



Explicit drinking identity and alcohol problems: The mediating role of drinking to cope



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Drinking identity is associated with drinking to cope.
- Drinking identity is associated with alcohol problems via coping.
- Drinking identity is associated with problems over time.

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ABSTRACT

Drinking identity, or the tendency to view one's self as a drinker, is a unique predictor of alcohol use and related consequences among young adults; yet the mechanism by which it leads to alcohol problems is poorly understood. Based on self-presentation and self-verification perspectives, we examined drinking to cope as a mediator of the association between explicit drinking identity and alcohol-related problems among two samples of young adults. Study data come from two large, longitudinal studies. Participants from Sample 1 and Sample 2 included undergraduates (55% and 59% female, respectively) who reported drinking in the previous three months. Tests of the indirect effects indicated that 3-month drinking to cope significantly mediated the positive association between baseline drinking identity and 6-month alcohol-related problems in both samples. In contrast, 3-month drinking identity did not mediate the association between baseline drinking to cope and 6-month alcohol-related problems. Findings indicate that individuals with a stronger drinking identity are more likely to use alcohol to cope and, subsequently, experience more problems. Thus, drinking identity may be an important intervention target for college students as it appears to temporally proceed drinking to cope in the prediction of alcohol-related problems.

1. Introduction

Heavy alcohol use is common among college students, with 35% reporting at least one heavy drinking episode (five or more drinks on an occasion) in the past two weeks and 43% reporting having been drunk at least once in the past month (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2014). Heavy episodic drinking is associated with a variety of negative consequences and a host of health risk behaviors, including marijuana use, cigarette smoking, and risky sex (Wechsler, Lee, Nelson, & Kuo, 2002; White & Hingson, 2014). Given the extent of problems associated with this heavy drinking pattern

(Perkins, 2002), research identifying potential mechanisms of problematic alcohol use among young adults is needed to inform prevention and intervention efforts. Using data collected from two independent samples, the current study aimed to establish and replicate findings pertaining to one such mechanism, drinking identity. Specifically, we sought to evaluate how drinking identity, drinking to cope, and alcohol-related problems were related to one another over a 6-month period. What follows is a test of two proposed mediation pathways as well as a replication using an independent sample.

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1.1. Drinking identity

Identity development, characterized as exploration of one's role and purpose in society, is a key feature of adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1956; Marcia, 1966). Theory suggests that young adults who explore and then commit to an identity will be more capable of withstanding stress and setting realistic goals than those who either fail to explore or fail to commit to an identity (Marcia, 1966). Alcohol and/or other drug use is a key element of this identity exploration for many young adults (Arnett, 2005), thus exposure to alcohol is likely to result in some kind of self-concept related to alcohol.

Strong drinking identity – or viewing one's self as a drinker (which can include identifying with alcohol, drinking behaviors, and/or social groups who drink; Lindgren, Neighbors, Gasser, Ramirez, & Cvencek, 2016) – has been associated with drinking quantity and alcohol-related consequences in both cross-sectional and longitudinal research. Drinking identity has been measured explicitly via self-report and is thought to capture propositional statements about who a person is (“I am a drinker”; see Lindgren, Neighbors et al., 2016; Lindgren, Neighbors et al., 2013). It has also been measured implicitly via reaction time measures and is thought to capture associations with the self and drinking that are thought to be more automatic, reflexive, and impulsive (see Lindgren, Foster, Westgate, & Neighbors, 2013). In the current study, our focus is on explicit drinking identity, which we refer to as drinking identity for brevity.

Drinking identity is a unique predictor of concurrent alcohol use and related consequences among young adults (Foster, Neighbors, & Young, 2014; Lindgren, Neighbors, Westgate, & Salemink, 2014; Lindgren, Foster et al., 2013; Lindgren, Neighbors et al., 2013), and these patterns are maintained over time (Lindgren, Neighbors, Wiers, Gasser, & Teachman, 2015; Lindgren, Neighbors et al., 2013). Even when compared directly to other, well-known predictors of alcohol use and consequences (e.g., descriptive and injunctive norms, expectancies, drinking motives), drinking identity remains a significant predictor of alcohol use and related problems (Lindgren, Neighbors et al., 2013). Moreover, stronger drinking identity predicts increases in alcohol consumption and alcohol problems (Lindgren, Neighbors, Teachman et al., 2016; Lindgren, Ramirez, Olin, Neighbors, 2016), and risk of alcohol use disorders (Lindgren, Ramirez et al., 2016). Drinking identity also predicts future problems after controlling for consumption, indicating that identity is not redundant with consumption (Lindgren, Neighbors, Teachman et al., 2016). While the research examining drinking identity as a predictor of alcohol use and problems is compelling, little work has examined the process by which drinking identity may impact alcohol-related outcomes over time.

