

‘Isn’t it mostly girls that do pre-drinks really?’ Young men and women’s accounts of pre-loading in the UK

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Abstract

Aims: Pre-loading, the consumption of off-sale alcohol within private settings before socialising in licenced premises, is common among young people. The research explored young people’s accounts of pre-loading within their experience of wider peer group drinking occasions in the UK. **Methods:** 14 semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with peer groups of young people (N=70, 16-21 years) and analysed using thematic analysis. **Results:** Pre-loading with friends prior to a ‘night out’ drinking in public spaces was a common sequential practice within their collective drinking experiences. Although traditionally conceptualised within policy, academic and media discourse as drinking in the domestic sphere before entering licenced premises, young people also considered drinking within the home prior to attending private parties (e.g. house parties) as pre-loading. Price was represented as a key, yet not sole, motivating factor and pre-drinking alcohol held importance in reaching a desired state of intoxication that enhanced shared fun and pleasure among both young men and women. However, the social (e.g. chatting with friends, taking photographs) and preparatory activities (e.g. ‘getting ready’) at play during pre-loading appeared to hold more importance to young women, in promoting group bonding and in the creation and management of heterosexual feminine identities both on- and off-line. **Conclusions:** Although price is important, there is a wider social and cultural significance of pre-loading as a gendered phenomenon. Young people apply a wider definition of pre-loading that incorporated the consumption of off-sale alcohol prior to parties within private settings.

Key words: pre-loading, pre-drinking, young people, alcohol, United Kingdom, gender

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Background

Over the last decade there has been a reduction in the proportion of 16-24 year olds in the UK reporting 'binge drinking' in the last week (Fuller, 2015). Whilst there is an increasing number of young alcohol abstainers, in those young people in England (aged 11-15) who do report alcohol use in the previous week (8%), 22% report drinking 15 or more units, and 17% of all 16-24 year olds drink in excess of national weekly alcohol consumption guidelines (14 units) (Fuller, 2015). Moreover, although the proportion of young people consuming alcohol has decreased, there has been notable changes in young women's alcohol consumption, with a convergence between the sexes and a relative increase in young women's frequency and level of alcohol consumption, and self-reported drunkenness (Atkinson et al., 2012a; Fuller, 2015; Hibell et al., 2012; Slade et al., 2016). Women are now active participants in public drinking environments, and like young men, partake in a culture of drinking and intoxication in the pursuit of pleasure, group belonging and friendship bonding, both in public spaces and within the home (Griffin et al., 2009; 2013; Measham & Østergaard, 2009; Niland et al., 2013; 2014; Szmigin et al., 2008). Despite evidence of convergence between the drinking practices of young women and men, experiences of drinking, intoxication and public, private and virtual drinking spaces remain gendered (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Griffin et al., 2013; Thurnell-Read, 2016). Drinking spaces, and practices and relations within them, act as important sites in the performance and management of masculinity and femininity and as spaces in which heteronormative gender relations are played out and negotiated (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Atkinson et al., 2012b; Bailey et al., 2015; 2016; De Visser & McDonnell, 2012; De Visser & Smith, 2007a,b; 2009; Griffin et al., 2013; Measham, 2002). Alcohol use and intoxication have traditionally been regarded as masculine behaviours and women continuing to face more social judgement and scrutiny for their alcohol use, intoxication, appearance and expression of their sexuality in drinking environments than men (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2013; Nichols, 2016; Thurnell-Read, 2016).

The spaces in which alcohol-related practices are played out are not only physical (e.g. public such as bars and clubs and private spaces such as the home), but mediated (e.g. by the media), and have recently become virtual (e.g. Social Network Sites, SNS) (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Barton & Husk, 2014; Griffin et al., 2009; Goodwin et al., 2016). Despite representing separate physical locations, private and public drinking spaces are not separate

entities, and it is important to explore the relationship between the two in order to gain a better understanding of young people's contemporary drinking practices (Barton & Husk, 2014; Wells et al., 2009). Moreover, the role of the media within young people's drinking practices is of importance (Atkinson et al., 2011; 2012b; 2013), and the recent phenomena of young people documenting their drinking experiences, including pre-drinking, on social media adds a further layer of complexity to the ways in which young people attach meaning and significance to drinking within their social lives (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Atkinson et al., 2016; Moewaka Barnes et al., 2016).

