



Romantic relationships, college student alcohol use, and negative consequences of drinking

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether being in a romantic relationship is associated with undergraduates' alcohol use and negative consequences of drinking. Alcohol use was operationalized to include amount and frequency of drinking, binge drinking, and drunkenness. Negative consequences included: having a hangover, missing a class, getting behind in school work, doing something that was later regretted, forgetting where the student was or what they did, having unplanned sex, and getting hurt or injured. Data came from an online survey distributed to Midwestern undergraduate students ($N = 572$), with analyses conducted separately for men and women. Results indicated that being in a committed relationship generally served as a protective factor against drunkenness, but did not reduce frequency of drinking or binge drinking. Whereas romantically committed men were only less likely to report doing something that was later regretted, women in romantic relationships were less likely to experience all negative consequences of drinking considered here.

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1. Introduction

Alcohol use is a major public health concern on college campuses (NIAAA, 2017a; Slutske, 2005), where about 40% of students age 18–20 engage in binge drinking¹ (NIAAA, 2017b; SAMHSA, 2007) and over 30% meet the diagnostic criteria for alcohol abuse or dependence (Beck et al., 2008). Evidence suggests that while college alcohol use and the frequency of drinking on campuses remain relatively steady, the amount that students drink has risen, including a rapid increase in heavy drinking (White & Hingson,

2013). As well, college women are closing the gender gap in drinking, looking more and more like men in their alcohol consumption (CDC, 2017). College alcohol use is of concern primarily because it has been linked to a number of negative consequences, extending from the academic and interpersonal to injury, assault, and death (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005). Thus, they are serious concerns for the students who drink, their friends and loved ones, and campus administrators seeking ways to enhance student retention and success.

Drinking while at college has become a ritual in US higher education (NIAAA, 2017a; Robb, 2011), with consequences for students' academic, intellectual, and career trajectories (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). A number of students come to campus having already established drinking habits in high school (SAMHSA, 2014), whereas others are socialized into alcohol use as early as the first six weeks of classes (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; NIAAA, 2017a). The culture of drinking is strong on campuses (NIAAA, 2002), and many facets of the traditional college

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¹ Binge drinking is a contested term, but popularly refers to the consumption of four (for women) or five (for men) drinks in one sitting. Because this is the term that is widely recognized, as well as widely used (see for example, the Centers for Disease Control), we have adopted it here.

experience are conducive to alcohol use: the newfound freedom students have from parents and other adults, living with a group of same age peers, unstructured time, easy availability of alcohol, and inconsistent enforcement of underage drinking (Arnett, 2000; NIAAA, 2017a). The frequency of drinking and quantity of alcohol consumed tends to increase along with class level until students reach the legal drinking age of 21, after which these trends decline (Fromme, Wetherill, & Neal, 2010; Read, Beattie, Chamberlain, & Merrill, 2008). Collegiate subcultures also contribute to alcohol use. Those involved in the Greek system, especially those who live in sorority and fraternity houses, exhibit the highest rates of alcohol use and are most likely to binge drink (NIAAA, 2017a; Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 1996). Use is also higher on campuses with prominent athletic programs (NIAAA, 2017a; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Grossman, & Zanakos, 1997) and among athletes themselves (Green, Nelson, & Hartmann, 2014). Involvement in student organizations provides a window to both opportunity structures and social capital that may increase the likelihood of alcohol use (Lorant & Nicaise, 2015; Theall et al., 2009). Consistent with the notion that drinking is woven into the college culture, upon graduation, rates of heavy alcohol use immediately decline (Masten, Faden, Zucker, & Spear, 2009).

