



Friends in low places: The impact of locations and companions on 21st birthday drinking



Lindsey M. Rodriguez ^{a,*}, Chelsie M. Young ^b, Mary M. Tomkins ^b, Angelo M. DiBello ^c, Heather Krieger ^b, Clayton Neighbors ^b

^a University of New Hampshire, United States

^b University of Houston, United States

^c Brown University, United States

HIGHLIGHTS

- Examines how specific contextual factors are associated with 21st birthday drinking.
- Celebration locations and companions were used as predictors of drinks and eBAC.
- Drinking at a bar and with Greek members was most strongly associated with drinking.
- Celebrating with romantic partners was associated with lower birthday drinking.

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ABSTRACT

The present research examined how various locations and companions were associated with hazardous drinking during 21st birthday celebrations. The sample included 912 college students (57% female) who completed an on-line survey to examine 21st birthday drinking. Locations included bars, friends' houses, restaurants, outdoor barbecues, homes, parents' homes, and Fraternity/Sorority houses. Companions included friends, family members, casual acquaintances, roommates, significant others, Fraternity/Sorority members, and none (alone). Participants consumed an average of 7.6 drinks and reached an average eBAC of .15 during their 21st birthday celebrations. Locations accounted for 20%/18% of the variance in number of drinks and eBAC, respectively, whereas companions accounted for 23%/20% of the variance. Drinking with romantic partners was associated with less drinking, whereas drinking with Fraternity/Sorority members was associated with more drinking. Stepwise regressions combining locations and companions suggested that, overall, celebrating in a bar setting and with Fraternity and Sorority members were the strongest variables associated with drinking. With the exception of a bar setting, companions were the most important contextual factors associated with 21st birthday drinking.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Contextual factors and drinking

Drinking in college student populations is a prevalent and critical issue. The Monitoring the Future study found that 63.1% of college students reported drinking alcohol in the previous thirty days, and 40.2% reported being drunk during that time (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, Schulenberg, & Miech, 2014). The consequences of these behaviors can be extremely harmful to college students, including police involvement, property damage, assault, unsafe sex, health problems, drunk

driving, injury, and death, among others (White & Hingson, 2013). However, how much students drink and how detrimental alcohol-related consequences are can vary based on contextual factors surrounding the drinker. These may include locations, companions, and details surrounding the specific event itself.

1.1.1. Location

One important aspect of the drinking context is the location in which drinking takes place. Greenfield et al. (2011) found that participants drank in a variety of locations, including at their own homes, others' homes, bars, restaurants, weddings/celebrations, and outdoors. Relatedly, a large New Zealand study of college student drinking found that 43% of the reported drinking episodes were at someone's home, 37% occurred at a bar, pub, or club, 8% at a residence hall, and 11% at another location (Kypri, Paschall, Langley, Baxter, & Bourdeau,

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of New Hampshire, 468 McConnell, Durham, NH 03824, United States.

E-mail address: lindsey.rodriguez1@gmail.com (L.M. Rodriguez).

2010). Individuals' alcohol consumption patterns may vary depending on the location in which they are drinking (Clapp, Reed, Holmes, Lange, & Voas, 2006). For example, people tend to drink more at Fraternity and Sorority houses (Larimer, Turner, Mallet, & Geisner, 2004). Additionally, when a person is drinking in a place with large numbers of other intoxicated people, they are more likely to consume higher levels of alcohol (Clapp et al., 2006).

1.1.2. Companions

The people with whom one is drinking can also affect how much a person drinks (and subsequent alcohol-related consequences). For example, members of the Greek system tend to drink more than non-members (Capone, Wood, Borsari, & Laird, 2007; Larimer et al., 2004; Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 2009; Weitzman, Nelson, & Wechsler, 2003). Generally, rates of alcohol use and related consequences tend to be higher when individuals drink with friends (Borsari & Carey, 2006; Connor, Cousins, Samaranayaka, & Kypri, 2014). Drinking alone has also been related to the experience of more negative consequences from drinking (Creswell, Chung, Clark, & Martin, 2014; Gonzalez & Skewes, 2013; Keough, O'Connor, Sherry, & Stewart, 2015). On the other hand, alcohol rates tend to be lower when drinking with family (Keough et al., 2015). Research on how romantic partners are associated with drinking among college students is mixed. Some work suggests that romantic partners affect each other's heavy episodic drinking (Mushquash et al., 2013) as well as changes in drinking over time (Wiersma, Fischer, Cleveland, Reifman, & Harris, 2011). However, other work suggests that individuals believe that romantic partners encourage them to engage in healthier behaviors, which include safer drinking patterns (Markey, Markey, & Gray, 2007). In conclusion, one's own drinking and related consequences depend on the specific companions with whom one is drinking.

