



Brief insights

Sports bar drinking culture

Generation X and Baby Boomers

Introduction

In 2016, VicHealth commissioned La Trobe University's Centre for Alcohol Policy Research (CAPR) to examine alcohol cultures in middle- and older-age groups in Victoria – Generation X, born 1965 to 1980, and Baby Boomers, born 1946 to 1964.

The research applies the Alcohol Cultures Framework (VicHealth 2016a) to guide the exploration of factors that socially shape the way people drink, providing the evidence to inform future VicHealth-funded alcohol culture change interventions operating at the subpopulation level.

In order to identify cultures of risky drinking for targeted interventions, researchers drew upon three methods: analysis of existing survey data, literature review and stakeholder consultation. Following multiple rounds of consultation and consideration of potential project impact, drinking among Baby Boomer and Generation X sports bar attendees was selected by VicHealth as one of the alcohol cultures of interest.

Why sports bar drinking?

Research shows a strong association between sports and heavy drinking among both sports participants and spectators (Palmer 2011). In the USA, Neal et al (2005) identified that among college students, heavier drinkers were more likely to drink alcohol, and drink alcohol heavily, on high profile sporting game days. In addition, fans of the winning team were found to drink more heavily than those who supported the losing team. Shanahan (2002) identified a culture of (primarily male) participants drinking after an event, and spectators (again, mainly males) drinking at heavy levels before, during and after the game, with cricket and football key examples of sports events in which alcohol consumption is excessive. This corresponds to the UK experience where males aged between 45 and 60 have been identified as drinking at higher risk levels, both when watching and when socialising after a sporting event (Christmas & Souter 2016).

While there are a range of initiatives addressing heavy drinking among sports participants, such as Good Sports, heavy drinking among sporting spectators has received less attention.

Sports bars (pubs or other licensed venues that regularly screen popular sporting events) are a key location where heavy drinking among spectators occurs. Although the size of the Victorian population regularly attending sports bars is not known, it is likely to be substantial given the number of sporting events and licensed venues in operation.

These insights may not represent the practices and perspectives of all people who drink at sports bars, but describe drinking patterns and culture reported by the sample.

About the research

In late 2016, CAPR administered an online survey where respondents were recruited through targeted Facebook advertising and offered the chance to win a \$50 gift voucher in return for their participation. Eligible respondents were Victorians aged 36–70 years old (Generation X or Baby Boomers) who drink at sports bars at least occasionally – either before or after attending sporting events – or to watch a sporting event on television.

Survey respondents were asked about their attitudes to, and experiences of, alcohol culture among sports bar drinkers, including alcohol consumption patterns, risky drinking, social norms relating to drinking, the consequences of drinking and concerns relating to drinking in these social settings.

Our final sample was 112 Victorians who drink at sports bars. The majority belong to the Generation X age cohort (born between 1966 and 1980), and over three quarters of respondents were men. Over seven out of ten respondents lived in inner or outer Melbourne suburbs, one in five lived in a regional city and over one in ten lived in a rural area.

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The sports bar setting

Respondents more commonly attended sports bars to watch a game or event, rather than before or after attending a live sporting event. They most often attended with friends, although going alone was not uncommon, with over a quarter of respondents reporting they often attended on their own.

While drinking did not appear to be a requirement of attending a sports bar, respondents identified enjoying the 'vibe and buzz' of the atmosphere, the opportunity to meet like-minded supporters and lively interactions with other patrons as important aspects of drinking at sports bars.

"...in a bar... the energy is higher and there is more comradeship between strangers."

Respondents also reported choosing to watch sporting events at sports bars because of:

- the better and/or cheaper selection of drinks compared with attending the actual event.
- access to beer on tap and a desire to drink more alcohol compared with watching at home.

"It's like being at the game but with easier and cheaper access to the bar."

Access to bigger screens, being able to watch events not available at home and access to gambling facilities were also reported as reasons for attending.

