

Perceived Importance of Alcohol and Peer Pressure Predict Alcohol Consumption among College Students

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Abstract

Despite efforts to curb alcohol consumption in college students, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that, "...60.8 percent [of full-time college students] were current drinkers, 39.1 percent were binge drinkers, and 13.6 percent were heavy drinkers."¹ Exploring the centrality of alcohol to students' college experiences allows researchers to address this concern. Additionally, examining the students' drinking motives can offer insight into the frequency and extent of their drinking. It is hypothesized that the more central alcohol is to the college students' experience and the more peer pressure they feel to drink, the higher the rate of alcohol consumption. The data was collected through an online survey at a mid-size Midwestern university. Participants included 254 females and 89 males, averaging 20.7 years of age. Incentives to participate included either extra credit in a particular class or ten dollars in cash. Regression analysis was performed with the data to indicate the predictability of the CLASS (College Life Alcohol Salience Scale) and conformity motives (a measure of peer pressure) on peak drinking occasions. It was found that peak drinking is associated with how central alcohol is to their college experience ($\beta=.50$, $p<.001$) but not drinking to conform ($\beta=-.04$, $p=.51$), $F(2,206)=32$, $p<.001$, adjusted $R^2=.23$. The strong correlation between CLASS and peak drinking suggests that it is possible that changing the image of alcohol relative to college life could greatly reduce alcohol consumption among college students.

Keywords: Alcohol, CLASS, conformity

1. Introduction

Drinking among college students has become an ever-increasing problem on campuses across the country. Within the past month, it can be estimated that roughly 60 percent of college students consumed alcohol. Furthermore, two-thirds of those students participated in binge drinking.² There are many factors that contribute to these trends. Most notably, the centrality of alcohol to the college experience and the drinking motive of conformity both influence the way in which college students perceive the drinking of others and ultimately the drinking habits of themselves.³ Having these preconceived notions of how drinking in college will play out, it is often difficult to change the mindset of young adults who are constantly surrounded by images of alcohol. Furthermore, a study by Carey indicated that people who drink for conformity reasons are at a greater risk of drinking heavily and experiencing problems related to alcohol consumption.⁴ Such problems can include injury, traffic accidents, lower grades, blackouts, and sexual assault, and their likelihood increases in those who get drunk on just one occasion each week.⁵ These problems, such as those influencing academics, are far-reaching, affecting about 25% of college students.⁶ With a better understand of the influence that the centrality of alcohol to college life and conformity play in the drinking behaviors of college students, the goal of changing these stereotypes and eventually actual drinking behaviors becomes much more attainable.

1.1 CLASS

The College Life Alcohol Salience Scale, or CLASS, is a measure developed by Osberg to evaluate the centrality of alcohol to the college experience. When arriving at college, many students have an idealized notion of the role that alcohol is going to play in their lives, whether that includes attending parties, playing drinking games, blacking out, or suffering from the occasional hangover. In fact, many see drinking as a rite of passage, or something that signifies an entrance into the real world.⁷ With many students entering college with ideas of drinking, it can easily become excessive and lead to a problem. For example, binge drinkers are up to 5 times more likely to skip a class as a result of drinking.⁸ Ultimately, the centrality of alcohol to one's college experience can have widespread consequences for the drinker and those in his or her environment.

1.2 Drinking Motives

There are several motives for drinking outlined by Cox and Klinger. These motives are either internally or externally produced for either negative or positive reinforcement.⁹ This study focuses on the motive of conformity, which is produced externally by negative reinforcement. People conform in order to avoid ridicule and social rejection from peers. For example, one might drink alcohol at a party in order to avoid embarrassment and harassment from peers. Research by Cooper indicates that males and younger students are more likely to identify conformity as reasons for drinking. Reasons for this may include that males want to appear more masculine among their peers, and handling more alcohol may be a way of achieving this.¹⁰ Furthermore, younger students who have yet to solidify a friend group or presence among their peers may try to prove their worth to others through drinking. In fact, the vulnerability of students during the first 6 weeks of freshman year leads to a considerable amount of drinking as students are molded by the expectations and pressures of their peers.¹¹ When some students are unable to make the friends that they envisioned for themselves, they turn to alcohol as an escape and further acceptance. This idea ties into the social bond theory, wherein those who do not feel a connection to their peers may begin to display deviant behavior, often manifested through drinking.¹²