Within policy, academic and media discourse, the concept of 'preloading', 'pre-drinking', 'front-loading' or 'pre-partying' (referred to as 'pre-loading' or 'pre-drinking' from here on) tends to refer to a pattern of drinking involving the consumption of alcohol, usually purchased from off-trade retailers (e.g. supermarkets) within private spaces (e.g. home) prior to drinking in licenced premises (Barton & Husk, 2012; 2014; BBC, 2017; Foster et al., 2013; Hughes et al., 2008; LaBrie et al., 2011; Wells et al., 2009). Although drinking alcohol before drinking in licensed premises is not a new phenomenon, pre-loading appears to have become more prominent and ritualised among young people in some countries (Barton & Husk, 2012; 2014; Hughes et al., 2008; McCreanor et al., 2016; Wells, 2009). As a sequential extension of the social practice of collective drinking and nights out with friends, pre-loading is a normalised and routinised type of drinking which is enacted at certain times, with certain people and in particular settings, with its own activities, motivations and meanings (Alley et al., 2016; Roberts, 2012; Savic et al., 2017; Supski et al., 2017).

One important reason for pre-loading among young people is the affordability of off-sale alcohol compared with alcohol available for purchase in public drinking spaces (Barton & Husk, 2012; Caudwell & Hagger, 2014; Forsyth, 2005; Foster et al., 2012; MacClean et al., 2013; Ogeil et al., 2016; Østergaard & Andrade, 2014; Penderson et al., 2009; Read et al., 2010; Wells et al., 2009). Young people thus pre-load on cheap alcohol before entering public spaces with the intention of reducing the total amount spent on alcohol (Barton & Husk, 2014; Caudwell & Hagger, 2014; Foster & Ferguson, 2013; Forsyth, 2010; Ogeil et al., 2016; Østergaard & Andrade, 2014; Penderson et al., 2009; Read et al., 2010; Wells, 2009). As Barton and Husk (2012; 2014) highlight, whilst there is a tendency to assume that the key factor driving young people's pre-loading is price, explanations based purely on price are too simplistic and ignore the important cultural and social role of pre-loading to the peer group (Barton & Husk, 2012; 2014). Both men and women pre-load (Barton & Husk, 2012), yet some research suggests women practice pre-loading to a greater extent than men (Boyle et al., 2010; Measham et al. 2011; LaBrie & Pedersen, 2008). There is also some evidence that pre-

loading may be a gendered phenomenon, with the nature and explanations for pre-loading differing between them (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Barton & Husk, 2014; McCreanor et al., 2016; Wells, 2009). This paper aims to provide insight into young men and women's accounts of the nature and reasons for pre-loading with friends prior to a 'night out' or private party context in the UK.

Methods

Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with 14 peer groups, consisting of 70 young men (n=30) and women (n=40) aged 16–21 years. Participants were recruited through educational establishments (schools (n=3), colleges (n=1), Universities (n=2)) and youth groups (n=1) in one region of the North-West of England (UK) well known for its nightlife and nightlife tourism. This region also has significantly higher levels of alcohol consumption, related hospital admissions, and 'binge drinking' than the rest of England (Fuller, 2015; Public Health England, 2015). Educational establishments and individual participants were drawn from low-high- and mid-point Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintiles. The mean age of participants was 17.8 years, and included those approaching the legal UK alcohol purchasing age of 18 (51%, n=36) and those aged 18-21 year olds (49%, n=34), who were legally able to purchase alcohol. All participants were currently in full time education and the majority were White British (77%, n=54). Mean age of initiation into alcohol use was 13.3 years. Most had consumed alcohol at least once in their lifetime (86%, n=60), and had drunk both before (pre-drink) and at social events with friends at parties (e.g. 18th birthday parties located in public and private drinking locations, house parties), and within mainstream heteronormative nightlife drinking environments (less regularly and on special occasions for younger participants). The focus of the paper is therefore young people gathering to drink before attending licensed drinking establishments (e.g. bars and clubs), as well as organised social events/parties within private settings (e.g. the home).

Focus groups took place within schools and colleges, and spaces preferred by the participants (e.g. university communal areas, within the home). Both mixed sex (n=8) and single sex focus groups (n=6) (all male n=1, all female n=5) were conducted, reflecting the makeup of young people's peer groups, and the number of participants in each group ranged from 3 to 10 consisting of young people who were similar in age range (e.g. 17-18 years, 20-21 years). Mixed sex groups contained young men and women who were familiar with each other and drank together, yet they also discussed drinking separately in single sex groups (particularly when pre-loading). Discussions around pre-loading took place as part of a wider

study exploring young people's talk around their peer group drinking practices and the role of alcohol marketing and SNS in their drinking cultures. Questions covered a number of areas such as young people's experiences of drinking and intoxication, experiences in drinking environments, perspectives on alcohol marketing, use of SNS, and use of SNS in relation to drinking and intoxication. Pre-loading was not a main focus of the study, but we were interested in how pre-loading featured within young men and women's talk around their wider peer group drinking experiences. Young people were asked to describe their usual and 'ideal' drinking occasions and one question focussed upon drinking within the home before a 'night out'. However, many participants discussed pre-loading as a main feature of their peer group drinking occasions (e.g. participation in nightlife and private 'house' parties) without being prompted.

