



Alcohol evaluations and acceptability: Examining descriptive and injunctive norms among heavy drinkers



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Consequence evaluations and descriptive norms are uniquely associated with drinking
- Evaluations, descriptive, and injunctive norms also associate with approval of drinking
- Injunctive norms associate with approval for high descriptive norms and evaluations

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study assessed descriptive and injunctive norms, evaluations of alcohol consequences, and acceptability of drinking.

Methods: Participants were 248 heavy-drinking undergraduates (81.05% female; $M_{\text{age}} = 23.45$).

Results: Stronger perceptions of descriptive and injunctive norms for drinking and more positive evaluations of alcohol consequences were positively associated with drinking and the number of drinks considered acceptable. Descriptive and injunctive norms interacted, indicating that injunctive norms were linked with number of acceptable drinks among those with higher descriptive norms. Descriptive norms and evaluations of consequences interacted, indicating that descriptive norms were positively linked with number of acceptable drinks among those with negative evaluations of consequences; however, among those with positive evaluations of consequences, descriptive norms were negatively associated with number of acceptable drinks. Injunctive norms and evaluations of consequences interacted, indicating that injunctive norms were positively associated with number of acceptable drinks, particularly among those with positive evaluations of consequences. A three-way interaction emerged between injunctive and descriptive norms and evaluations of consequences, suggesting that injunctive norms and the number of acceptable drinks were positively associated more strongly among those with negative versus positive evaluations of consequences. Those with higher acceptable drinks also had positive evaluations of consequences and were high in injunctive norms.

Conclusions: Findings supported hypotheses that norms and evaluations of alcohol consequences would interact with respect to drinking and acceptance of drinking. These examinations have practical utility and may inform development and implementation of interventions and programs targeting alcohol misuse among heavy drinking undergraduates.

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1. Introduction

Of the 10.6 million undergraduates enrolled in four-year institutions in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), an estimated 4.2 million drink heavily at least once a month (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2013). These heavy drinking episodes are associated with academic problems, physical assault and injury, drunk driving,

and even death (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2013; Perkins, 2002). The outcomes of heavy drinking directly affect an estimated 2 million college students and are a continuing public health concern (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2013). Using Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior, which highlights the importance of attitudes and norms in influencing alcohol behaviors, research has explored individual characteristics that influence the consumption of alcohol among undergraduates. Thus, we use this framework to explore specific drinking acceptability and attitudes towards alcohol consumption and outcomes associated with heavy drinking, defined as drinking

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at least 4 or 5 drinks during one occasion in the past month for females or males respectively.

2. Descriptive and injunctive norms

Perceptions of drinking and acceptability of alcohol use, measured via descriptive and injunctive norms, are strong precursors to heavy drinking (e.g. Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett, 2007; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007). Descriptive norms, defined as perceptions of peer drinking, are consistently found to be higher than reported personal use (Baer & Carney, 1993), indicating that students think that their peers drink more than they do. Descriptive norms are also consistently related to increased personal alcohol consumption (e.g. Borsari & Carey, 2001; Borsari & Carey, 2003), which suggests that students who think that their peers drink more also tend to drink more. The perception of peer approval of drinking, termed injunctive norms, also impacts alcohol consumption with higher injunctive norms leading to higher alcohol consumption (e.g. Collins & Spelman, 2013; Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004). The relationship between injunctive norms and alcohol consumption has been found to be inconsistent and may be a result of the use of different or less salient reference groups (Collins & Spelman, 2013; LaBrie, Hummer, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2009; Neighbors et al., 2008). However, both descriptive and injunctive norms have been found to influence how acceptable and positive drinking is perceived to be (Brown, Christiansen, & Goldman, 1987). Greater injunctive and descriptive norms lead to greater drinking acceptability ratings and greater levels of alcohol consumption (Brown et al., 1987). Research further indicates that injunctive and descriptive norms interact to predict drinking and acceptability of alcohol (Rimal & Real, 2003). Additional research is warranted to explore antecedents to heavy drinking that may play important roles alongside alcohol-related norms and acceptability of alcohol use, and one such antecedent is an individual's evaluation of alcohol-related consequences.

