



# Friends' drinking norms and male adolescents' alcohol consumption: The moderating role of performance-based peer influence susceptibility



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined whether the relationship between friends' drinking norms and male adolescents' alcohol use is moderated by performance-based peer influence susceptibility. Seventy-three male adolescents ( $M = 17$  years) from three schools in the Netherlands were exposed to the drinking norms of "peers" (electronic confederates) in a chat room experiment. These peers were either popular or unpopular, and conveyed pro- or anti-alcohol norms. Peer influence susceptibility was defined as the change in adolescents' answers before and after exposure to the peer norms. Multilevel regression analyses indicated that the relationship between friends' drinking norms and adolescents' alcohol use (assessed during eight weekends) was moderated by susceptibility to the pro-alcohol norms of popular peers. This relationship was stronger for adolescents who were highly susceptible. These findings suggest that a behavioral measure of peer influence susceptibility could be useful in alcohol prevention programs to select adolescents at risk for negative peer socialization.

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Adolescent alcohol use is associated with long-term health-consequences such as increased risk for alcohol problems and dependence in adulthood (McCambridge, McAlaney, & Rowe, 2011), and several aversive short-term consequences, such as aggression and violent behavior, somatic problems due to intoxication, vandalism, accidents, poor school performance, risky sexual behavior, self-harm and suicide (Bonomo et al., 2001; Felson, Savolainen, Aaltonen, & Moustgaard, 2008; Huang, White, Kosterman, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2001; Miller, Naimi, Brewer, & Jones, 2007; Stolle, Sack, & Thomasius, 2009). One of the strongest correlates of adolescents' alcohol use is peers' drinking behavior (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Leung,

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Toumbourou, & Hemphill, 2014). This may not be surprising, given that adolescents predominantly drink in peer groups. These groups generally show high similarities in alcohol use, due to a combination of selection and influence processes (Osgood et al., 2013). Adolescence is characterized as a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, in which individuals attempt to become more independent from their parents and establish new social relationships with peers (Blakemore, 2008; Brown, 2004). Moreover, adolescents have a strong motivation to acquire social status in the peer group (LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). Peers can signal, through their own drinking behavior, which behavior is appropriate and accepted in certain situations, and accordingly, which behavior is likely to lead to positive evaluation and social acceptance (Borsari & Carey, 2001). Adapting to the behavior and norms of peers could therefore increase adolescents' sense of accepted and valued behavior in the peer group, which may stimulate new social relationships with peers, detachment from parents and the development of a stable and favorable self-concept (see Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011).

Indeed, several studies yielded convincing evidence that adolescence is marked by increased sensitivity to peer influence (Chein, Albert, O'Brien, Uckert, & Steinberg, 2011; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; O'Brien, Albert, Chein, & Steinberg, 2011; Smith, Chein, & Steinberg, 2014; Smith, Steinberg, Strang, & Chein, 2015; Weigard, Chein, Albert, Smith, & Steinberg, 2014). However, less is known about individual variability in the extent to which adolescents are influenced by peers. More specifically, there is still limited understanding of the role of peer influence susceptibility in the relationship between peers' and adolescents' alcohol use. The present study therefore focused on whether the association between friends' drinking norms and adolescents' alcohol use is moderated by adolescents' peer influence susceptibility.

Several methods have been designed to assess peer influence susceptibility. Frequently, susceptibility is assessed with questionnaires, in which participants are asked to report on their level of susceptibility or resistance to peer influence (e.g. Steinberg & Monahan, 2007; Sumter, Bokhorst, Steinberg, & Westenberg, 2009). Santor, Messervey, and Kusumakar (2000) found that self-reported peer influence susceptibility was positively related to alcohol consumption among adolescents. Related to peer influence susceptibility, previous research showed that social comparison moderated the relationship between perceived peer drinking norms and alcohol related negative consequences, such that the relationship between peer norms and negative consequences was stronger for college students who scored higher on social comparison (Litt, Lewis, Stahlbrandt, Firth, & Neighbors, 2012). Additionally, in a study focusing on delinquency, Miller (2010) showed that the effect of peers' delinquent behavior on adolescents' self-reported delinquent behavior was stronger when these adolescents scored high on peer influence susceptibility. These findings suggest that peer influence susceptibility is an important factor to include when studying the effect of peers' drinking behavior on adolescents' alcohol consumption. However, as influence processes may occur unconsciously and individuals may change their behavior unintentionally (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), conclusions about peer influence susceptibility that are solely based on adolescents' self-reports may be incomplete and biased.

To account for this limitation of self-reported susceptibility, some scholars proposed a performance-based measure to assess peer influence susceptibility more objectively. Allen, Porter, and McFarland (2006) asked adolescents and their close friends to respond separately to neutral hypothetical dilemmas. After they made their personal decisions, they were instructed to reach consensus about their decisions. Peer influence susceptibility was assessed as the degree to which the adolescent adapted his or her answer to the friend's answer. This study showed that adolescents' substance use problems were positively related to whether their close friends previously used substances, but only among highly susceptible adolescents. For less susceptible adolescents no associations between substance use problems and friends' substance use were found. Additionally, Prinstein, Brechwald, and Cohen (2011) created a performance-based measure of peer influence susceptibility to examine the relationship between male adolescents' and their friends' deviant behavior. They used a simulated Internet chat room to expose adolescents to deviant norms of peers. These peers were either popular/liked or unpopular/disliked. The adolescents were asked to respond to hypothetical scenarios about engagement in deviant behavior, and peer influence susceptibility was defined as the difference between adolescents' answers before and after exposure to the peer norms. The results indicated that adolescents' perceptions of their best friend's engagement in deviant behavior predicted their own engagement in deviant behavior. However, this association was only found for adolescents who were highly susceptible to popular/liked peers, while no moderation effects of susceptibility to unpopular/disliked peers were found. The researchers therefore suggest that adolescents' susceptibility to peer influence may depend on adolescents' desire to be similar to favorable peers (Gibbons, Gerrard, & Lane, 2003). A similar performance-based measure of peer influence susceptibility was used to examine whether the relationship between popular peer norms and adolescents' engagement in sexual activity was moderated by peer influence susceptibility (Choukas-Bradley, Giletta, Widman, Cohen, & Prinstein, 2014). Consistent with the results of Prinstein et al. (2011), this study revealed that the longitudinal association between the perceived number of sexual partners of popular peers and adolescents' own number of sexual partners was stronger for adolescents high in peer influence susceptibility.

In the present study, we used a comparable performance-based measure to examine whether the relationship between friends' drinking norms and male adolescents' alcohol consumption was moderated by adolescents' peer influence susceptibility. Moreover, peer influence susceptibility is not a fixed construct; the extent to which adolescents are influenced by peers depends on the type of peers and the type of norms that are conveyed by these peers (Teunissen et al., 2012). We therefore differentiated between the norms of popular and unpopular peers, and we made a distinction between peers' pro-alcohol and anti-alcohol norms. Pro-alcohol norms refer to peer norms that promote drinking while anti-alcohol norms refer to peer norms that promote little or no drinking. We created a performance-based measure with a  $2 \times 2$  between subjects design (i.e., popular vs. unpopular peers  $\times$  pro- vs. anti-alcohol norms) and we examined adolescents' peer influence susceptibility within these four conditions. In line with the study of Prinstein et al. (2011), we hypothesized that the

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