



# The association between multidimensional feminine norms, binge drinking and alcohol-related problems among young adult college women



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Alcohol consumption among women has steadily increased over the past 30 years.
- The escalation of alcohol use among women highlights the need to examine gender-relevant factors.
- Multidimensional feminine norms is a theoretically-important factor that explains alcohol use.
- Distinct feminine norms appear to be protective while other norms heighten risk of alcohol use.
- The findings can be used in prevention efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm among college women.

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## ABSTRACT

Alcohol consumption among women has steadily increased over the past 30 years, and women's drinking behavior is now similar to that of men's. The escalation of alcohol use among women highlights the critical need to examine gender issues and motivational factors that contribute to binge drinking and related problems within this population. Feminine norms or the socially constructed beliefs, messages and attitudes about what it means to be a woman may contribute to within-group differences in drinking patterns among women. The current study examined the relationship between multidimensional feminine norms and binge drinking and alcohol-related problems among 1910 college women. Participants completed a self-report measure of binge drinking, alcohol-related problems, conformity to feminine norms, alcohol expectancies and descriptive norms. Controlling for the covariates descriptive norms, positive alcohol expectancies, and sorority membership, adherence to feminine norms related to sexual fidelity and belief that one needs to be sweet and nice were negatively associated to binge drinking, while adhering to investment in appearance was positively associated to binge drinking and alcohol-related problems. Distinct feminine norms also had a significant indirect effect on alcohol-related problems through binge drinking. This study significant contributes to the literature by elucidating the theoretically gender-relevant risk and protective aspects of feminine norms in relation to binge drinking and related problems, and provides important information that might be used in clinical and prevention efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm among a vulnerable group: college women.

## 1. Introduction

Alcohol consumption among women in the United States has been steadily increasing in the past 30 years (O'Malley et al., 2007), and recent epidemiological studies suggest that women are “closing the gender gap” (Keyes, Grant, & Hasin, 2008). This is particularly concerning as women who drink are at heightened risk of developing specific health problems, including liver problems and various cancers

(Baan et al., 2007) due to biological and physiological differences from men (e.g., different metabolic rates, water concentrations, and body weights) which contribute to differences in blood alcohol levels (Ham & Hope, 2003; LaBrie, Cail, Hummer, Lac, & Neighbors, 2009). Women experience increased risk for certain acute effects of alcohol consumption including sexual assault, engagement in unprotected sex and sexually transmitted diseases (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005). Movere researcher suggest that a broader

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investigation of alcohol-related problem among college women may more accurately capture problematic alcohol use that does not meet the alcohol use disorder criteria (Nealis, Collins, Lee-Baggley, Sherry, & Stewart, 2017). Given the escalation of problem drinking among women, and the disproportionate consequences at similar levels of consumption, there is a critical need to examine the gender-relevant and motivational factors contributing to binge drinking and related problems within this population (Brady, Iwamoto, Grivel, Kaya, & Clinton, 2016; LaBrie et al., 2009).

Traditionally, women's subordinated status and the longstanding notion that female drinking is "immoral" have been used to discourage heavy alcohol use among women on a societal scale (Peralta, 2010). The feminist movement ushered in positive cultural and societal changes in women's social position that resulted in the adaptation of less traditional feminine norms, or socially constructed beliefs about what it means to be a woman (Lyons & Willott, 2008). According to social constructivist theory, feminine gender norms "provide guidance for women about how they are supposed to act, think, and feel, and constrain women from certain behaviors that are off limits" (Mahalik et al., 2005). Societal changes in gender role norms may therefore explain, at least in part, the reduced stigma placed on certain high-risk behaviors among American women including public drinking (Lyons & Willott, 2008). Theory and research support the idea that there are different pressures to drink or to abstain based upon varying intersecting social statuses (e.g., feminine, gay, Hispanic) (Peralta & Jauk, 2011), and that feminine norms may explain drinking behaviors better than biological sex alone (Brady et al., 2016; Moller-Leimkuhler, Schwarz, Burtsccheidt, & Gaebel, 2002).

A growing body of research suggests that women's adherence to feminine norms is an important factor contributing to subsequent individual differences in drinking patterns (Brady et al., 2016; Moller-Leimkuhler et al., 2002). Huselid and Cooper (1992) found that gender norms partially mediated the relationship between biological sex and alcohol use. Although males engaged in heavier drinking, gender norms reduced the magnitude of the effect of biological sex on drinking and related problems. In another study, higher endorsement of gender norms related to success and power was associated with heavier drinking for both women and men (Korcuska & Thombs, 2003). The results have been inconsistent, however, with some studies indicating that adherence to feminine norms is associated with heightened risk (Hensing, Spak, Thundal, & Östlund, 2003; Kulis, Marsiglia, & Nagoshi, 2010; Moller-Leimkuhler et al., 2002; Williams & Ricciardelli, 2001), and others suggesting that traditional feminine norms are protective against binge drinking (Emslie, Hunt, & Macintyre, 2002; Hensing & Spak, 2009; Wolff, Busza, Bufumbo, & Whitworth, 2006).