Prior studies conducted by Cooper explore the influence of conformity motives on drinking in adolescents age 13-19.¹³ This study puts more focus on young adults attending college. College reflects a very unique stage of life, where students oftentimes are living with peers rather than parents. Therefore, the shift in primary groups is accompanied by a shift in behavior to match or meet the expectations of the new primary group. Furthermore, the transition to college can be difficult for many and so drinking can be a source of bonding and can serve as a way to form new friendships. In addition, many young adults attending college are likely to attribute drinking to the need to rid themselves of the irresponsible behavior that might otherwise follow them into their adult years.¹⁴ The latter idea relates greatly to the CLASS proposed by Osberg. In studies conducted by Osberg, college students, with a focus on freshman, were surveyed to verify the validity of the CLASS in relating to drinking behaviors. The sample was obtained from a small university and therefore exploring this topic in a university attended by more students, such as that of this study, may help to broaden the demographics for which the data can be applied.¹⁵ Ultimately, it is hypothesized that both a greater score on the CLASS and the endorsement of conformity as a motive for drinking influence the frequency and amount of drinking among undergraduate college students.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The participants in the study included a sample of 349 undergraduate students, 89 males and 254 females, at a midsize, Midwestern university. The average age of the sample was 20.7 years. Freshman made up the smallest proportion of those sampled (19.8%), while seniors made up the largest proportion of those sampled (26.4%). Most the student participants were white (Caucasian), making up about 87% of the sample. An overwhelming majority (90.5%) of the participants identified as being completely heterosexual. Additionally, a considerable number of participants identified having a yearly family income over \$200,00 (18%).

2.2 Procedure

Data was collected with a snowball sampling method as an online survey emailed out to students across campus. The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board. Incentives to participate included a \$10 gift card or extra credit in a particular class.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 *alcohol consumption*

The first questions on the survey were centered around students' frequency and amount of drinking. It had to be determined which students drank and how much they typically drank. The number of days drinking in a week, the number of drinks on the average occasion, and peak drinking within the last month were all measured.

2.3.2 *CLASS*

The next measure used was the CLASS. Students were provided a list of 15 statements regarding beliefs, attitudes, and experiences with alcohol. The participants rated these statements on a Likert scale ranging from 1-5. The answers choices ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," with a 1 indicating strong disagreement and a 5 indicating strong agreement. Examples of statements used for this measure include, "Parties with alcohol are an integral part of college life," "To become drunk is a college rite of passage," "I think that the students who do not go out to parties or bars are not enjoying their college experience," and "The chance to drink in college is just as important as the academic experience."

2.3.3 *conformity motive*

The drinking motive of conformity was also measured on Likert scale ranging 1-5. In this case, only 5 items were used. Responses of endorsement for drinking were made to the statements "Because your friends pressure you to drink," "So that others won't kid you about drinking," "To fit in with a group you like," "To be liked," and "So you won't feel left out." A higher rating on the scale indicated a greater endorsement for conformity as a motive to consume alcohol.

3. Results

3.1 Alcohol Consumption

The frequency and amount of drinking of the participants was analyzed based on the survey results. The vast majority (92.8%) of the participants identified as to having consumed at least one alcoholic beverage in the past. The average number of days in a week that the participants consume at least one alcoholic beverage was 1.77 (SD=1.41). On a typical day of drinking, an average of 4.01 alcoholic drinks were consumed (SD=3.02). The average peak drinking occasion, defined as the most number of drinks consumed on one occasion, was 6.31 (SD=5.33).

3.2 CLASS

Cronbach's alpha was computed to ensure the consistency of the meaning of the answers to each question. The scale was found to be very reliable (15 items; $\alpha=0.90$). The mean of this scale was 42.26 (SD=10.50).