Drinking patterns and the role of alcohol

Most commonly, respondents drank on 1.5 days per week and at sports bars a little more than once a fortnight. Among males, drinking occasions at sports bars were reported to be heavier overall, with a median of six drinks per occasion at sports bars compared with four drinks consumed on a usual drinking occasion. Among females, drinking occasions at sports bars were the same as usual drinking occasions, with a median of three drinks consumed in both situations. One in five male and around two in twenty female respondents reported drinking more than 'usual' (i.e. when drinking at home, at a friend's or at another licensed venue) when at a sports bar. It is important to note that many studies (Boniface et al 2014; Livingston & Callinan 2015; Stockwell et al 2004) have found that survey questions about self-reported alcohol consumption produce underestimates of alcohol consumption. This study did not adjust survey data to weight estimates, therefore this study is likely to underestimate consumption.

Four in five male and two in three female respondents reported that drinking was an important part of gathering at sports bars. This was often related to enhancing the social experience and atmosphere of the occasion, providing relaxation and release from everyday obligations and enhancing their enjoyment of the sport. For example, some participants suggested that watching sport at home did not have the added benefit of:

"catching up with friends during breaks in the game and forgetting about the working week and buying a round or two."

Risky drinking

Four in five men and one in two women reported consuming five or more standard drinks in a day at least monthly (including drinking at sports bars and at other locations).

Respondents also perceived high levels of risky drinking among others at sports bars: one quarter felt that most or all drinkers were drinking at risky levels, and a further half suggested more than half fell into this category. When presented with possible reasons for such risky drinking, respondents commonly selected that patrons might drink heavily for enjoyment, because it was the social norm or because of stress related to different facets of their lives.

Nearly two-thirds of male respondents (67 per cent) and over half of female respondents (56 per cent) agreed that it was acceptable to get drunk in a sports bar setting. Compared to Victorian survey data (VicHealth 2016b), acceptance of getting drunk is much higher for this sample. In Victoria, in any setting, almost a third (31 per cent) of men and one quarter of women (25 per cent) agreed that getting drunk occasionally is 'OK'. Within this study sample, almost all respondents (96 per cent) thought it was acceptable to drink to the point of becoming tipsy, with no differences observed according to gender.

Choosing not to drink

The majority of respondents agreed it was acceptable not to drink alcohol at all at a sports bar.

One quarter of male respondents and just under half of female respondents stated they had encountered pressure to drink or were encouraged to drink more, either being subjected to teasing or mocking in the form of being told they are 'weak', 'soft' and to 'harden up'.

"Some may say you're weak and some accept it [the choice not to drink]. More the former than the latter."

"Some are a little incredulous: 'What's wrong, are you sick?' Others are very respectful. Some state: 'You can just have one', but respect my personal choice not to drink."

Just under one in ten respondents reported that being the designated driver was an accepted way to avoid such negative reactions, but a similar proportion felt even this wasn't considered a sufficient excuse and would result in pressure to leave their car at the venue overnight and drink with others.

When meeting people they did not know in a sports bar, the majority of women, and over six out of ten men reported they would feel comfortable choosing not to drink alcohol. Those who reported no pressure around choosing not to drink cited supportive friends and a focus on the game rather than alcohol as key supportive factors. However, more than one in five respondents indicated they would not feel comfortable choosing not to drink in this situation, as alcohol is a social lubricant that can enhance conversations with strangers. They considered drinking alcohol to be the purpose of attending sports bars or because they simply like to drink.

"[Alcohol] is a way to break the ice and avoid awkward silences."

Round-buying

It was noted by just under one in five respondents that drinking was a social expectation within the sports bar setting, and ‘buying rounds’ was a common practice. More than a third of respondents said that they would *always* be expected to buy a round when drinking in a sports bar, and more than half said this was *sometimes* the case (it was more likely to *always* be an expectation among men). Round-buying was generally reported to occur among smaller groups of friends and was an expected reciprocity of others initiating round-buying.