The inconsistent findings in previous studies may be due to measurement issues; namely, these studies utilized measures that conceptualized femininity as a global or unitary construct. Emerging research suggests that feminine norms in the United States are multidimensional and individual aspects of traditional feminine norms may have differential effects on externalizing behaviors including binge drinking (Mahalik et al., 2005). Nevertheless, contemporary studies have largely continued to rely on instruments that define and assess femininity as unidimensional (Brady et al., 2016). Thus, use of a multidimensional measure may provide greater specificity and clarify which feminine norms may protect against or increase vulnerability for problematic drinking behaviors.

One established multidimensional model of feminine norms identifies nine distinct aspects that contribute to women's experiences of and reactions to issues related to femininity (Mahalik et al., 2005), including: focus on thinness, investment in appearance, sexual fidelity in a committed relationship, maintaining relationships, being sweet and nice, valuing romantic relationships, modesty, upholding domestic roles, and caring for children (Parent & Moradi, 2010). Patterns of adherence to these multidimensional norms vary across individuals as they are based on the extent to which an individual experiences,

adheres to and internalizes these specific norms (Iwamoto, Grivel, Cheng, Clinton, & Kaya, 2016). Thus, while some women may conform more to feminine norms related to a focus on thinness and appearance, other women may value and conform more to the role of taking care of children (Mahalik et al., 2005). According to feminist theory, strictly conforming to feminine norms "can limit women's (and men's) potential by limiting the range of socially acceptable choices and behaviors available to them" (Parent & Moradi, 2010, p. 98); however, not conforming to certain feminine norms may have certain costs for women (Green, Davids, Skaggs, Riopel, & Hallengren, 2008). In a qualitative study, relative to non-binge drinkers, college women who were frequent binge drinkers were thinner and more social, appearance-focused, and concerned with men's opinions as a means to gain acceptance and fit in with their male peers (Young, Morales, McCabe, Boyd, & D'Arcy, 2005). Accordingly, adherence to feminine norms including focus on appearance and thinness, being nice in relationships, and maintaining romantic relationship may contribute to heavy drinking (LaBrie et al., 2009). In contrast, other feminine norms that reflect self-control and nurturing roles, such as placing value on sexual fidelity, caring for children, and domestic roles, might be protective against binge drinking and its associated consequences. Feminine norms related to caring for children may provide some women with means of achieving self-confidence, reducing the need for validation from peers and thereby protecting against risky behaviors such as problematic drinking (Mahalik et al., 2005).

Several recent studies suggest that adherence to distinct dimensions of feminine norms are in fact associated to binge drinking. One study found that among Spanish college-aged women, higher endorsement of sexual fidelity and romantic feminine norms was associated with lower alcohol use (Sanchez-Lopez, Cuellar-Flores, & Dresch, 2012). Brabete, Sanchez-Lopez, Cuellar-Flores, and Rivas-Diez (2013) mirrored these findings, reporting that endorsement of sexual fidelity, romantic relationship, and domestic norms was inversely related to alcohol use among Romanian college students. Alternatively, one study suggested that endorsement of particular feminine norms including thinness, investment in appearance, and relational norms were positively associated to binge drinking and alcohol-related problems, while sexual fidelity (e.g., containing sexual relationships to one partner) was negatively related to the alcohol outcomes among Asian American women (Iwamoto et al., 2016). Thus it appears that higher adherence to distinct feminine norms heightens risk of alcohol-related problem while other norms decrease risk. However these studies did not include well-established correlates of drinking including descriptive norms (i.e., an individual's perception and estimate of their peers drinking behaviors), and alcohol expectancies, or the beliefs and cognitions about the positive effects of alcohol use, and only one study to date has investigated this among a U.S sample of young adult women.

Given the promising empirical associations between feminine norms and alcohol use among college women (Parent & Moradi, 2010), the current study aims to advance the literature by investigating the relationship between conformity to feminine norms and rates of binge drinking and alcohol-related problems among young adult women. Heavy drinking and its associated problems are significantly increasing among women thus it is important to understand the determinants among this at-risk group. We hypothesized that distinct dimensions of feminine norms would differentially account for incremental variance in alcohol-related outcomes, over and above the effects of these well-established risk factors including sorority membership, descriptive norms and positive alcohol expectancies (Borsari & Carey, 2003). Specifically, based on the results of previous studies (Iwamoto et al., 2016; Sanchez-Lopez et al., 2012), we hypothesized that the feminine norms of sexual fidelity and modesty will be negatively associated with HED and alcohol-related problems, while thinness, investment in appearance, and maintaining relationships and romantic relationships will be positively associated with the alcohol outcomes.

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