



I like people who drink like me: Perceived appeal as a function of drinking status[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This experiment evaluated appeal as a function of drinker type and own drinking.
- Photos of faces were randomly paired with drinking information and rated on appeal.
- Social drinkers were rated as significantly more appealing than other drinker types.
- Similarity in drinking between raters and faces influenced ratings of appeal.

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Individuals rate opposite sex faces as more attractive after consuming or being primed with alcohol. However, other traits such as intelligence and likeability have not been examined and might vary as a function of information about one's drinking habits. We expected social drinkers to be rated more positively than heavy drinkers, abstainers, or recovering alcoholics. We further hypothesized that faces with similar drinking habits to participants would be rated as more appealing.

Methods: Five hundred ninety-four undergraduates viewed 25 opposite sex faces randomly paired with drinking information, and rated each face on perceived appeal.

Results: Hierarchical linear models revealed that social drinkers were rated as most appealing, as expected. Unexpectedly, recovering alcoholics were rated as the next most appealing, followed by abstainers, then heavy drinkers. The interaction between drinker type and participants' own drinking predicting ratings indicated that the heavier the participant drinks, the more favorably they rated heavy drinkers compared to other types of drinkers. Thus, as expected, ratings varied as a function of participants' own drinking; however, ratings did not vary as a function of participants' alcohol-related problems.

Conclusions: Findings support hypotheses in that social drinkers were generally perceived as appealing compared to other drinker types, and ratings tended to be influenced by participants' own drinking. Individuals' prototypes and norms regarding drinking may influence how they perceive others when others' drinking habits are known. This might be especially important to consider with heavy drinkers who may seek out others who drink similarly, which could reinforce problematic drinking.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Drinking and social influences

An estimated 35–44% of college students are 'heavy episodic drinkers' (consuming more than five drinks in a row during the past two weeks; Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2014; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), 2009; Wechsler et al., 2002). These heavy drinking patterns are associated with problems ranging from academic difficulties and

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hangovers (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Hingson, 2010; Wechsler, Kuo, Lee, & Dowdall, 2000; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, & Moeykens, 1994), to risky sexual behavior and sexual assault (Abbey, Buck, Zawacki, & Saenz, 2003; Kaysen, Neighbors, Martell, Fossos, & Larimer, 2006; Koss & Gaines, 1993; Larimer, Lydum, Anderson, & Turner, 1999). Accordingly, the U.S. Surgeon General has declared the reduction of heavy drinking among college students to be a major health goal for the nation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, and Office of Communications and Public Liaison, 2009). Thus, factors such as social influences that impact problematic alcohol use should be further examined. Prior research focusing on links between social attributes and drinking indicate that during college, peers are the primary means of guidance and support for most undergraduates, and exert greater impact on behavioral decisions than familial or biological influences (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986; Borsari & Carey, 2001). Further, social influence is identified as one of the most consistent and strongest predictors of problem alcohol use among college students (e.g., Borsari & Carey, 2003; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007). Importantly, alcohol intoxication is known to alter perception such that potential sexual partners appear more attractive, a phenomenon anecdotally referred to as “beer goggles” (Kruse & Fromme, 2005; Pennebaker, 1979). Mere exposure to alcohol has also been shown to increase ratings of attractiveness (Friedman, McCarthy, Förster, & Denzler, 2005), providing a basis for the examination of the relationships between patterns of alcohol consumption and perceptions of others.

1.2. Perceptions of drinking

A small but growing body of literature focuses on college students' perceptions of alcohol consumption, other's drinking behaviors, and what constitutes problematic drinking. Regarding general perceptions of alcohol use, research has demonstrated that college students perceive alcohol use as a normative and even critical part of the college experience (e.g., DeLamater & Myers, 2007). A qualitative study that explored the link between college and post-college drinking revealed that college students perceive distinct subjective norms and societal attitudes toward heavy drinking in college in comparison to post-college graduation (Colby, Colby, & Raymond, 2009). Specifically, themes revealed that the large majority of these students perceived heavy drinking during college to be acceptable, even expected. Students also believed their own personal attitudes were consistent with broader societal attitudes (Colby et al., 2009). Undergraduates' perceptions of heavy and problem drinking specifically also appear to be fluid and potentially context-specific (Segrist & Pettibone, 2009). One investigation found that individuals seen drinking with friends or as part of a group were not perceived as having a problem, whereas a person drinking alone was more likely to be viewed as a problem drinker (Segrist & Pettibone, 2009). This may be due to students assuming that a person drinking in a social context has different motives relative to a person drinking alone (Segrist & Pettibone, 2009).