The results of at least one study suggest that drinking identity may be associated with alcohol-related problems due in part to its influence on drinking to cope. Specifically, Moeller and Crocker (2009) found that a construct similar to identity which they term self-image goals, or the desire for others to view one in positive ways, was associated with alcohol-related problems in part because it was associated with an increased use of alcohol to cope with negative affect, or “drinking to cope.” Drinking to cope – or more specifically, endorsing drinking to cope as a reason or motive to drink – is a robust predictor of heavy alcohol use and alcohol-related consequences above and beyond the amount of alcohol consumed among young adults (Cooper, 1994; Cooper, Agocha, & Sheldon, 2000; Ham & Hope, 2003; Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005; Merrill, Wardell, & Read, 2014), with associations lasting up to 10 years (Holahan, Moos, Holohan, Cronkite, & Randall, 2001). Unfortunately, drinking to cope may not decrease as students transition out of college (Perkins, 1999). The finding that drinking to cope may account, in part, for the impact of self-image on alcohol-related consequences is consistent with self-presentation and self-verification perspectives. Specifically, self-presentation (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2009) posits that individuals are motivated to convey information about themselves through their behavior, while

self-verification (Swann, 2012) suggests that individuals want others to view them in accordance with the way they view themselves. Both of these models suggest that individuals are motivated to engage in behaviors that are consistent with their own self-views (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2009; Leary, 1993; Swann, 2012). Furthermore, from these perspectives, individuals who identify as drinkers may be more likely to use alcohol when experiencing negative affect, which may then lead to more alcohol-related problems. This may be due in part to individuals desire to convey information about themselves through drinking behavior (self-presentation) and a desire for others to have a view of their drinking that is consistent with their own (self-verification).

Alternatively, another study found a different relationship between drinking identity and drinking to cope, but it focused on implicit drinking identity. Specifically, Lindgren, Neighbors et al., 2015 found that implicit drinking identity mediated the association between drinking to cope and drinking quantity one week later (Lindgren, Neighbors et al., 2015). These findings were promising but left several empirical questions unanswered. Specifically, are the processes associated with explicit drinking identity the same as those for implicit identity? Self-presentation and self-verification perspectives require self-knowledge and introspection, which is reflected more in explicit (vs. implicit) measures of drinking identity. Thus, one could expect different results depending on which type of drinking identity measure one uses. Second, Lindgren et al. did not test this association with alcohol-related problems and did not rule out alternative temporal orderings of these variables. Third, the associations were tested over a relatively short time period (i.e., 16 days). Given these unanswered questions and existing theory, there is good reason to believe that the temporal precedence of drinking identity and drinking to cope may be reversed. Thus, the current work aimed to integrate self-verification and self-presentation perspectives and to provide a more rigorous test via evaluating competing mediation models ([explicit] drinking identity → drinking to cope vs. drinking to cope → drinking identity) with alcohol problems as the outcome and assessing these relationships over a longer (i.e., 6 month) period.

In addition to testing competing models, we also included a second sample to test whether findings replicated. This decision stems from concerns about the reproducibility of findings in psychological science (Open Science Collaboration, 2015). We think it is important to evaluate the extent to which these findings replicate across these two samples given the concerns raised about reproducibility in general. We also think it is important for two reasons specific to the hypotheses and samples and questions. First, these data come from studies that were not originally designed to address these questions – they are secondary analyses. Second, based on existing social psychological perspectives we are proposing an alternative temporal ordering of these variables and thought it important to both present the alternative and verify the different findings across two samples.

1.2. Current research

The current study, thus, examined drinking to cope as a mediator of the association between drinking identity and alcohol problems in two independent samples of young adults. Based on the work of Moeller and Crocker (2009) and self-presentation and self-verification theories, we hypothesized that drinking to cope at three months would mediate the association between drinking identity at baseline and alcohol problems at six months. However, given the finding that implicit drinking identity was a mediator of drinking to cope and alcohol use (Lindgren, Neighbors et al., 2015), we also tested whether [explicit] drinking identity at three months mediated the association between drinking to cope at baseline and alcohol problems at six months. Results of this study are expected to inform interventions for heavy alcohol use among young adults by documenting temporal associations between drinking identity, drinking to cope, and alcohol-related consequences.

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