



Review

Understanding the relationship between social anxiety and alcohol use in college students: A meta-analysis



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Meta-analysis examining social anxiety and alcohol variables in college students.
- Social anxiety (SA) was negatively related to alcohol use.
- SA was positively related to alcohol-related problems.
- Drinking motives and alcohol outcome expectancies were positively related to SA.
- Clinicians should be aware of these relationships for treatment and assessment.

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ABSTRACT

Many college students use alcohol, and most of these students experience problems related to their use. Emerging research indicates that socially anxious students face heightened risk of experiencing alcohol-related problems, although the extant research on alcohol use and social anxiety in this population has yielded inconsistent findings. This meta-analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between social anxiety and alcohol variables in college students. A literature search was used to identify studies on college students that included measures of social anxiety and at least one of the alcohol variables of interest. All analyses were conducted using random effects models. We found that social anxiety was negatively correlated with alcohol use variables (e.g., typical quantity and typical frequency), but significantly positively correlated with alcohol-related problems, coping, conformity, and social motives for alcohol use, and positive and negative alcohol outcome expectancies. Several moderators of effect sizes were found to be significant, including methodological factors such as sample ascertainment approach. Given that social anxiety was negatively related to alcohol use but positively related to alcohol-related problems, research is needed to address why individuals high in social anxiety experience more problems as a result of their alcohol use. Avoidance of social situations among socially anxious students should also be taken into account when measuring alcohol use. The primary limitation of this study is the small number of studies available for inclusion in some of the analyses.

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1. Introduction

Alcohol is, by far, the most widely used drug among college students, with 60.8% of students reporting alcohol use in the past month (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, 2012). In 2009, 61.5% of college students reported that they had been intoxicated at least once in the past year, with 42.4% reporting that they had been intoxicated in the past 30 days (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2010). Approximately 37 to 44% of college students reported that they binge drank at least once in the past two weeks to month (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Johnston et al., 2010; Wechsler et al., 2002).

Alcohol use can lead to a wide range of problems (e.g., involvement in risky sexual situations, driving under the influence, hangovers, nausea and vomiting, and aggression). Due to the high levels of alcohol consumption and the contexts in which college students typically consume alcohol (e.g., parties where excessive drinking is the norm), along with no parental oversight and monitoring, this population may be particularly likely to experience alcohol-related problems (ARPs). Of college students who drank at least once per week during their first year of college, 80% experienced more than one ARP during their first year, and 34% reported that they had experienced six or more ARPs during that time (Mallett et al., 2011).

1.1. Social anxiety and alcohol

It is important for practitioners who work with this population to be aware of other problems that may be associated with, or lead to, problematic alcohol use in order to best treat students, even when ARPs are not the primary presenting concern. Social anxiety, defined as a fear of being observed or negatively evaluated by others (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000), has been studied in relation to alcohol use among college students. For individuals with high levels of social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation may play a role in their alcohol use, as they may “use substances to avoid potential scrutiny from substance-using peers and/or because they believe substance use is a common (and thus socially acceptable) strategy for dampening their anxiety in social situations” (Buckner, 2011, p. 4). Multiple theoretical models (e.g., Appraisal-Disruption Model (Sayette, 1993), Attention Allocation Model (Steele, Southwick, & Pagano, 1986), and Avoidance-Coping Model (Bacon & Ham, 2010)) suggest that alcohol use can result in decreased anxiety for at least some individuals. In light of the

dampening effect of alcohol on social anxiety and because college students are likely to be in situations where drinking, often to excess, is the social norm, understanding relationships among social anxiety and alcohol-related variables may be particularly relevant.

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) and alcohol use disorders (AUDs) are frequently comorbid (see Morris, Stewart, and Ham (2005), for a review). Approximately 13% of adults with past-year SAD met criteria for a comorbid AUD, and of adults with lifetime SAD, 48.2% met criteria for an AUD (Grant et al., 2005). This relationship appears to be due to a greater likelihood of having comorbid alcohol dependence (characterized by tolerance, withdrawal, or compulsive alcohol consumption (APA, 2000); OR = 2.26 to 2.7) rather than alcohol abuse (characterized by a pattern of negative consequences that result from alcohol use (APA, 2000); OR = 1.2 to 1.23; Buckner, Timpano, Zvolensky, Sachs-Ericsson, & Schmidt, 2008; Grant et al., 2005). Both retrospective and longitudinal studies have shown that when SAD and AUD co-occur, SAD typically precedes the onset of the AUD (Buckner, Schmidt, et al., 2008; Buckner, Timpano, et al., 2008; Buckner & Turner, 2009; Falk, Yi, & Hilton, 2008).

Consistent with studies of adults, Kushner and Sher (1993) found that 43% of college freshmen with SAD met diagnostic criteria for an AUD while only 26% of college freshman without SAD met criteria for an AUD. Overall, however, research on the relationship between social anxiety and alcohol use among college students has revealed very mixed findings (see Morris et al. (2005), for a review). Some laboratory studies have demonstrated that socially anxious participants drink more in anticipation of both interaction (Higgins & Marlatt, 1975) and speech tasks (Kidorf & Lang, 1999), whereas others (e.g., Holroyd, 1978) have found that socially anxious students drink significantly less alcohol than non-socially anxious peers during informal laboratory-based “get togethers.” Survey studies of college students have either failed to find a relationship between social anxiety and alcohol consumption, or have found an inverse relationship between social anxiety and alcohol consumption (e.g., Buckner, Schmidt, & Eggleston, 2006; Gilles, Turk, & Fresco, 2006; Ham & Hope, 2006; Lewis et al., 2008). One possible reason for the lack of a positive relationship between social anxiety and alcohol use is that socially anxious students may avoid social situations and only use alcohol to cope with anxiety in social situations when they cannot be avoided (Norberg, Norton, & Olivier, 2009; Stewart, Morris, Mellings, & Komar, 2006).

Despite the fact that many studies have found a negative relationship, or no relationship at all, between social anxiety and alcohol use,

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