Group discussions were used in order to reflect drinking as a social and group behaviour and the real life experiences, group dynamics, shared knowledge and meaning of alcohol use within the group (Eder & Ferguson, 2003; Heath et al., 2009; Griffiths & Casswell, 2010; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996). Conducting interviews in the friendship groups in which young people drank alcohol and experienced intoxication, provided the most useful and relaxed context in which accounts of their real life experiences could be captured (Demant & Järvinen, 2010; Griffin et al., 2009; 2013). However, it is important to acknowledge that what young people discussed may not reflect their real life drinking practices, but instead how they wished to be perceived by others within their (gendered) identity making practices within the research interview context (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Lyons et al., 2015). Interviews were analysed using a thematic coding frame incorporating a combination of pre-determined and emerging themes using a thematic analysis approach in NVivo (version 10) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews lasted between 30 min and one hour, were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed by the same researchers who conducted the interviews, with regular in-depth discussions concerning code application and development taking place. Field researchers were White British females aged between 25 and 30. Ethical approval was granted by the University ethics committee and informed consent provided by all participants.

Results

Overview of results

Pre-loading was a common, routine, planned, and sequential feature of the social practice of collective drinking with friends at social events within licenced premises and house parties, among underage and legal aged young people. Both young men and women referred to 'pre-drinking' when recalling their drinking experiences, which may be explained by frequent use of the term in UK mainstream media (e.g. BBC, 2017). Although definitions of pre-loading employed by policy makers, academics and the media focus on alcohol consumption in domestic spaces prior to entering licenced premises, young people included drinking in domestic settings prior to attending social events in private settings (e.g. house parties) as pre-drinking. Thus, although the language of policy and academia has been integrated into young people's talk via media discourse, the meaning of the term has been expanded to reflect young people's own experiences.

Pre-loading was predominantly discussed as a single sex group activity which took place in the home/friend's home during the early evening, involving between two to three hours of group drinking for young women (between the hours of 1900 and 2230), and shorter periods for young men, with both entering public nightlife spaces after 2230. Young people provided several reasons for pre-drinking, that went beyond reducing the cost of a night and enabling intoxication, providing insight into pre-loading as a sequential social and gendered practice within their wider experiences of collective drinking with friends. Young women in particular represented pre-loading as an occasion incorporating certain social and preparatory activities (e.g. chatting with friends, 'getting ready' for a night out, taking photographs), that initiated group bonding and enabled the creation the heterosexual feminine appearances required for their participation in nightlife, and for displaying to others on SNS.

Reducing cost and the purchasing of on-sale alcohol

Highlighting how wider economic and market factors influence young people's drinking practices, one of the key explanations for pre-loading expressed was a desire to spend less money on alcohol due to the high cost of on-premise alcohol relative to off- sale prices in supermarkets.

Extract 1

Researcher: Ok do you ever do drinks beforehand?

Male 1: Yeah, we do, yeah

Researcher: Where does that tend to be?

Male 2:- In my house

Female 1:- Yeah always in someone's house

Researcher: Why do you do that?

Male 3: Cost of a night out in pubs

Researcher: Any other reason?

Male 1: A lot of it's about not having to spend as much when we actually go out, on drink, clubs

Female 1: and getting a lift from there means it costs less as well

(Group 1, Females and Males, 17-19 years)

In extract 1, economic influences are apparent and discussed as the main reason for pre-loading, highlighting how it was not just the amount spent on alcohol they wished to reduce, but the overall cost of a night out including the cost of taxis and entry to clubs. As Female 1 suggests, the pre-loading setting provided the opportunity for transport to be provided (presumably by family members), which in turn reduced overall costs. The location of pre-loading was therefore carefully and practically in relation to the proximity of participants' homes, the location of the nightlife drinking spaces, and the potential availability of transport to nightlife.

Extract 2

Researcher: Back to the pre-drinking, if you've had drinks before you head out, will, will you purchase less?

Female 4: Less

Male 5: Have a little bit, you'd have less cos you're already like tipsy, so you don't need them first like few like pints or bottles to get you there

Female 4: And you spread them out over a long time as well

Male 5: Yeah, when you drink like slower cos half the time you're either dancing or doing something else and you forget the drinks there on the table with your mates.

Researcher: So is that because the cost is so expensive?

