



Alcohol and college students: Reasons, realization and intention to quit



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ABSTRACT

Alcoholism is a devastating social and economic problem in the United States, and young college students are perhaps most vulnerable to this problem. Using data from 892 students, this study empirically examines the determinants of intention to quit alcohol among college students. The results indicate that intention to quit drinking is positively associated with realization of excessive drinking, recall of alcohol ads, and escape as a reason for drinking, but negatively with fun as a reason for drinking. In turn, realization of excessive drinking is positively associated with recall of alcohol ads and deal-proneness, and escape, loneliness, and social, but not with fun, relaxation and taste as reasons for drinking. Discussion of these findings, their implications and limitations are provided in this study.

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1. Introduction

Alcoholism is perhaps the most common, devastating, and costly problems in the United States (CAMY, 2014; NIAAA, NIH, 2014). One group most vulnerable to alcohol abuse is young adults between the ages of 18 and 29, especially college-age young adults. About 25% of people aged 18 or older (this figure was 40% for the 18–22 year age group) reported engaging in binge drinking (five or more drinks in 2 h for men and four or more drinks in 2 h for women) in the past month (NIAAA, NIH, 2014). In terms of consequences, it is estimated that annually about 88,000 people (62,000 men and 26,000 women) die from alcohol related causes, making it the third leading cause of preventable death in the United States. Financially, in the US alone, costs associated with alcohol abuse is estimated to be about \$224 billion in 2006, and almost 75% of this cost is attributed to binge drinking (Bouchery, Harwood, Sacks, Simon, & Brewer, 2011; CDC, 2010; NIAAA, NIH, 2014). This suggests that alcoholism and binge drinking among young adults is a major social and economic problem (Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett, 2007; Gordon, 2011; Schry & White, 2013), and it is crucial to understand the reasons for drinking and find ways to solve this problem.

As a society, the USA is taking this problem seriously by investing in knowledge building efforts. Examples include the continuous work by the Center of Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY) and National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). Alcoholism is also drawing

research attention from very diverse perspectives. Most researchers approach alcoholism from a clinical perspective (Anderson, de Bruijn, Angus, Gordon, & Hastings, 2009; Ham & Hope, 2003; NIAAA, NIH, 2014), and some of the studies focus on the motivation to drink (Cooper, 1994; Cox & Klinger, 1988, 2004; Kuntsche, Stewart, & Cooper, 2008; Schry & White, 2013). In the past decade, researchers have also started to focus on the role of marketing activities on alcohol consumption among college students (Anderson et al., 2009; Booth et al., 2008; Casswell & Zhang, 1998; Chen, Grube, Bersamin, Waiters, & Keefe, 2005; Collins, Ellickson, McCaffrey, & Hambarsoomians, 2007; Gordon, 2011; Kuo, Wechsler, Greenberg, & Lee, 2003; Ross et al., 2014; Russell, Russell, & Grube, 2009; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009). However, most of these studies have looked at alcoholism in a somewhat narrow manner (Nelson, 2011; Wechsler & Nelson, 2008) by looking at few dimensions at a time and the focus has primarily been clinical. No study has comprehensively examined the simultaneous and relative effect of social, intrinsic, and marketing factors on reduction in alcohol consumption. This study focuses on college students as consumers of alcohol, and investigates the relationship between reasons for drinking (with internal, social and marketing locus) and realization of excessive drinking, and their intention to quit drinking.

This study makes a contribution by bringing together reasons for drinking from three domains – one that resides within consumers, a second that resides outside in the larger society, and the third is anchored in the marketing efforts of alcohol marketing firms – and investigating their relative effects on intention to quit drinking. This study also incorporates the notion of consumer realization of excessive drinking on intention to quit drinking. While the literature on alcohol addiction has predominantly focused on the notion of

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problem recognition as an associate of reduction in alcohol consumption (Agostinelli, Floyd, Grube, Woodall, & Miller, 2004), some suggest that perhaps realization of excessive drinking (CaSondra & Sparks, 2014; Khantzian, 2014; Rognmo, Torvik, Røysamb, & Tambs, 2013; Sandier, 1983; Tamutiené, 2014) is a stronger and more relevant motivator of intention to quit. In terms of definition, recognition is defined as “to know and remember (someone or something) because of previous knowledge or experience,” and realization as “an act of becoming fully aware of something as a fact and to understand or become aware of (something)” Merriam-Webster (2014). While problem recognition is primarily assessed based on the gap between a real state and a benchmark (external or ideal), realization is suggested to capture the moment of truth (Birnbau & Parker, 2014; Houston, 2010; Tiebout, 1953).

The approach taken in this study is motivated by the fact that consumer's decision to drink or not to drink is influenced by intrinsic factors, social factors, and marketing related factors simultaneously. In addition, a realization must sink in things that have gone too far for a consumer to initiate changes in their behavior. These sentiments have been discussed by researchers using social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 1999) and self-regulation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1998, 2012). Given a more comprehensive orientation, the findings of this study are likely to be more realistic and have greater implications for society at large and public policy makers, because it is likely to show the relative influence of one reason over another on the intention to quit alcohol. This study first reviews the theoretical anchors used by the existing literature on alcohol consumption.

