



## Characteristics of prospectively identified negative alcohol-related events among college students



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Majority of participants experienced the event at either their own or a friend's residence.
- 87.1% of participants were with peers when the event happened.
- 85.0% indicated that their closest friend knew about their event.
- Overall, students' reactions to the event were mild.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Alcohol-related consequences

College

Same-age peers

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Throughout the first two years of college, the majority of drinkers experience one or more alcohol-related consequences. Research that examines the characteristics surrounding negative consequences typically utilizes global retrospective survey methods. The objective of the current study was to apply an event-based methodology to describe the circumstances of a recent drinking episode that resulted in one or more alcohol-related consequences among first- and second-year college students.

**Methods:** We used a prospective web-based survey method to identify participants (N = 296) who had one or more alcohol-related consequences in the past week. Shortly after reporting the consequence(s), participants attended an in-person interview during which they described the circumstances that preceded and followed the consequence(s), including the use of alcohol and other substances, proximal contextual factors including peer drinking, the characteristics of the negative alcohol-related consequence(s), and the reaction of others to the event.

**Results:** The majority of participants reported experiencing the event at either their own (32.4%) or a friend's (32.8%) residence, and 87.1% of participants were with peers when the event happened. Most (85.0%) of the sample indicated that their closest friend knew about their event.

**Conclusion:** The high peer involvement at all stages of the event suggest the potential for training college students to help each other avoid or prevent consequences.

This research was supported in part by grant numbers R01AA13970 and T32AA007459-32 from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and T32DA016184 from the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

### 1. Introduction

Heavy alcohol use is a well-documented problem among college students (Dowdall & Wechsler, 2002), particularly in the first year after matriculating into college (Barnett et al., 2014). College students

frequently drink heavily (Blanco et al., 2008; Dawson, Grant, Stinson, & Chou, 2004; Paschall, 2003; Slutske, 2005), and accordingly, they experience a variety of alcohol-related consequences (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Hingson, Heeren, Zakocs, Kopstein, & Wechsler, 2002; Hingson, Zha, & Weitzman, 2009; A. White & Hingson, 2014). Throughout the first two years of college, the majority of drinkers report at least one negative alcohol-related consequence (e.g., vomiting, blackout, and regretting something said; Mallett, Marzell, & Turrisi, 2011; Mallett et al., 2011). When measuring alcohol consequences, global retrospective surveys which collect counts or scores

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2017.11.025>

Received 7 June 2017; Received in revised form 13 October 2017; Accepted 13 November 2017

Available online 14 November 2017

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of consequences along with information about alcohol use over roughly the same timeframe are primarily used. These more traditional methods can result in inaccurate responses and recall bias (Shiffman et al., 1997). In contrast, event-level methods (e.g., ecological momentary assessment, daily surveys) can identify a specific drinking event and its outcomes with the purpose of identifying precursors and correlates of the event. In the current event-level study combined with intensive interviewing, we aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the characteristics of alcohol-related events that are associated with consequences reported by college students.

Volume of alcohol use is related to the setting in which it is consumed. The drinking setting not only refers to where alcohol is consumed, but it also refers to why, when, where, and with whom alcohol is consumed. When college students drink, they most often do so with their friends, on weekends, and at parties or other social occasions (Beets et al., 2009; Clapp, Shillington, & Segars, 2000). At the aggregate level, heavy drinking episodes among college students tend to equally occur at public contexts, such as bars or restaurants, and private contexts, such as residences (Clapp et al., 2000) although college students under the age of 21 predominately drink in private contexts (Clapp, Reed, Holmes, Lange, & Voas, 2006). The current study expands on this line of research by examining the settings of alcohol-related consequences.

Studies that utilize global retrospective methods consistently find that individuals who drink heavily also tend to use other substances and that using multiple substance use is associated with more alcohol-related consequences (Haas & Smith, 2012; Reed, Wang, Shillington, Clapp, & Lange, 2007; Shillington & Clapp, 2006). For example, individuals who use both alcohol and marijuana are more likely to experience alcohol-related and non-alcohol-related problems than those who only drink (Hammer & Pape, 1997; Shillington & Clapp, 2001; Simons & Carey, 2006). The one event-level study to date that has examined the relationship between simultaneous substance use and alcohol-related problems among college students found that on occasions when students used more than one substance, more consequences were reported than when students only used alcohol (Mallett et al., 2017). However, this study only included individuals who reported both alcohol use and use of another substance on the event occasion; hence, the sample is higher risk and lacks generalizability.