Female 4: Yeah, unless you're in a house party, cos when you're in a house party you just take your stuff, drink it before when you're in the house, and then you just drink your own when you're there at the party as well

(Group 3, Females and Males, 17-18 years)

The degree to which pre-loading reduced purchases of on-trade alcohol, in turn reducing the amount consumed varied and was influenced by young people's financial circumstances. Extract 2 shows that, for some, pre-loading consisted of drinking to a desired level of subjective intoxication and then drinking little, or not at all, in nightlife spaces. Through describing how he would purchase 'less cos you're already like tipsy, so you don't need them first like few like pints or bottles to get you there', Male 1 highlighted self-titration with alcohol before entering night-life as a normal aspect of his social drinking occasions. The extract also highlights how some young people deliberately drank less quickly in nightlife spaces ('spread them out over a long time', Female, 'you drink slower', Male) and how participating in group activities ('dancing', Male) limited alcohol consumption and the amount spent.

When asked whether decisions to reduce levels of drinking were due to the expense of alcohol, a distinction was made between pre-loading prior to a night out drinking in public drinking spaces, and pre-drinking before attending house parties. Whilst both young people and young adults reported drinking alcohol before attending house parties, there were differences in the domestic context of drinking. Underage youth who were less able to gain entry into venues and were less likely to have parental permission to participate in nightlife tended to drink at house parties and defined drinking with friends within the home prior to such

occasions as pre-loading. However, others (e.g. Female 4) suggested that pre-loading to reduce cost did not apply to 'house parties', where they supplied their own alcohol (presumably cheaper off-trade alcohol) and as such did not reduce the amount they drank.

Extract 3

Researcher: If you think about pre drinking or pre loading do you guys ever do that?

Male 4: I always do that.

Female 5: Yeah always pre-drink.

Female 6: I have a problem with that cos it's not pre-drinking, for me, a lot of my mates if they haven't got a lot of money they'll pre-drink and then not drink in town, but then I pre-drink and then I still drink the same amount that I would anyway, even if hadn't planned to

(Group 4, Females and Males, 19-21 years)

Comparing Extract 2 with Extract 3, some young people reported the intention to drink less in public drinking spaces following pre-loading, but were unsuccessful in doing so and as such, failed to reduce the amount they spent as desired. In extract 3, Female 6 discussed how she intended to drink less in nightlife spaces following pre-loading, yet still drank 'the same amount that [she] would anyway, even if [she] hadn't planned to'. With failed self-regulation being a regular aspect of her drinking, she questioned whether drinking in the home before entering nightlife spaces could be defined as 'pre-drinking', due to the continuation of drinking in public spaces ('cos it's not pre-drinking, for me'). Thus, she indirectly defined pre-loading as drinking within the private sphere with the intention drinking less on-sale alcohol and reducing cost. Moreover, she distinguished herself from friends who due to economic restrictions ('haven't got a lot of money') purchased less on-sale alcohol, highlighting how her economic ability to purchase alcohol led to higher levels of consumption, despite intending to drink less ('I still drink the same amount that I would anyway').

Pre-loading and intoxication

Extract 4

Female 7: I like pre-loading

Female 8: Pre-drinking

Researcher: What's the reasons for that?

Female 8: Erm, I'm a shy person, so I need to get like kinda...

Female 8: A buzz on

Female 7: I need to get 'pumped' to go out

Female 8: It's a legit reason

Female 8: So that is literally my reason

Female 9: Legit

(Group 4, Females, 18-19 years)

Pre-drinking not only allowed participants to reach a desired state of subjective intoxication prior to entering nightlife with the intention of limiting the amount spent on on-sale alcohol, but also enabled intoxication for social reasons (e.g. to overcome shyness, to boost confidence) which enhance shared fun. As shown in Extract 4, young women discussed pre-loading to lower inhibitions and boost confidence as the main reason for pre-drinking ('that is literally my reason'). Describing the effects of alcohol ('I need to get 'pumped' to go out') and overcoming shyness ('I'm a shy person') they defended their use of pre-loading for this reason as 'legit' (thus hinting at 'illegitimate' reasons for pre-drinking) in ways that young men did not. This attempt to justify their actions suggested a certain degree of societal disapproval attached to the instrumental use of alcohol as a confidence enhancer in ways that were gendered.

Extract 5

Researcher: Is drinking alcohol beforehand important in your night out?

Female 10: Well I couldn't be sober in a club.

All: Yeah.

Female 11: I don't know, I mean it makes you dance and stuff and you don't feel as embarrassed to dance.

Female 10: I can't dance unless I've had a drink, we all dance

Female 12: I can't dance as well [all laugh].

Researcher: going back to the pre-drinking and getting ready did you say that's just as important as going out like part of the night out itself?