Underscoring public concern about college alcohol use are the negative consequences associated with drinking. These consequences, ranging in severity, occur across a number of domains to include the physical and physiological, social and interpersonal, academic, occupational, and legal, among others (Merrill, Wardell, & Read, 2014). Students are also more likely to engage in risky behaviors when they drink, as their inhibitions are lowered and they have less capacity to engage in responsible decision-making. These risky behaviors may also have negative consequences associated with them (Foster, Caravelis, & Kopak, 2014). College students who drink, and drink excessively, have higher rates of injury, health and social problems, academic problems, assault, vandalism, and arrest than their non-drinking peers (NIAAA, 2002; Thombs et al., 2009; Wechsler, Dowdall, Maenner, Gledhill-Hoyt, & Lee, 1998). They are more likely to suffer from a hangover, illness, memory problems, alcohol poisoning, and experience disruption of their physical growth and development (CDC, 2017). They may choose to drive under the influence or engage in unplanned or unsafe sex, and put themselves at risk for STIs, pregnancy, sexual abuse, intimate partner violence, accidents, and homicide (CDC, 2017; Fielder, Walsh, Carey, & Carey, 2013; Linden-Carmichael, Lau-Barraco, & Kelley, 2016).

Because of the severity and incidence of these negative outcomes, identification of protective factors that help shield students from heavy alcohol use and its consequences is both important and timely. The current study examined whether being in a romantic relationship is associated with undergraduates' alcohol use and negative consequences of drinking. Past research has identified that being in a committed relationship is associated with reduced alcohol consumption and fewer alcohol-related problems (Salvatore et al., 2016; Simon & Barrett, 2010), but existing studies have focused on global measures that

lack specificity. Furthermore, increasing parity in the consumption of alcohol by men and women, along with gender differences in the experience of intimate relationships suggest that the association between romantic relationships, alcohol use, and negative consequences is likely to vary on the basis of gender. In this paper, we take a more extensive look at both alcohol use and its consequences, addressing whether there are notable gender differences in the dating-drinking relationship. Alcohol use was operationalized to include amount and frequency of drinking, binge drinking, and drunkenness. Negative consequences included: having a hangover, missing a class, getting behind in school work, doing something that was later regretted, forgetting where the student was or what they did, having unplanned sex, and getting hurt or injured. Data came from an online survey distributed to a cluster and convenience sample of Midwestern undergraduate students ($N=572$), with analyses conducted separately for men and women.

2. Background

Though the odds of experiencing negative consequences increase when a student drinks alcohol, they do not occur to every student, nor do they occur each time alcohol is used (Lange et al., 2002). Men face more frequent alcohol-related consequences, and these outcomes tend to be related to anti-social behaviors. In contrast, women report individualized outcomes, such as passing out and getting injured, and do so less frequently (Sugarman, Demartini, & Carey, 2009). Foster et al. (2014) found that students affiliated with a Greek organization reported heavier alcohol use and more negative alcohol-related consequences, whereas academic performance was negatively associated with use and negative consequences. Lange et al. (2002) noted that because negative experiences do not occur each time a student drinks, they may find alcohol use more rewarding than not, and may in fact perceive more positive than negative outcomes related to use. This may help explain why students consume more alcohol in the week to follow when they experience its positive effects. Yet, they are no less likely to reduce their binge drinking when they experience alcohol's negative effects (Schulenberg et al., 2001).

One factor that may be associated with reduced alcohol use and drinking-related consequences is being in a committed romantic relationship. Whereas dating several people is associated with greater alcohol use, being in a committed relationship is associated with less alcohol use and fewer alcohol-related problems (Salvatore et al., 2016; Simon & Barrett, 2010). Braithwaite, Delevi, and Fincham (2010) found that students involved in a committed relationship were less likely than single students to report risky alcohol-related behaviors. Similarly, Whitton, Weitbrecht, Kuryluk, and Bruner (2013) reported less problem alcohol use among undergraduate men and women who were in a committed dating relationship. In their study, problem alcohol use was a composite measure referring to quantity and frequency of alcohol use, signs of dependency, and problems caused by drinking.

Why does dating and commitment potentially confer a protective influence? Whitton et al. (2013) concluded that

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