2. Theoretical background

Several theories have been used in the addiction literature. Of these, the social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 1999) suggests that alcohol consumption behavior is a result of reciprocal interactions between personal cognitive factors, social and environmental determinants, and behavior. A key construct in this framework is self-efficacy – “judgment of one's capability to accomplish a certain level of performance” (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Marlatt, Baer, and Qigley (1995) suggest that self-efficacy beliefs influence not only addictive behavior, but also behavior changes leading to abstinence. They argue that there is often a conflict between self-efficacy beliefs associated with abstinence and the pressure from peers. A related theory is the outcome expectancy theory (Bandura, 1977), where alcohol consumption is explained by individuals having alcohol related expectations. These expectations associated with alcohol consumption are part of the structures and process of motivation in long-term memory that impact the cognitive processes governing consumption behavior.

Literature on alcohol addiction also relies on the self-regulation theory (Carver & Scheier, 1998, 2012), which consists of three stages – self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement. Individuals with a high self-regulatory capacity will consistently and effectively reduce the discrepancy between their current state and their desired goal, thus increasing their chance of achieving adaptive outcomes. Thus, not only is self-regulation an active process involving continuous self-monitoring, but individuals vary in their ability to adjust behavior to achieve favorable goals. Miller and Brown (1991) theorized that self-regulation consists of seven dimensions including motivation and commitment to change. Some researchers (Bissett, Wood, Cox, Scott, & Cassell, 2013; Rimal & Mollen, 2013) have also used the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) to theoretically anchor problematic drinking behavior in recent years. TRA suggests that behavioral intentions are “a function of salient information or beliefs about the likelihood that performing a particular behavior will lead to a specific outcome” (Madden, Ellen, & Ajzen, 1992, p. 3). Schlegel, Crawford, and Sanborn (1977) extend this model to understand alcohol drinking by adolescents.

While these theories approach addiction slightly differently, they also converge on the role of personal cognitive and social factors

which influence alcohol consumption and the commitment to change. These key motivating factors are next identified through a review of alcohol consumption and marketing literature.

3. Literature review

3.1. Alcohol consumption

The literature of problematic alcohol drinking is vast and diverse and a review of this literature is beyond the scope of this study, which focuses on alcohol consumption among college students. Borrowing from the problem behavior theory (Jessor & Jessor, 1977), Sadava (1985) suggests a two-dimensional model of alcohol use – levels of alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems such as psychosocial vulnerability, which may influence the definition of problem drinking (Baer, 2002; Ham & Hope, 2003). Problematic alcohol consumption among college students has become a major concern for all. Researchers have identified several psychosocial factors that influence problematic drinking among college students (Borsari & Carey, 2001; Elliot, Thrash, & Murayama, 2011; Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005, 2006; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007; Stewart, Zeitlin, & Samoluk, 1996). Ham and Hope (2003) review the literature of both internal and external influencers and identify categories of influencing factors including demographic variables (gender, ethnicity), personality factors (sensation seeking, neuroticism), drinking history, alcohol expectancies (globally positive change, physiological and sexual arousal, tension reduction), drinking motives (coping and conformity motives, enhancement and social motives), stress and coping, activity involvement (academic and athletic activity, Greek societies, religion, and drinking games), and peer and family influences (peer, family, social, environmental influences). Cronin (1997) shows that drinking motives are more closely associated with alcohol use than alcohol expectancies. Others assert that situational factors including drinking circumstance, location, day of the week, group size, type of relationship, local norms, and residence are important drivers of college age drinking (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986; Kairouz, Gliksman, Demers, & Adlef, 2002). Cooper (1994) identifies four primary clusters of reasons for drinking – social motives, conformity motives, enhancement, and coping motives. These factors were also used by others such as Cox and Klinger (1988, 2004), Kuntsche et al. (2005, 2006, 2008), and Stewart et al. (1996). Social motives capture anticipated positive social rewards while conformity motives capture avoidance of social disapproval. However, their effect on problematic alcohol consumption has been somewhat mixed. In comparison, enhancement motives capture anticipated positive enhancement in mood and status while coping motives capture a person's effort to deal with negative aspects of life such as loneliness; and they are found to be associated with heavy alcohol consumption. Further, conformity and coping motives are found to mediate the relationship between social anxiety and problematic drinking (Lewis et al., 2008). O'Connor and Colder (2005) examine all four types of reasons and find that among first-year college students, sensitivity to rewards to be associated with problematic drinking behaviors while enhancement, coping, and social reasons mediating this relationship. Meanwhile, Merrill, Wardell, and Read (2014) suggest that the effect of motives on problematic drinking depends on the type of motives and the focal outcomes. In addition, norms and expectations have also been found to predict alcohol abuse among college students (Wood, Nagoshi, & Dennis, 1992). Others have divided the enhancement and coping motives into fun, taste, relaxation, escape, dealing with loneliness as reasons for drinking (see Kuntsche et al., 2005 for an extensive review). Relying on this literature, this study focuses on six intrinsic social reasons for alcohol consumption – social (social, friends), fun (happy, upbeat, fun), taste, relaxation (relax, reduce stress, unwind), escape (forget problems and worries, and less depressed), and loneliness (when alone, nothing to do and bored).

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