Female 11: Sometimes, but it's not even about before you go out into town

Female 10: yeah, pre drinks help, but like when you go to like parties if you don't have a pre drink it's boring, like the first hour everyone's just sat there like 2/3 drinks down, all shy, then on the dance floor, like the party actually starts, so pre drinks actually like help parties

(Group 5, Females, 17-18 years old)

Reaching a desired level of subjective intoxication was further highlighted in extract 5 where it was discussed as allowing for participation in group activities such as dancing without embarrassment and to enhance enjoyment, fun and group bonding through shared group activities. Stating that she could not 'be sober in a club' and that she could not dance unless she 'had a drink', Female 10 suggested that the main function of pre-drinking was reaching a desired level of intoxication prior to a night out to encourage shared activities, and in turn framed abstention as restricting sociability and enjoyment. Pre-loading was thus positioned as holding a practical function related to achieving intoxication, as well as an instrumental social function related to the sociability and shared fun ('we all dance')) afforded by intoxication.

Pre-loading also had a functional role in reaching a desired state of drunkenness prior to drinking alcohol at private parties. Whilst cost was not a motivating factor for pre-drinking in this context, it was essential in boosting confidence and pleasure. As Female 10 highlighted, not drinking before parties was felt to lead to boredom ('if you don't have a pre drink, 'it's boring'), as prohibiting social interaction ('everyone's just sat there like 2/3 drinks down, all shy') and as limiting shared enjoyable activities such as dancing. Thus, in the same way as pre-loading before entering nightlife spaces, through initiating intoxication, pre-drinking prior

to private parties, 'helps' (Female 10) instigate social interaction, highlighting the central role of alcohol in lowering inhibitions and promoting sociability.

Extract 6

Researcher: So, do you tend to do that before every night out or is it just sometimes?

Female 13: Yeah.

Female 14: I do it.

Female 13: Yeah I do it.

Female 14: [Addressing Female 12] You're quite good.

Female 13: Yeah, 'cause I know my limit because once I get past that limit then it ruins the night for me because I'm just too drunk and it annoys me.

Researcher: So do you try not to get too drunk when you're pre-drinking?

Female 13: I sort of get a bit tipsy but I know when to stop.

Researcher: [to Female3] Is it the same for you?

Female 13 and 14: No

Female 13 [: [to Female 13] She don't know her limit [laughs]

Female 14: I don't know when to stop. I know I'm getting better.

Female 13: Yeah, but she does end up falling asleep a lot in the toilets [all three laugh].

Female 15: You never know where she's going to end up [all laugh].

(Group 6, Females, 20-21 years)

Discussions around pre-loading also initiated talk around managing alcohol intake and intoxication. Some young women expressed regulating their alcohol use whilst pre-loading in an attempt to control intoxication ('I sort of get a bit tipsy but I know when to stop', Extract 6) in order to prevent becoming too intoxicated which was viewed as ruining the night ('I know my limit because once I get past that limit then it ruins the night'). Such discussions were

absent from young men's accounts, reflecting the gendered restrictions placed on women's drinking and intoxication in relation to the notion of self-control relative to men (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2009; 2013). Others discussed pre-loading that led to more extreme experiences of intoxication, in ways that expressed enjoyment (expressed through laughter) and social bonding through the recall of humorous drinking stories (Atkinson et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2009). For example, Female 13, recalled how it was common for her friend, Female 14, who defined herself as not knowing 'when to stop', to 'end up falling asleep... in the toilets' on a night out following pre-drinking. Such an example differed to accounts by those who discussed drinking little on-sale alcohol in public spaces, and highlighted how pre-loading led to controlled intoxication for some, whilst for others it was an important component of the pleasures associated with a loss of control.

A gendered phenomenon

Pre-loading was a gendered phenomenon, not only with regards to the extent to which participants discussed pre-loading and the extent to which they engaged in conversations regarding pre-loading, but also with regards to the meaning and importance they attached to pre-drinking within their talk. Both young men and women pre-drank, yet young women openly discussed pre-loading to a greater extent, in greater depth, and attached more meaning to its social aspects (e.g. socialising bonding with friends) and the activities (e.g. 'getting ready' for a night out, uploading photos to SNS) involved. Young men distanced themselves from these feminine connotations and focused on the act of alcohol consumption itself and the practical affordances it provided such as reaching a desired state of intoxication and reducing costs.

A collective social practice

Extract 7

Researcher: going back to the pre-drinking and getting ready did you say that's just as important as going out like part of the night out itself?

