



Sex differences in the impact of secondhand harm from alcohol on student mental health and university sense of belonging



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Secondhand harm from alcohol is commonly experienced by university students.
- Eighty-nine percent of students reported harm from peers drinking.
- Greater exposure to harms has a negative impact on sense of belonging.
- Greater exposure to harms had a negative impact on student mental health.
- Associations are particularly strong for females.

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: University students report high rates of secondhand harm from alcohol (i.e., harm from another person's drinking). The current study investigated the association between students' exposure to secondhand harm and student mental health and university sense of belonging. We also assessed whether students' sense of belonging mediated the association between secondhand harm and mental health and sex differences in these associations.

Methods: A total of 941 students (70% female) completed an online survey. Path analysis was employed to test our hypotheses. Secondhand harm was assessed across three dimensions; strains (e.g., having sleep/studies interrupted), threats (e.g., physical/sexual assault), and interpersonal harm (e.g., taking care of intoxicated friends).

Results: Eighty-nine percent of participants reported secondhand harm exposure in the last 30 days. Interpersonal harm was the most common type of harm experienced by students. Strains were associated with higher levels of anxiety and stress, threats were associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression, and interpersonal harm predicted higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. Gender moderated these effects, such that only interpersonal harm was associated with men's mental health outcomes. Sense of belonging was associated with fewer mental health symptoms, and significantly mediated the effect of threats on anxiety, depression, and stress for females only, such that threat exposure was associated with reduced sense of belonging, which in turn increased anxiety, depression, and stress.

Conclusion: This study supports the growing body of literature demonstrating the high prevalence of secondhand harm exposure among university students and the association of these experiences with poor student mental health. Furthermore, this research provides evidence that sense of belonging may be one mechanism that explains this association.

1. Introduction

The transition to university represents an important milestone for many young adults that presents new challenges, including living on their own for the first time and developing strategies to balance

academic and social responsibilities. Establishing new social support networks within the college environment helps young adults successfully navigate this transition. Alcohol use is a common element of the social culture in university, and students often report that alcohol helps them socialize with peers by reducing inhibitions and facilitating social

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bonding (Hudson et al. 2018). However, heavy drinking (consuming 4+/5+ drinks per occasion for females/males; Wechsler & Nelson 2001) is associated with negative consequences for both the drinker (White & Hingson 2013) and those around them (Casswell, You, & Huckle 2011; Greenfield, Karriker-Jaffe, Kerr, Ye, & Kaplan 2016), which may disrupt or damage support networks and feelings of connectedness to the campus community.

Generally, research suggests that exposure to heavy drinkers in one's social network (i.e., peers, family, co-workers) is associated with lower self-reported well-being and physical and mental health status (Casswell et al. 2011; Ferris, Laslett, Livingston, Room, & Wilkinson 2011; Greenfield et al. 2016). However, to date few studies have investigated the impact of experiences of secondhand harm (harm from other's drinking) on university student wellbeing (Cabalatungan & McCarthy 2015; Thompson et al. 2017). The current study adds to the limited literature by investigating sex differences in the association between harm from others drinking, students' sense of belonging, and student mental health and examines whether sense of belonging mediates the association between secondhand harm and mental health outcomes.

1.1. Secondhand harm

Secondhand harm from alcohol refers to the negative impacts drinkers have on their environment, family, and peers (Greenfield et al. 2016). Harm from other's drinking is incredibly prevalent among post-secondary students, with prevalence estimates ranging from 56% to 80% across studies (Davis MacNevin, Thompson, Teehan, Stuart, & Stewart 2017; Diep, Knibbe, Giang, & De Vries 2015; Nelson, Xuan, Lee, & Weitzman 2009; Thompson et al. 2017). However, variability in the items used to measure secondhand harm, differences in assessment timeframes (i.e., past month, past year), and variability in drinking cultures and alcohol policies across countries make it difficult to compare prevalence estimates across studies. One national US study tracking student exposure to secondhand harm from 1993 to 2005 across 18 institutions found that approximately 56–62% of students experienced two or more secondhand harms a year (Nelson et al. 2009). In a study of students from 12 university in Vietnam, Diep et al. (2015) categorized secondhand harms as either bodily effects (e.g., unwanted sexual advances) or non-bodily effects (e.g., sleep disturbances), and found that almost 80% of students reported past year exposure in either one or more categories. Recently published Canadian studies found that 70% of students reported recent (i.e., past term) exposure, particularly female student and those living on-campus (Davis MacNevin et al. 2017; Thompson et al. 2017).