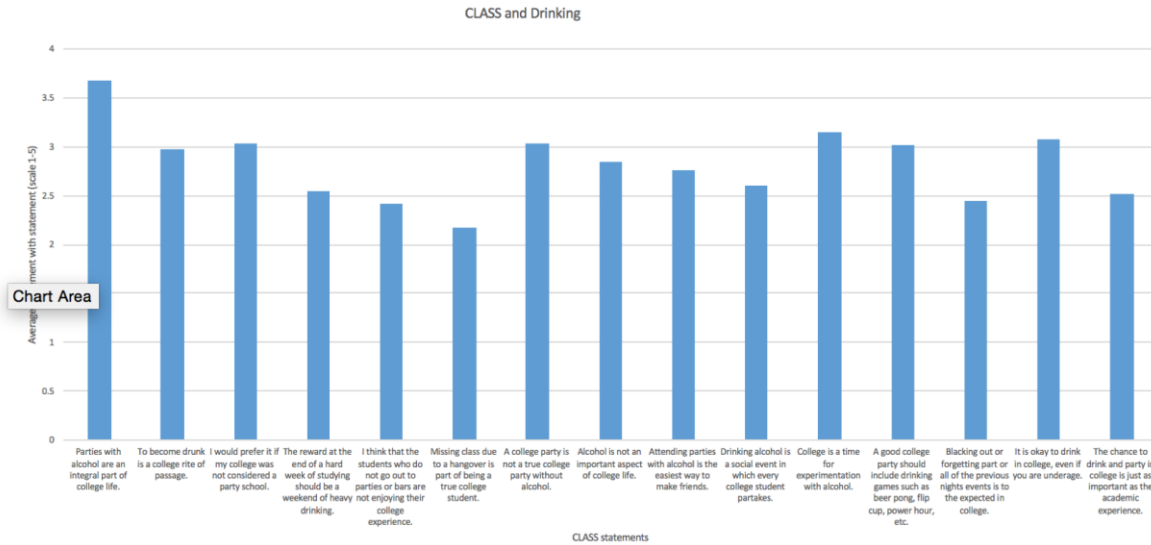


Figure 2. The average ratings of agreement with statements pertaining to CLASS.

The statements in Figure 2 relate to the centrality of alcohol to college life. The statement that received the highest rating was, “Parties with alcohol are an integral part of college life.” The statement that received the lowest rating was, “Missing class due to a hangover is part of being a true college student.” Nine of the statements fell within the 2 to 3 range, indicating a disagreement or indifference to the statement. Six of the statements fell within the 3 to 4 range, indicating an indifference or agreement with the statement.

3.3 Conformity

The conformity motives questionnaire was reliable, having a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.85 for 5 items. The mean of this measure was found to be 7.90 (SD=3.55).



Figure 1. The ratings of agreement with statements of conformity based on the Likert scale.

The statements provided in Figure 1 are all potential motives that could influence one’s drinking habits due to conformity to peers. The statement that received the highest value on the scale was, “Because your friends pressure you to drink.” The statement with the lowest rating was, “So that others won’t kid you about not drinking.” All of the

motives fell within the 1 to 2 range, indicating an overall strong disagreement or disagreement with the statements as motives for drinking.

3.3 CLASS, Conformity, And Drinking

A significant positive correlation was found between CLASS and conformity, $r=.24$, $p<.001$. CLASS and peak drinking had a significant correlation of 0.518, ($p<.001$) Conformity and peak drinking had a significant correlation of .12, ($p<.032$).

It was found that peak drinking is associated with how central alcohol is to their college experience ($\beta=.50$, $p<.001$) but not drinking to conform ($\beta=-.04$, $p=.51$), $F(2,206)=32$, $p<.001$, adjusted $R^2=.23$.

4. Discussion

Regression analyses were conducted on data obtained from a survey of college students regarding their drinking behavior, expectations about drinking, and motivations for drinking. It was found that there was a significant positive correlation between the centrality of alcohol to one's college experience and peak drinking. In other words, the more central alcohol is to one's college experience, or the more one expects alcohol to play a role in his or her life while in college, the more alcohol that he or she will consume on any given drinking occasion. Furthermore, it was found that there is not a significant correlation between the drinking motive of conformity and peak drinking. Therefore, drinking alcohol with the intention of avoiding humiliation or mockery from peers is not related to the amount that one drinks on one occasion.

Osberg's study found robust associations between amount and frequency of drinking and scores on the CLASS. That study was designed to test the use of CLASS in predicting drinking behaviors. While it was conducted at a small university, it was proposed to be applicable on larger scales. The results found by this study were similar to those found by Osberg, reinforcing the validity of the CLASS to predict drinking behaviors, even at universities that are more populous. Furthermore, Osberg found the CLASS to be correlated to the drinking motive of conformity, but only to an extent. For instance, motives that were linked to positive reinforcements exhibited stronger correlations with the CLASS.¹⁶

Cooper's study of drinking motives found that conformity motives were negatively associated with amount and frequency of drinking among adolescents. Additionally, drinking to conform was identified to be negatively associated with heavy alcohol consumption, yet had a significant positive correlation with drinking problems when usual alcohol use was controlled for. These results imply that drinking for negative reinforcement is much healthier than drinking for positive reinforcement. In other words, conformity motives for drinking can be compulsive and pathological, eventually leading to more serious issues. Furthermore, drinking to conform was positively associated with drinking at parties, likely to do with the fact that this is where most peer pressure is experienced. Conformity motives were also found to be more predictive of drinking among males than females. Lastly, Cooper's study identified conformity as a stronger influence to drinking among younger adolescents. This observation could be due to the fact that when adolescents first find themselves in situations with alcohol and peers, they want to prove themselves to their peers and prevent any ridicule.¹⁷ It was hypothesized in this study that the college students would endorse conformity motives for drinking since college is a time when young adults are surrounded by many new faces. Therefore, it is assumed that they would drink to avoid pressure and negative views from their peers. However, the results were not in support of this hypothesis. Moreover, these results serve as an extension to the conclusions from Cooper in that as age increases, conformity motives for drinking do not increase, even in those attending college.