Females 7: I don't know, you can't really speak to each other when you're out

Female 9 cos if you go into town, you get to catch up during pre-loading and then when you're out you can't really see each other

Female 8: so you see everyone there while you're getting ready and drinking and if you go to town you're just dancing aren't ya

(Group 4, Females, 17-18 years)

Young women first and foremost framed pre-loading as a collective group practice that was enacted with female friends and as an important and routine sequential feature of their social drinking occasions. For many, the build up to drinking in public spaces and private parties and the social interaction involved during pre-loading was expressed as the most enjoyable part of their drinking occasions where they relaxed and chatted with friends. This is shown in Extract 7, in that although participation in nightlife was a shared fun activity, the busyness and loudness of licenced premises, and an emphasis on other activities in these spaces ('you're just dancing', Female 8) restricted verbal interaction with friends ('you can't really speak to each other when you're out', Female 7, 'you can't really see each other', Female 9, 18 years) (Barton & Husk, 2014; Wells, 2009).

Extract 8

Researcher: Erm, so why do you do it [pre-load] then?

Female 3: It's never normally my idea, someone just say, 'come to ours for a drinks' [laughs]. It's only because we, if we're going to meet somewhere and catch up, it's not such we go there to like get wasted, cos we just go there so we're all in the same place, we can all go somewhere at the same time, the alcohol just happens to be there

Female 15: We don't tend to pre-drink on, you know, on my own

Female 3: Oh no, I'd never do it on my own, it's always with people. It's an extension of the evening.

Female 15: It's like you meet up before you go out, and there's just alcohol there, so you drink it

In both extract 7 and 8, pre-loading is positioned as a pleasurable and social activity that brought female friends together and enhanced shared fun and group bonding. For example, in extract 8 female 15 stated how she did not 'tend to pre-drink on, you know, on my own', and was quick to distance pre-loading from lone drinking, supported by Female 3 who asserted that she too would 'never do it [pre-load] on my own'. Instead, they defined pre-drinking as an activity always practiced in the company of others ('always with people'). They prioritised the social aspects of pre-loading such as 'catching up' with friends (Female 3, 19 years), rather than the consumption of alcohol itself, in turn distancing themselves from the problematized figure of the lone drinking 'alcy' (alcoholic) (Atkinson et al., 2016). Despite other young women discussing pre-loading with the intention of intoxication in similar manners to young men, these young women both down played and normalised the consumption of alcohol within the pre-loading context by highlighting how 'alcohol just happens to be there' (Female 3) 'so you drink it' (Female 15). This further positioned the act of pre-drinking as secondary to its social role in bringing the group together, relative to young men, who focussed solely on alcohol consumption itself. How young women down played alcohol consumption reflects research showing that due to drinking and intoxication being traditionally regarded as masculine behaviours, women drinkers experience gender and sexual double standards and negotiate and manage their drinking in accordance to prevent being labelled unfeminine, sexually promiscuous and lacking self-control (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2013).

'Getting ready' for a night out

Extract 9

Female 4: as you're getting ready, it will be as you are getting ready. Cos I like do everyone's makeup so they're all at one house, I'm not travelling and then the others do hair or whatever, it's more like if you're getting ready at mine its easier, like my Mum's normally the taxi driver, takes us all to the place anyway

Male 5: so we don't have to do that do we lads. Isn't it is mostly girls that do pre drinks really?

Male 7: from like other people that I know I don't really hear of it like it's usually just the same like lads pick each other up and just go straight away.

Male 5: cos they don't really like usually like sit together, you don't need like lots of time to get ready, like 5 minutes top jeans on... lads can't get in anyway

Female 4: girls can

Male 7: girls can get in at like dead young

Female 4: you just walk in, they id the lads and don't even l'd you

Male 5: I'm like nearly 19 and I always get ID'd. Girls can make themselves look older can't they with makeup and heels and stuff like that lads can't

(Group 3, Females and Males, 17-18 years)

The gendered nature of pre-loading was also evident in how coming together in the domestic setting provided an opportunity for young women to create and perfect appearance in preparation for a night out in licenced premises. Such discussions were absent from accounts of pre-drinking prior to attending house parties, suggesting a particular heterosexual feminine look was expected of young women to enable entry into night life drinking spaces (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016). As Extract 9 highlights, 'getting ready' together whilst pre-drinking was not only valued as it enabled bonding, but also for providing the opportunity to perfect their feminine appearance and achieve the right look through sharing the skills of the friendship group ('I like do everyone's makeup ...the others do hair or whatever', Female 4). In the analysis of the wider research data, a hyper-sexual and glamorous feminine look was positioned as the norm in public drinking spaces and for uploading to SNS. Young women thus invested much work and effort in self-surveillance and in managing their appearance in an attempt to appear attractive, glamorous and sexy, but without being labelled as drunk, unattractive and sexually promiscuous (Atkinson et al., 2015; Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2013).