Students diverge in how they perceive alcohol-related consequences, resulting in differential effects on subsequent drinking and alcohol-related consequences. For example, when alcohol-related consequences are perceived as aversive, students are more motivated to reduce their alcohol use and show subsequent declines in use (Barnett, Goldstein, Murphy, Colby, & Monti, 2006; Merrill, Read, & Barnett, 2013). Despite the importance of friends and family in college students' drinking-related perceptions and behaviors (Kenney, Ott, Meisel, & Barnett, 2017; Meisel, Clifton, MacKillop, & Goodie, 2015; Walls, Fairlie, & Wood, 2009; H. R. White et al., 2006), no study to date has examined how friends' and family members' awareness of and reactions toward the consequence are associated with the event circumstances and to the student's own reaction toward the consequence(s) experienced.

The current study utilized a combination of event-based methods and in-person interviews to describe the circumstances of a recent drinking episode that resulted in one or more alcohol-related consequences among first- and second-year college students at three different universities under the age of 21 and to examine: 1) proximal contextual factors related to drinking and the number of consequences experienced, 2) whether using alcohol with other substances was related to consequences, 3) whether alcohol use in the event was different from alcohol use in the prior month, and 4) students' reaction to the event, including the extent to which perceptions of aversiveness of alcohol-related consequences were related to the characteristics of the alcohol-related consequences, whether close others were aware of the event, and whether parents' and close friends' reactions were associated

with event characteristics. We also examined gender differences in the characteristics of drinking and the drinking setting on the event day and the reactions to the event. Understanding the circumstances under which students experience negative alcohol-related consequences when they drink can be informative for optimal prevention efforts.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample for this study (N = 296) was derived from a larger longitudinal study of college student alcohol use (Barnett et al., 2014). The parent study was conducted with three cohorts of incoming college students at three mid-sized universities/colleges in the northeast. To be eligible for the parent study, students had to be under the age of 21, an incoming freshman enrolled full-time at one of the three colleges, residing on-campus during their first year, and not an international student. The parent sample was stratified based on gender, and students with a racial-ethnic identity other than exclusively non-Hispanic white were oversampled. Individuals under the age of 18 were required to provide parent consent and the study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the three college locations.

### 2.2. Procedures for the parent study

Participants were surveyed prior to their first year of college and were subsequently randomly assigned to one of two survey groups. Each group was surveyed every other week (on alternate weeks) for the first two years of college, except during winter and summer breaks. These online biweekly surveys assessed participants' alcohol use and alcohol consequences over the past seven days. Each semester was 16 weeks, so participants were asked to complete eight surveys each semester. Participants were compensated \$2 for each completed survey and had a (randomly determined) opportunity to win \$100 after each survey. If participants completed seven or eight of the eight surveys each semester, they received a bonus of \$20.

#### 2.2.1. Procedures for the present study

Immediately following the end of each survey, participants who had reported one or more alcohol-related consequences were identified (n = 522). To ensure lower frequency consequences were captured, 50% of participants who reported a school or work problem, trouble with police, a physical fight, or accidentally hurting someone were selected; the rest of the 13 consequences (see Table 1) were sampled at a 25% rate. Selected participants were then randomly assigned at a 3:2 ratio to an assessment group (n = 326) or a no-assessment group (n = 196). Participants could only be selected once. Participants received \$25 for completing the assessment. The no-assessment group was not relevant for the current analysis so is not further described.

#### 2.2.2. Event identification interview

In the week they were selected, participants were invited to attend an in-person on-campus interview. A research assistant (RA) informed participants that they were randomly selected to be interviewed about a recent alcohol-related consequence. During the interview, participants were presented with their responses from the survey and using a calendar were asked to identify the day(s) on which they experienced the reported negative consequences. If consequences were experienced on more than one day in the week, participants were asked to select the day on which the consequence(s) were the most important or meaningful; thereafter these alcohol-related circumstances were called "the event." When more than one consequence was reported on the event day, participants were asked to select the consequence on the event day that was "the most meaningful or important when you think about your drinking now." The RA then asked the participant to describe the drinking and social details that led up to and followed the event.

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