1.2. 21st birthdays

Some specific events are also closely associated with drinking. One event that is strongly correlated with hazardous levels of alcohol use is a person's 21st birthday celebration (Day-Cameron, Muse, Haunstein, Simmons, & Correia, 2009; Neighbors, Oster-Aaland, Bergstrom, & Lewis, 2006; Neighbors et al., 2011). Part of what makes this event so dangerous is that a 21st birthday celebration is not only specific to an individual, but is a drinking rite of passage (Day-Cameron et al., 2009). Day-Cameron et al. (2009) describe a variety of perspectives taken towards 21st birthdays, including the prospect of an enjoyable evening with family and friends, the opportunity to experience alcohol as a legal consumer, or the chance to engage in risky behavior. Overall, it is clear that a high percentage of students consume more alcohol on their 21st birthdays than on a typical drinking occasion (Neighbors et al., 2006; Neighbors et al., 2011).

1.3. Present research

Research has underscored the importance of contextual influences on drinking, but it is still unclear which specific contextual factors have the strongest associations with 21st birthday drinking. The present study expands previous research by examining how specific locations (e.g., bars, restaurants, home) and companions (e.g., friends, family, romantic partners) of 21st birthday celebrations are associated with alcohol consumption. Studying these contextual factors will provide unique insights into the potentially harmful characteristics of event-specific college student drinking. Further, a more comprehensive understanding of the factors related to hazardous drinking will provide a better foundation for the prevention and intervention of harmful consequences for college students. Based on previous research (e.g., Clapp et al., 2006), we expect to find that celebrating at bars, parties, and Fraternity/Sorority houses will be associated with greater levels of drinking, whereas celebrating at a parent's house will be associated with lower levels of drinking. We also expect that celebrations with friends and Fraternity/

Sorority members will be associated with greater levels of drinking, whereas celebrations with family members will be associated with lower levels of drinking. There is not enough research on romantic partners to formulate a clear hypothesis, but based on previous work (e.g., Markey et al., 2007), we expect that celebrants will drink less when their significant others are present at the celebration. It is currently unclear which specific celebration locations or companions will emerge as showing the strongest associations with drinking and related consequences; this is one objective of the current research.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited from 2113 undergraduates who were turning 21 years old between February and August 2008. The questionnaire assessed the participant's alcohol consumption on the days surrounding their 21st birthday. Invitations were sent to students four days after their birthdays and students were given seven days to complete the survey. A total of 1124 students (53.2% of the invited sample) completed the survey and were given \$30 for their participation. As this study examined how both locations and companions were associated with drinking, we excluded participants ($n = 214$) who did not report drinking any alcohol on their 21st birthday. Thus, the results presented here include 912 participants (56.8% female) who had at least one drink on their birthday. This study was conducted at a large public university in the northwestern United States. The University's Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Alcohol use

Alcohol use was measured by assessing the number of drinks participants reported consuming on their 21st birthday and by calculating estimated peak blood alcohol concentration (eBAC; U.S. Department of Transportation, 1994). This formula accounts for variation in gender, weight, quantity of alcohol consumed, duration of consumption, and rate of metabolism.

2.2.2. Contextual factors (locations and companions)

Participants were asked to indicate in which of the following locations (select all that apply) they celebrated their 21st birthday: a bar, restaurant, their own residence, friend's house, parent's house, party, Fraternity/Sorority house, and outdoor barbecue. Additionally, participants were asked with which of the following people (select all that apply) they celebrated their 21st birthday: their friends, family, roommates, romantic partner, casual acquaintances, Fraternity/Sorority members, and alone.

2.3. Analysis plan

The aims of the current research were to evaluate how strongly various locations and companions were associated with drinking on 21st birthday celebrations. We first examined how many participants endorsed celebrating at the different locations and with different companions, as well as bivariate correlations among companions, locations, and drinking. We then utilized multiple regression models with the dummy-coded location and companion variables to evaluate associations between the various locations and drinking and the various celebration companions and drinking. Finally, stepwise regression models evaluated how all location and companion variables were associated with 21st birthday drinking.

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