In the exchange between young men and women in Extract 9, creating a particular heterosexual feminine and adult appearance for a night out was discussed as being beneficial in helping to secure entry to nightlife venues (usually by male door staff) by appearing 'older', in ways that young men could not ('girls can make themselves look older can't they with makeup and heels and stuff like that lads can't', Male 1). Whilst this may be viewed as beneficial to young women, it demonstrates the additional work and negotiation young women must engage in relative to young men in fitting the heteronormative perceptions of femininity required for participation in nightlife spaces (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016).

Extract 11

Researcher: Ok just describe a typical night out?

Male 1: Erm I'd say we have a drink, play FIFA [football based video game] and mess about for a bit, then sit around, then we just tend to go out and we just have a few a more basically

(Group 1, Female and Male, 17-19 years)

Young men distanced themselves from the connotations attached to 'getting ready' activities and in turn were reluctant to discuss the nature and extent of their pre-drinking more generally in an attempt to keep intact their masculinity. This was exemplified by Male 3 in Extract 9 who stated that men 'don't have to do that ['get ready]' and directly questioned men's engagement in pre-loading by asking 'isn't it is mostly girls that do pre-drinks really?'. As the conversation progressed Male 5, further framed pre-loading with reference to the time needed to get ready ('you don't need like lots of time to get ready, like 5 minutes top jeans on') and the relative short time required to 'get ready' by young men also meant they pre-drank alcohol over shorter periods of time. However, whilst the young men in Extract 9 stated that they did not pre-load, others did discuss consuming alcohol with friends within the home/friends home prior to a night out drinking in licenced premises. Thus, it was not that young men did not engage in pre-drinking, but were more reluctant to discuss the extent and nature of their pre-drinking and when they did, distanced themselves from the activities (e.g. getting ready) discussed by young women and the feminine connotations attached. Extract 10 provides a typical response by young men and highlights how they placed emphasis on masculine activities such as video games and compared to young women who down played the role of drinking, focussed upon the act of consuming alcohol itself ('Erm I'd say we have a drink, play Fifa and mess about for

a bit', Male 18 years). This allowed them to distance themselves from feminine activities in an attempt to confirm their masculinity, reinforcing alcohol consumption as masculine and highlighting how they do not face the same pressures and scrutiny as young women to manage their appearance and drinking in the production of their masculine identities.

Displaying photos on Social Network Sites

Through providing a context (e.g. friends with beauty product application skills) and setting (e.g. home setting with beauty appliances) to perfect appearance, pre-loading was related to the gendered practice of displaying and managing photographs of drinking occasions on SNS among young women (e.g. Facebook).

Extract 11

Researcher: Why do you do it [pre-load]?

Female 14 and 13: Saves money.

Researcher: Ok so, just talk me through a typical night out, what would it involve?

Female 13: Getting ready for two days [All laugh]

Female 12: We normally meet up at like 9 don't we?

Others: Yeah.

Female 12: Then everyone is like doing the finishing touches, make up, hair, then just standing round, getting good photos to upload

Researcher: What would you say is an ideal photo from a night out?

Female 13: Like before or on the actual night out?

Researcher: Either.

Female 13: The ideal photo is probably all standing, smiling with our mates before, wouldn't ever just think 'oh, put that bottle of Grey Goose there to show everyone'. Not bothered really are we? [All laugh].

Researcher: So what is the main reason for uploading photos of a night out then?

Female 12: Well if you've got a nice outfit on, you think this can't be wasted, you want people to see that outfit

Female 13: To show everyone what you look like really.

Female 14: Just show people, being seen, what you're wearing and how you look.

Researcher: Is that the main and only reason?

Female 13 and 14: yeah

(Group 6, Females, 20–21 years)

As exemplified in Extract 11, whilst 'sav[ing] money' was initially stated as the reason for pre-loading, as the conversation progressed, pre-loading was represented as providing an opportunity to perfect a desired feminine look and appearance, which could be caught on camera for the display of 'ideal' photos on SNS (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016). As stated by Female 12, within the pre-loading setting, 'finishing touches, make up, hair' were perfected and 'good photos' taken 'to upload' to SNS'. Photos taken 'before' entering nightlife spaces were positioned as 'ideal photos', and the role of alcohol use itself again downplayed. Displaying appearance ('to show everyone what you look like really', 'people to see'. Female 13 and 14) and 'being seen' (Female 14) by others on SNS were discussed as main reasons for uploading photographs within the wider research (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016). Capturing appearance before it was perceived as compromised by intoxication was paramount and a certain degree of competitive femininity was evident, with young women competing for both the heteronormative male gaze and the gaze of other women through depictions of their appearance within drinking contexts on SNS (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Bailey et al., 2016). The affordances the pre-loading context and setting offered in creating perfect photos and controlling how they were seen by others were thus valued within the wider gender relations and constraints at play within the culture of drinking and intoxication (Atkinson & Sumnall 2016; Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2013).