Despite college drinking being viewed as acceptable by college students, prototypes or mental images conjured when one imagines a typical person engaging in a behavior such as drinking (Gerrard, Gibbons, Houlihan, Stock, & Pomeroy, 2008; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995), vary based on different levels of drinking. Research has revealed that heavy drinkers and drunk individuals are typically described negatively by college students using words such as “annoying”, “irresponsible”, and “dependent” (Van Lettow, de Vries, Burdorf, Norman, & Van Empelen, 2013b). Moderate drinkers tend to be viewed more favorably (van Lettow, Vermunt, de Vries, Burdorf, & van Empelen, 2013a) and have been described as “determined”, “amiable”, and “healthy”, with most students identifying as moderate drinkers. Abstainers tend to be rated favorably but have been described as a mixture of positive and negative attributes such as “boring”, “responsible”, “unsociable”, and “healthy”.

These drinker prototypes are generalizations about specific types of drinkers; however, little is known about how individuals are perceived if the only information provided about them is their drinking behavior.

Literature specifically evaluating college students' perceptions of peer drinkers in terms of likeability or attractiveness is relatively sparse, with findings generally showing that individuals have less favorable perceptions of heavy drinkers and relatively favorable impressions of lighter drinkers (Malouff, Schutte, & Payne, 1992; van Lettow et al., 2013a). However, no study, to our knowledge, has evaluated perceptions of specific traits (i.e., likeability, approachability, attractiveness, and intelligence) of opposite sex faces based on drinking information. Understanding initial impressions of peers based on their perceived drinking practices may help inform drinking interventions by illuminating factors associated with selection of heavier drinking peers, which may in turn affect perceived norms and overestimations of drinking norms (Wardell & Read, 2013). Furthermore, understanding how undergraduates perceive abstainers versus social or heavy drinkers is also a potentially important component that may have implications for prevention efforts.

1.3. Current research

The present study seeks to extend the literature on understanding perceptions of college student risk behavior by applying labels of types of drinkers to unfamiliar opposite sex faces and asking participants to rate others based on their drinking habits. Based on previous literature, we expected that social drinkers would be most appealing on the attributes of attractiveness, likeability, and approachability, followed by abstainers and recovering alcoholics, with heavy drinkers rated as least appealing overall. Furthermore, we expected that these attributes (likeability, intelligence, approachability, and attractiveness) would vary as a function of raters' drinking status and experience of alcohol-related problems, with heavy and problematic drinkers' ratings of pictures of heavy drinkers being more favorable than lighter and non-problematic drinkers' ratings of heavy drinkers.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants included 594 (85% female; Age: $M = 21.94$, $SD = 4.80$) heterosexual college students from a large university in the southern United States. The sample was racially diverse with the following racial backgrounds: 41.4% Caucasian, 0.7% Native American/American Indian, 15.1% Black/African American, 23.6% Asian, 1.0% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 3.8% Multi-ethnic, and 14.4% Other. Additionally, 33.1% of participants identified as Hispanic. Overall, 55% of the sample reported consuming at least 1 or more drinks per week on average in the past three months. Furthermore, the mean for drinks per week was 4.04 ($SD = 6.75$) and the mean for alcohol-related problems was 4.63 ($SD = 9.66$). However, of those who drank, the mean number of drinks per week was 7.27 ($SD = 7.65$) and the mean number of alcohol-related problems was 6.79 ($SD = 10.80$). Regarding relationship status, 39.6% of participants reported that they were exclusively dating, 33.8% reported being single, 14.4% reported casually dating, 8.5% were married or had a life partner, and 3.7% were engaged. After indicating their sex and sexual orientation, participants completed an experiment online in which they viewed opposite sex faces that were randomly paired with drinking information about the person pictured. Show-if survey programming was used such that individuals who indicated that they were heterosexual men were only shown faces of women. For each participant, faces were randomly paired with one of the following four drinker type descriptions, “This college student frequently drinks heavily”, “This college student drinks socially on occasion”, “This college student never drinks”, or “This college student is a recovering alcoholic and therefore abstains from using alcohol”. Thus, drinking information

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