This study was conducted with a majority female sample. This poses limitations because males tend to drink more than females. According to the 2011 survey conducted by Monitoring the Future, "...43 percent of male and 32 percent of female college students crossed the binge threshold in a given 2-week period."¹⁸ Furthermore, males are more likely than females to pursue external rewards when drinking and are also more likely to consume alcohol with the intention of escaping social humiliation. Lastly, men are generally seen to endorse conformity motives for drinking more often than women.¹⁹ Because of this and the fact that most of the participants were female, the data may not accurately represent the influence of conformity on alcohol consumption and so cannot be extended to other populations. Future research should aim to gather data from a more gender-balanced sample and even to control for gender when interpreting results.

Another limitation caused from the sample surveyed includes the number of students that represent each class. For instance, the centrality of alcohol to the college experience likely has a different effect on freshman than it does on seniors. For instance, freshmen are just arriving at college with visions and ideas of how alcohol will play a role in their life. On the other hand, seniors already know how alcohol has shaped their lives thus far, and so are more likely to be further influenced by their past behaviors than ideas that they may have held at one point or another of the role that alcohol plays in college. Furthermore, the motive of conformity is likely to be more influential on younger students who are more vulnerable to the idea of drinking, particularly when it comes to the pursuit of making new friends. However, seniors were the largest group sampled in this study, and freshman made up the smallest group sampled. As a result, the data was most likely swayed by the predominate drinking motives of older students which have previously been identified as social, coping, and enhancement motives.²⁰ Future research could aim to sample a larger proportion of freshman and sophomores as opposed to juniors and seniors.

The data was collected with a self-report survey. Therefore, the results are based on the honesty of the participants. Not actually observing the drinking behavior of the participants puts restrictions on the validity of the results. Future research can focus on more concrete drinking data from observations. Additionally, the survey was online, and participation was not mandatory. This produces a selection bias because not all people are equally likely to take the time to answer an online survey. All of these limitations influence the data that was collected because without completely random samples, the conclusions cannot be applied to all populations.

The results of this study are critical to addressing the alcohol consumption rates that plague many universities across the country. The setting of this study was unique in that it tested out Osberg and Cooper's findings on a greater scale. The university is well-known academically, and has gained more recent attention due to its social aspects. With the lack of a big sport's culture, people who attend often identify with the notion that there is little to do on the weekends except drink. Therefore, the large presence of drinkers in the sample emphasizes the reason that the results of such a study should not be taken lightly. Even though conformity was not stressed as a factor of drinking influence, that does not mean that it is not at all at play.

The first issue that must be addressed is the image that alcohol has in the minds of those entering college. The stereotypes attached to the life of the "typical" college student, which include attending parties, using a fake ID to gain access to bars and buy alcohol, sneaking alcohol into dorm rooms, experiencing blackouts and hangovers, and more, have a strong influence on the actual proceedings of one's college experience, including the environment that one chooses to surround him or herself with. For instance, internalizing the culture of drinking may cause one to choose friends with similar expectancies, leading to a larger endorsement of the negative behaviors associated with alcohol.²¹ Therefore, by eliminating these expectations to involve alcohol in one's life, the pressure to live out these expectations is reduced. Lessening the consumption of alcohol by college students then translates into a dramatic reduction of alcohol related problems.

This study also provides insight into the motives that drive many college students to drink. For instance, the need to conform with others through drinking, in order to avoid social rejection, should not be the norm. Students who feel this way are at a much greater risk for experiencing more serious alcohol-related issues in the future than students who drink for positive reinforcement reasons.²² Identifying these motives in students can be helpful for early intervention to prevent more severe drinking consequences. Such intervention should take place in high school while students are deciding which college to attend and which possible career path they would like to pursue. Knowing one's influences early enough may help him or her choose a path and navigate through situations that could jeopardize his or her future. Ultimately, the results of this study aid in better understanding ways in which the culture of drinking can be changed to reduce the rates of alcohol consumption among college students.

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