3. Evaluations of alcohol consequences

An individual's positive and negative evaluations of alcohol consequences are also known precursors to drinking (e.g. Leigh, 1987; Patrick & Maggs, 2011). Research demonstrates that positive evaluations of alcohol consequences are positively associated with alcohol consumption and acceptability of alcohol use (Leigh, 1987; Merrill, Read, & Barnett, 2013; Patrick & Maggs, 2011). Moreover, previous work shows that alcohol consequence evaluations predict drinking beyond the influences of descriptive norms (Merrill, Read, & Colder, 2013). They found that greater negative evaluations of alcohol consequences were associated with less drinking at follow-up while controlling for previous alcohol use and descriptive norms (Merrill, Read, & Colder, 2013). Similarly, studies of injunctive norms and evaluations of alcohol consequences indicate that they form a relationship, which predicts drinking and drinking acceptability (Zamboanga, Schwartz, Ham, Jarvis, & Olthuis, 2009). Specifically, Zamboanga, Schwartz, Ham, Borsari, and Tyne (2009) and Zamboanga, Schwartz, Ham, Jarvis, and Olthuis (2009) found that evaluations of consequences mediate the relationship between norms and alcohol consumption, and as such, further work is needed in order to better elucidate relationships among these constructs. Taken together, extant literature indicates that evaluations of alcohol consequences may influence relationships among descriptive and injunctive norms and may play an important role in influencing drinking outcomes.

4. Current study

The present study expands previous research by assessing how descriptive and injunctive norms associate with evaluations of alcohol consequences in the context of heavy alcohol consumption. A heavy drinking sample was targeted for this evaluation as these individuals

tend to be at greater risk for experiencing alcohol consequences relative to a light or moderate drinking sample (e.g. Perkins, 2002; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994). Evaluations of alcohol consequences were expected to interact with descriptive and injunctive norms with respect to alcohol consumption and acceptability of alcohol use. This study was designed to examine the predictive ability of norms and evaluations of consequences in regard to alcohol consumption and drinking acceptability and to evaluate the unique effects above and beyond theoretically relevant covariates including gender (Wagoner et al., 2012), race/ethnicity (Hollander, 2012), year in school (generally linked with age; Griffin, Bang, & Botvin, 2010), Greek membership (see Barry, 2007 for a review), and work status (which is linked with socioeconomic status; Humensky, 2010).

We had three main hypotheses. Our first hypothesis was related to main effects and attempted to replicate previous findings; we expected that higher descriptive norms, injunctive norms, and positive evaluations of alcohol consequences would be associated with increases in drinking levels and the number of acceptable drinks reported. Our second hypothesis was related to moderating (two-way interaction) relationships; descriptive and injunctive norms were expected to interact such that higher injunctive norms would be associated with increases in alcohol outcomes, particularly among those with high relative to low descriptive norms. Further, evaluations of alcohol consequences were expected to moderate the relationship between descriptive norms and outcomes and also between injunctive norms and outcomes. Here, higher drinking norms were expected to associate with increases in alcohol outcomes, and this relationship was expected to be more evident among those with positive relative to negative evaluations of consequences. Our third hypothesis predicted that evaluations of alcohol consequences would interact with injunctive and descriptive norms (a three-way interaction) such that the relationship between descriptive and injunctive norms would be influenced differentially by positive versus negative alcohol consequence evaluations. We expected that those at highest risk for problem drinking would be high in injunctive and descriptive norms and would also hold positive evaluations of alcohol consequences.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

Participants were psychology students who were recruited via in-class announcements and informational flyers placed on a large southern university campus. Interested students accessed web-based study materials and completed a battery of self-reported measures. Participants received course extra credit as compensation for participation. A total of 715 participants completed the online questionnaire. Of these, 262 participants met heavy drinking criteria (males/females reporting having consumed 5/4 drinks on one occasion in the previous month, respectively). Of these, 14 cases contained missing data and were thus excluded from analyses. The final sample consisted of 248 heavy drinking undergraduate (81.05% female; age $M = 23.45$; $SD = 5.45$) students. The racial distribution of this sample was as follows: 50.00% identified as White/Caucasian; 15.73% identified as 'Other'; 13.31% identified as Black/African American; 12.50% identified as Asian; 6.81% identified as multi-ethnic; 0.81% identified as Native American/American Indian; and 0.81% identified as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

5.2. Measures

5.2.1. Demographics

Participants provided demographic information including gender, year in school, work status, age, racial background, and ethnicity.

5.2.2. Daily drinking questionnaire

The Daily Drinking Questionnaire (DDQ; Collins, Parks, & Marlatt, 1985; Kivlahan, Marlatt, Fromme, Coppel, & Williams, 1990) asks

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