Our finding is supported by a study that explored round-buying among young adults in Melbourne (Riazi & MacLean 2016). The study identified social rules, such as expectations of reciprocity, that the decision to buy rounds is not always discussed and can commence without agreement from others in the group, and implicit pressures that can encourage drinkers to conform to the pace of the fastest drinker in the group. Overwhelmingly, participants in this study believed that round-buying increased their overall alcohol intake through pressures to consume more.

Alcohol-related concerns

Most respondents in our online survey reported witnessing drunken behaviour, unpleasant or abusive talk, or fighting or aggression in sports bars at least occasionally: one-quarter witnessed such behaviour ‘sometimes’ and one in ten ‘most times’. Six in ten respondents who had witnessed anti-social behaviour said that situations were efficiently dealt with by venue management or authorities. Some noted that friends or other patrons sometimes intervened, while others reported a lack of action in some situations, for example when loud and obnoxious behaviour was simply ignored and, in some cases, alcohol continued to be served to the offending individual.

A few respondents made reference to groups of all male drinkers, suggesting that the expression of masculinity caused problems, worried them or reduced their level of comfort.

“When men drink at sports bars it can get out of control.”

“At times [it] may become rowdy and we may move to [a] different area especially if [there is a] group of men together.”

Some suggested that drunken behaviour was more likely during big games and among individuals whose team lost or who had lost money gambling.

However, more than half were not concerned about the amount people drank at sports bars, either because they had not witnessed problems relating to drunkenness or did not think these behaviours were any worse in sports bars than in other venues.

More than half of survey respondents had, at least occasionally, seen someone who had had too much to drink drive home from a sports bar. More than one-third reported taking no action on the last occasion this occurred, feeling that it was not their business or that it might cause trouble to get involved. Others reported that they, members of the drinker’s social group or venue staff did take action by attempting to deter the person from driving, confiscating the drinker’s keys, ordering a taxi or ride share service, driving the person home or prompting venue staff to intervene.



Summary of brief insights – sports bar drinking cultures, Baby Boomer and Generation X

Factors that influence drinking	Insights
Role of alcohol	<p>Important social and recreational purposes.</p> <p>Cultural association between sport and alcohol.</p>
Social practices and norms	<p>Drinking is a strong social norm at sports bars.</p> <p>Round-buying often expected, especially among men.</p>
Gendered norms	<p>Masculinity identified within groups of all male drinkers, linked to the perception of alcohol-related problems occurring and causing concern among other patrons.</p>
Drinking settings	<p>Alcohol is easily available in sports bars, often cheaper in price and a wider range of drinks available compared to drinking at a live match or game.</p> <p>Consuming alcohol and watching live sports contributes towards strong bonding among friendship groups and even strangers in the sports bar setting.</p>
Perceptions of others	<p>Perception that over half of all sports bar drinkers drink at risky levels, this may have an impact on validating or disapproving heavy drinking.</p> <p>Perception that heavy drinking is more likely during and after a game and may be influenced by a team's result.</p>
Acceptability of intoxication	<p>Being drunk or tipsy is acceptable behaviour in the sports bar setting. Compared to Victorian population data, being 'drunk' was more acceptable within this sample.</p> <p>Men are more accepting of getting drunk than females (two in three men agree; one in two women agree).</p>
Formal rules and enforcement	<p>Respect shown for venue management or authorities in managing drunken behaviour.</p> <p>Action taken by friends and venue staff to deter drink-driving.</p>
Approaches to alcohol and drinking behaviours	<p>Unpleasant drunken behaviour in sports bars is unacceptable and is mainly managed by venue staff.</p> <p>Drink-driving is unacceptable, and a need to drive places limits on drinking. However many survey respondents had at least occasionally witnessed drink-driving home from a sports bar venue.</p>



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