drinking session.

Methods: Data were derived from the mixed-methods Young Australians Alcohol Reporting System (YAARS) project. 16 participants aged 16–19 were identified as pre-drinking on their most recent risky drinking session, followed by subsequent alcohol consumption in *non-licensed* venues. 4 members of this subsample also undertook qualitative interviews.

Results: These data expand on existing understandings of pre-drinking by emphasising the breadth of motivations and practical considerations understood to shape both pre-drinking practices, and subsequent drinking in other public entertainment areas. These primarily included desires for personal enhancement and experiencing freedom over restriction, the dynamics of accessing alcohol and private space, the necessity of opportunism, and concerns regarding parents and other authority figures.

Conclusions: Analyses of groups obscured by dominant definitions of what constitutes 'pre-drinking' illuminate a broader range of motivations and concerns facing young people who drink. Such findings enhance our understanding of young people's drinking practices, the terminology used to describe them, and the development of relevant policies and interventions.

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Introduction

Pre-drinking (also known as pre-loading or pre-gaming) is a widespread, important and ritualised aspect of the collective drinking practices of contemporary night-time economy (NTE) populations, particularly young people (LaBrie, Hummer, Pederesen, Lac, & Chithambo, 2012; Miller et al., 2013; Zamboanga et al., 2011). With many young people organising their nights out according to a 'home-pub-club' model (Barton & Husk, 2014),

research on pre-drinking has primarily focussed on the extent to which it shapes, or exacerbates, 'risky' drinking patterns and related harms in licensed entertainment precincts (Labhart, Graham, Wells, & Kuntsche, 2013; Zamboanga et al., 2011). This focus has left pre-drinking as primarily defined in policy, academic and media discourse as drinking in private locations prior to further drinking in these public night-time spaces, predominantly in licensed venues (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2017; Foster & Ferguson, 2014; MacLean & Callinan, 2013).

Following this salient definition, pre-drinking is often understood to be motivated by the affordability of consuming off-license alcohol in the home, relative to the high price of beverages in licensed venues (Barton & Husk, 2012; Ogeil et al., 2016; Seaman, Edgar, & Ikegwuonu, 2013). However, recent research has also illuminated the broad range of socio-cultural pre-drinking

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motivations articulated by young people, including enhanced sociability, boosted confidence, shared fun, achieving desired levels of intoxication, and preparing appearances for the NTE (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2017; Bachrach, Merrill, Bytschkow, & Read, 2012; Foster & Ferguson, 2014; Zamboanga et al., 2011). Others have also suggested that pre-drinking can include consumption in suburban bars prior to ‘going out’ into the larger NTE district (Deville, Allen, & Brown, 2017). Similarly, Zamboanga et al. (2011) draw attention to the prevalence of pre-drinking prior to attending private parties, and its associations with risky drinking practices such as drinking games, particularly among populations under the legal purchase age. These studies highlight the ways in which young people’s understandings of pre-drinking might be more extensive than how it is typically defined in the wider alcohol discourse, as well as eliciting several health and policy concerns, given pre-drinking practices often occur beyond the limits of existing regulatory controls (Dietze, Livingston, Callinan, & Room, 2014; Ogeil et al., 2016).

The majority of pre-drinking studies to this point have, however, been limited to quantitative analyses of legal purchase age drinkers, often within an educational context (either high-school or university students), and focus on their movements from private to licensed public spaces (Foster & Ferguson, 2014). In contrast, our paper draws attention to the experiences of a sample of Australian teenagers, including some under the Australian legal purchase age, who reported drinking prior to attending non-licensed venues, typically parties. Using qualitative data, we elicit the significance of having access to alcohol and private space, the need for personal enhancement, and the role of parents and other authority figures, to shaping how pre-drinking is valued, understood and practiced.

Methods

Data are derived from a larger study examining heavy drinking amongst Australian teenagers aged 16–19 years (Lam et al., 2015; Lam et al., 2017; Ogeil et al., 2016), which included quantitative face-to-face surveys ($n = 351$) and in-depth qualitative interviews ($n = 68$).

