



Perceived peer norms and alcohol use among college students in China

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Chinese college students had elevated estimations for peer heavy episodic drinking.
- Perceived peer norms made unique contributions to individual drinking behaviors.
- Perceived peer alcohol use differentially affected alcohol use by men and women.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Currently, there has been little research on peer drinking norms with non-English speaking college populations. Using a Chinese college student sample, the present study investigated perceived peer norms and their associations with individual alcohol-related behaviors.

Methods: Past six-month drinkers ($n = 436$, 50% men, mean age = 20.49) recruited from one college in China took an anonymous paper-and-pencil survey. To examine the differences in alcohol-related behaviors among groups, one-way repeated measures analysis of variance and chi-square tests were conducted. To investigate the associations between perceived peer norms and individual alcohol-related behaviors, sequential linear and logistic regression analyses were conducted.

Results: There were overall mean differences in alcohol use among participants, perceived best friends, and perceived average student for both men ($F(1.98, 421.06) = 13.12, p < .001$) and women ($F(1.89, 399.70) = 5.79, p < .01$). The proportion of best friends perceived as having had heavy episodic drinking was higher than that of participants who had had heavy episodic drinking ($\chi^2(1, N = 415) = 61.85, p < .001$). So was the proportion of the average student perceived as having had heavy episodic drinking ($\chi^2(1, N = 414) = 68.17, p < .001$). After controlling for demographic variables, perceived peer alcohol use explained 17% of the variance in individual alcohol use; perceived peer heavy episodic drinking contributed to 2.6 to 3.6 times higher odds of participants' reporting heavy episodic drinking.

Conclusions: Replication research is needed to inform social norms interventions for Chinese college students.

1. Introduction

Alcohol use and misuse among college populations has become a public health concern around the world (Davoren, Demant, Shiely, & Perry, 2016; Karam, Kypri, & Salamoun, 2007; White & Hingson, 2013; Wicki, Kuntsche, & Gmel, 2010). Alcohol misuse among college students has been associated with a range of negative consequences such as injuries, lower academic performance, and risky sexual behaviors (Kaly, Heesacker, & Frost, 2002; Perkins, 2002; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994). Moreover, collegiate drinking has been related to many secondary effects among students who are light drinkers and abstainers, such as physical aggression, property

damage, and sexual harassment (Cabalatungan & McCarthy, 2015; Wechsler, Moeykens, Davenport, Castillo, & Hansen, 1995).

In recent decades, the role of peer drinking norms among college populations has become a major research focus (McAlaney, Bewick, & Hughes, 2011). According to social norms theory, people's behaviors are affected by normative perceptions; therefore, through correcting college students' perceptions of elevated peer drinking norms, excessive collegiate drinking may be reduced (Berkowitz, 2004; 2005). Research has shown that the majority of college students tended to overestimate peers' alcohol use (Baer, Stacy, & Larimer, 1991; McAlaney & McMahon, 2007; Perkins, Haines, & Rice, 2005). Perceived peer norms have been shown to make unique contributions to college students'

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alcohol-related behaviors both concurrently and prospectively (LaBrie, Napper, & Ghaidarov, 2012; Perkins, 2007; Perkins et al., 2005; Sher & Rutledge, 2007). Among related psychosocial variables (e.g., attitudes and self-efficacy), perceived peer norms have been found to be among the strongest correlates of alcohol-related outcomes in college populations (Cho, 2006; Cicognani & Zani, 2011; França, Dautzenberg, & Reynaud, 2010; Kuther & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2003; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007; Paek & Hove, 2012). Moreover, reviews have supported the efficacy of norm-based interventions (Dotson, Dunn, & Bowers, 2015; Lewis & Neighbors, 2006a; Miller et al., 2013) and the reduction of perceived peer norms as the mediator of social norms interventions in reducing college student drinking (Reid & Carey, 2015).

Most prior research on peer drinking norms among college students has been conducted in English-speaking countries such as the U.S., Great Britain, and Australia (Halim, Hasking, & Allen, 2012; McAlaney & McMahon, 2007; Perkins et al., 2005). It is necessary to expand the research field to include a variety of cultures because extant research findings may not be generalizable to other cultures (McAlaney et al., 2011; Monk & Heim, 2014). Thus, in order to investigate the applicability of social norms theory to Chinese students and to inform interventions, the present study examined perceived peer drinking norms among Chinese college students. Currently, levels of alcohol drinking and problematic drinking among Chinese college students are much lower than those among college students in Western countries (Chu, Jahn, Khan, & Kraemer, 2016). Nonetheless, collegiate drinking has been prevalent in China (Ji, Hu, & Song, 2012; Newman, Ding, & Feng, 2017), and harmful alcohol use has affected 7.3% of Chinese college students (Yang et al., 2018). Additionally, although most Chinese drink alcohol with meals, which helps to reduce the effects of alcohol (Hao, Chen, & Su, 2005; Millwood et al., 2013), cultural norms in China encourage social drinking and excessive drinking during social drinking occasions (e.g., dinner) among adults, including the young adult population of college students (Cochrane, Chen, Conigrave, & Hao, 2003; Gorgulho et al., 2008).