Harm from others drinking includes a variety of experiences varying in severity. Moreover, measures tend to vary considerably across studies, with no standardized set of items. However, using the most commonly included items across studies and confirmatory factor analysis, research with Canadian students suggests that harm items may cluster into three distinct types of secondhand harm termed: strains (e.g., interrupted sleep/studies), threats (e.g., physical/sexual assault) and interpersonal harm (e.g., caring for intoxicated friends) (Davis MacNevin et al. 2017; Thompson et al. 2017). Strains, such as having sleep or studies interrupted, are among the most prevalent experiences across studies with estimates ranging from approximately 20% (Hallet et al. 2012) to almost 60% (Davis MacNevin et al. 2017; Diep et al. 2015; Nelson et al. 2009) and tend to be more commonly reported by females (Davis MacNevin et al. 2017; Diep et al. 2015; Langley, Kypri, & Stephenson 2003; Thompson et al. 2017). Interpersonal harm, such as experiencing serious arguments, range from approximately 13% in the past month (Hallet et al. 2012) to 27% in the past term (Davis MacNevin et al. 2017) and caring for intoxicated peers ranges from 25% (Hallet et al. 2012) to 49% (Davis MacNevin et al. 2017). Females tend to consistently report caring for peers more frequently than males (Davis MacNevin et al. 2017; Hallet et al. 2012; Jaing, Callinan, Laslett,

& Room 2015). Threats, such as physical and/or sexual assault or harassment, tend to be less prevalent overall. Studies measuring past month exposure report that 5–15% of students were physically assaulted and 1–7% were sexually assaulted (Hallet et al. 2012; Langley et al. 2003), while Davis MacNevin et al. (2017) reported that 10% of students experienced physical and sexual assault over the past term. In college populations, studies find that male students tend to report higher rates of physical assaults by intoxicated peers, whereas female students tend to report higher rates of unwanted sexual advances (Davis MacNevin et al. 2017; Diep et al. 2015; Hallet et al. 2012; Langley et al. 2003).

While strains are often the most common type of secondhand harm experienced (Davis MacNevin et al. 2017; Diep et al. 2015; Thompson et al. 2017), threats and interpersonal harm may be more strongly associated with poor student wellbeing. A recent study by Thompson et al. (2017) examined the associations between exposure to strains and threats and mental health outcomes in a cross-sectional sample of 1885 university students. Both strains and threats were significantly associated with higher levels of self-reported anxiety, depression and reduced subjective mental wellbeing; however, associations were stronger for threats (Thompson et al. 2017). To our knowledge, no study has examined the association between interpersonal secondhand harm and mental health outcomes among university students. However, cross-sectional, general population-based studies have found that experiencing family-related harm from others drinking, such as relationship problems with family members/spouses or financial trouble, was associated with higher depression (Greenfield et al. 2016) and those who habitually cared for a problem drinker reported significantly lower quality of life (Jaing et al. 2015). Moreover, people tend to report greater distress when harm from others drinking is caused by someone close to them (Karriker-Jaffe, Greenfield, & Kaplan 2017). Thus, we posit that experiences of interpersonal harms from peers' drinking may also negatively impact student mental health outcomes.

1.2. Sense of belonging

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943), social needs (e.g., belonging and self-actualization) are vital to psychological health. Building on this seminal work, the belongingness hypothesis posits that humans have a strong and innate drive to belong within a community, frequently interact with peers, and form meaningful, stable relationships (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Slaten, Elison, Deemer, Hughes, & Shemwell 2017). The desire for community membership motivates goal-directed social behaviour, encourages success, and is a critical determinant of overall health and wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary 1995). This is particularly salient for university students, who are attempting to thrive in a new environment and establish new social support networks with their peers, in addition to succeeding academically in university (Slaten et al. 2014).

The majority of research on sense of belonging focuses on school-age children, but recent research has highlighted its importance in university (Slaten et al. 2014, 2017). Sense of belonging in university is defined as the extent to which a student feels accepted and successfully integrated within the campus community (Slaten et al. 2017). This includes meaningful involvement in groups and organizations, the development of peer relationships, pride and involvement in university culture and community, and perceived opportunities for personal growth (Slaten et al. 2014). Our understanding of the importance of university sense of belonging is in its infancy, but research suggests that it is a significant predictor of academic success and student mental health (Fink 2014; Mounts 2004; O'Keeffe 2013; Pittman & Richmond 2007). Students who report a high sense of belonging typically adjust better to university life (Pittman & Richmond 2007), report lower levels of depression and loneliness (Mounts 2004) and are less likely to drop out (Libbey 2004).

Important components of sense of belonging in university include

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