Of the survey respondents, just under half ($n = 149$) reported pre-drinking on their most recent session when 7+ standard drinks were consumed. In Australia, a ‘standard drink’ refers to beverages containing 10 g of alcohol, and a visual standard drink guide was provided to assist calculations. Our current analysis focuses on a subsample of 16 pre-drinkers (i.e. 16/149), 11 male, and 5 female, who reported pre-drinking but did not subsequently move into licensed entertainment precincts during their last risky drinking session.

The majority of this subsample were aged 16–17, and reported slightly higher typical consumption patterns than the overall pre-drinking group – they were invited for a qualitative interview if they had consumed 11+ SD at their last risky drinking session. This sample reported consuming 13.6 standard drinks on a ‘typical’ drinking occasion (compared to 12.1 in the overall pre-drinking sample), and 28.1 standard drinks (range 12–50) on their heaviest drinking occasion in the previous 12 months (compared to 25.6). These participants also reported consuming an average of nearly 26 standard drinks on their last risky drinking session, which most described as ‘typical’ of their regular drinking patterns. All sessions occurred less than 30 days prior to interview, with two-thirds occurring 7 or fewer days ago. Further quantitative detail on the overall pre-drinking sample can be found elsewhere (Ogeil et al., 2016).

2 males and 2 females from this subsample also undertook in-depth interviews for an average of approximately 30 min. Although not the primary focus of the interviews, questions regarding pre-

drinking were intended to form a more comprehensive picture of participants’ individual and collective drinking experiences. Participants were typically asked ‘can you tell me a little bit about the last time that you had pre-drinks, before going out?’ however some discussed pre-drinking unprompted. Thematic analysis was informed primarily by the existing Australian pre-drinking literature (e.g. MacLean & Callinan, 2013), and focuses primarily on the motivations and practical considerations understood to shape pre-drinking experiences.

Economical, relaxing, organisational: thoughts from the broader sample

To contextualise the analysis, the study’s broader pre-drinking sample ($n = 149$) imagined and practiced pre-drinking in ways that resonated with existing literature. These participants considered pre-drinking to be a normative, regular and collective drinking practice, generally occurring in private settings prior to organised events or going to ‘town’, with cost reported as the primary motivation for pre-drinking, as it enabled one to ‘save money.’ Pre-drinks were also considered to differ from ‘typical’ drinking events, combining practical preparation (e.g. hair and make-up, organising friends and transport) with emotional, social and intoxicative preparations (e.g. drinking, becoming more relaxed and talkative). Pre-drinking also provided participants with a sense of ease and freedom that contrasted starkly with the security, queues, financial and social pressures of licensed entertainment precincts.

Qualitative interviewees often imagined these idealised forms of pre-drinking. In practice, however, pre-drinking events often emerged differently due to the characteristics of the intended destination, available time, means of transport, or the emotional or intoxicated states of those with whom they might be pre-drinking. Similar patterns also emerged in interviews with members of the non-NTE subsample, with some differences. Given the lowered likelihood of attending licensed entertainment areas, this subsample was more likely to prioritise the social and emotional benefits of pre-drinking over its cost-effectiveness, while also articulating unique concerns with the practicalities of obtaining alcohol and private space, and negotiating parents and other authority figures. These considerations often appeared to these participants as more intense, more tightly policed, and assumed to carry greater consequences compared to those of the broader pre-drinking sample. We analyse the perspectives of this subsample in more detail below.

Results

Motivations

In keeping with both the wider sample of pre-drinkers, and previous research, several participants suggested pre-drinking was motivated by a need to achieve a relaxed state ideal for socialising.

Just sort of kill the nerves, loosen up a bit . . . before we start meeting people (Male, Age 18)

‘Loosening up’ was facilitated by a combination of intoxication levels ranging from a ‘buzz’ to ‘fairly drunk’, and a sense of increasing comfort and sociability.

What usually happens is I go to a mate’s house and I have 3 or 4 drinks and I get that little buzz of just not being nervous anymore and I am calmed down and relaxed. . . . you are just ready to be in that kind of easy going mode. (Female, 17)

Opportunism arising from boredom and the availability of alcohol also enabled some participants to fill idle time:

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