The current study had three objectives. First, we investigated whether participants perceived that peers drank more than themselves or not. We did not have *a priori* expectations for this objective, considering that there have been some studies reporting that participants, or subgroups of participants, had accurate estimations or underestimations of peer norms (Brett, Leavens, Miller, Lombardi, & Leffingwell, 2016; Bustamante et al., 2009; França et al., 2010; Halim et al., 2012), and that certain norms or norms of certain peer referents (e.g., friends) were not overestimated by participants (Cox & Bates, 2011; Kenney, Ott, Meisel, & Barnett, 2017; Perkins, Meilman, Leichliter, Cashin, & Presley, 1999). Second, we investigated the associations between perceived peer norms and individual drinking behaviors, controlling for demographic variables. We expected that perceived peer norms would be independent positive correlates of alcohol-related outcomes. Third, we examined whether the effects of perceived peer norms on individual drinking behaviors would vary across sex. Some previous studies have reported that perceived peer norms were more strongly associated with alcohol-related behaviors among college men than among college women (Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004; Read, Wood, Davidoff, McLacken, & Campbell, 2002), while others have found opposite findings (Kypri & Langley, 2003; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004). As the prevalence of alcohol drinking is considerably higher in Chinese college men than in women (Newman et al., 2017), this objective may help to inform more effective interventions for Chinese college students.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

The current study was conducted in 2012 at Chengdu Medical

Table 1
Demographics of participants ($N = 436$).

| | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Sex | | |
| Male | 216 | 50.0 |
| Female | 216 | 50.0 |
| Year in school | | |
| 1st year | 110 | 25.2 |
| 2nd year | 110 | 25.2 |
| 3rd year | 108 | 24.8 |
| 4th year | 108 | 24.8 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Han | 417 | 95.6 |
| Other | 19 | 4.4 |
| Residence | | |
| Dormitory | 432 | 99.3 |
| Home | 3 | 0.7 |
| Self-reported academic performance | | |
| Poor | 62 | 14.3 |
| Average | 185 | 42.5 |
| Good | 188 | 43.2 |
| Monthly expense (Yuan) | | |
| Below 600 | 68 | 15.7 |
| 600–799 | 171 | 39.5 |
| 800–999 | 127 | 29.3 |
| 1000 and above | 67 | 15.5 |
| Father's education | | |
| Primary school | 83 | 19.1 |
| Middle school | 120 | 48.3 |
| High school and above | 142 | 32.6 |
| Mother's education | | |
| Primary school | 163 | 37.6 |
| Middle school | 190 | 43.8 |
| High school and above | 81 | 18.7 |

College in Sichuan province of China. Full-time students of this college were recruited through posters, flyers, and personal communications. In consideration of the possible age and sex differences in alcohol use, we used quota sampling to recruit 50 men and 50 women in each of the four class years. The final sample consisted of 436 participants who were at least 18 years of age and had at least one drink in the past six months. Participants' mean age was 20.49 years ($SD = 1.49$). See Table 1 for the demographic information.

This study was by approved by the Institutional Review Board of Emory University and the authority of Chengdu Medical College. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. During the after-class time, participants took an anonymous self-administered paper-and-pen survey in their classroom settings. Each participant was given 20 Yuan after taking the survey. The average time to complete the survey questionnaire was about 30 min.

2.2. Measures

Alcohol use was assessed by the quantity-frequency-index method (Dawson, 2003). Measurement units used in the questionnaire were consistent with the customs in China, including 50 and 500 g, and 500 ml (Sun, Windle, & Thompson, 2015). First, three seven-point items and three eight-point items were used to measure the overall frequency of beer, spirits, and wine consumption in the past 30 days and that in the past six months, respectively. Response options ranged from 0 days to everyday. Second, six nine-point items were used to measure the usual quantity of beer, spirits, and wine consumed on days when participants drank in the past 30 days and in the past six months. Response options ranged from zero to a maximum quantity to be provided. Finally, alcohol use, in standard drinks, was computed by adding up the amount of the three alcoholic beverages consumed in related reference time periods.

Frequencies of heavy episodic drinking in the past 30 days and in the past six months were measured by two seven-point items. Response

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