Discussion and conclusions

Pre-loading was a common, routine, planned and enjoyable feature of young people's peer group drinking occasions in licenced premises and private party contexts (Barton & Husk, 2014). Age differences in the nature of pre-drinking were found, with younger participants being more likely to consume alcohol at private parties (e.g. house parties) than in licenced premises. Regardless of age, drinking with friends within the home prior to attending licenced premises and social events in private settings (e.g. house parties) was defined as pre-loading, highlighting how they had taken on, adapted and expanded the official definitions used within policy, academic and media discourse to more accurately reflect their own experiences.

As other research has confirmed, cost was a key, although not the sole, motivation for pre-loading, particularly prior to attending licenced premises, highlighting the importance of economic influences and the role of cheap off-sale alcohol to young people's ability to consume alcohol and participate in nightlife drinking spaces (Atkinson et al., 2016; Barton & Husk, 2014; Caudwell & Hagger, 2014; Foster & Ferguson, 2013; Forsyth, 2010; Ogeil et al., 2016 Østergaard & Andrade, 2014; Penderson et al., 2009; Read et al., 2010; Wells, 2009). Whilst other UK research has shown that those who pre-load continue to drink heavily when entering nightlife spaces and as such drink and spend more over the course of an evening than those who do not pre-load (Barton & Husk, 2012), not all young people in this study continued to drink in nightlife drinking spaces and succeeded in minimizing the cost of a night out. However, those with more economic ability to purchase alcohol reported failing to reduce their on-sale drinking as intended.

Several other important reasons for pre-loading were evident within young people's accounts that went beyond the importance of drinking alcohol and economic explanations, to provide insight into the social and gendered dynamics of pre-loading as a sequential element of the social practice of collective drinking with friends (Barton & Husk, 2012; Forsyth, 2005; McCreanor et al., 2016; Roberts, 2012; Supski et al., 2017). Gender identity making was at work within young people's talk around pre-loading (Atkinson et al 2015; 2016). Both recalled pre-drinking (Barton & Husk, 2012) but it appeared to be a gendered practice with young women attaching greater meaning to the context (e.g. peer group interaction) and setting (e. private sphere) of pre-loading in providing an opportunity for certain social and preparatory activities (e.g. chatting and catching up with friends, getting ready for a night out, taking photos to upload to SNS) (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Boyle et al., 2010; Measham et al. 2011; LaBrie & Pedersen, 2008). In contrast, young men focussed more on the act of drinking itself, and distanced themselves from the feminine connotations attached to the concept of 'getting ready' for a night out and the associated social bonding.

A number of limitations are acknowledged. Although one question regarding pre-loading was asked, and despite young people discussing pre-loading without being prompted, the research did not specifically focus on pre-loading itself, which may have resulted in additional discussions and findings. Despite reflecting findings of international research (Barton & Husk, 2012; 2014; McCreanor et al., 2016), the findings should not be regarded as representative of all young people's pre-loading experiences. Importantly, the findings reflect young people's talk around pre-loading within the context of a research interview, and may not reflect the real extent to which they pre-drink. As pre-loading was widely viewed as a feminine practice, young men may have been discouraged from discussing their pre-drinking experiences. They may have been reluctant to reveal participating in this practice in fear of being labelled as feminine, highlighting how gender identity making is at play within the research interview context. As only one focus group consisted of young men only, they also had less opportunity to discuss pre-loading without the presence of females who dominated discussions and labelled this practice as feminine.

The findings presented in this paper add to the national and international literature by offering an understanding of young people's pre-loading as a gendered social practice within the context of their peer drinking occasions. The research suggests that although pre-loading is a common drinking pattern among young men and women, gendered differences in the meanings and importance attached to pre-loading and the activities played out whilst pre-loading exist (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Barton & Husk, 2014; McCreanor et al., 2016; Wells, 2009). Although there is an important focus on pre-loading as a drinking pattern related to affordability and intoxication in advocacy and policy responses, for many young people in this study pre-loading was a practice entwined with the pleasures of the culture of intoxication shared fun and group bonding (Barton & Husk, 2014; McCreanor et al., 2016; Wells, 2009), and in the performance and management of femininity and masculinity (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Griffin et al., 2013; Bailey et al., 2013; Hutton et al., 2016). Moving beyond a focus on pre-loading as a drinking pattern (e.g. frequencies or quantities of drinking, alcohol-related harm) to incorporate recognition of the social and pleasurable nature of pre-loading, and the gendered meanings attached, is required when responding to young people's pre-drinking, if responses are to engage young people and resonate with their own experiences (Alley et al., 2016; Atkinson et al., 2015; Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016, Niland et al., 2014; Savic et al., 2016).

Conflict of interest

There are no known conflicts of interest.

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