



Drinking to reach the top: Young adults' drinking patterns as a predictor of status within natural drinking groups



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We used field methodology to recruit young adults' natural drinking groups.
- We measured within-group social status and usual drinking pattern in the last year.
- For men, more frequent heavy drinking was related to higher peer-nominated status.
- For women, more drinking in general was related to higher peer-nominated status.
- More consumption during heaviest drinking occasion also predicted higher status.

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ABSTRACT

In this study we examined associations between young adults' drinking patterns and social status within their *natural drinking groups* (NDGs) and assessed gender differences in these relationships. Same-sex NDGs ($n = 104$) on route to a bar district were recruited and completed a peer-nominated measure of within-NDG status. In a follow-up online survey, participants ($n = 293$; 174 men and 119 women) reported their usual drinking pattern within the past year. Hierarchical Linear Modeling revealed that men who engaged in more frequent heavy episodic drinking (HED) (both for 5+ and 8+ drinks in one sitting) and women who drank more frequently were nominated as occupying higher-status positions within their NDGs compared to their peers who drank less. Further, for both men and women, drinking more than one's peers during one's heaviest drinking occasion in the past year was also associated with higher within-NDG status. These findings suggest that higher social status is associated with riskier drinking patterns and have important implications for prevention programming.

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1. Introduction

Alcohol consumption in young adulthood is largely a social activity (Borsari & Carey, 2001; Demant & Järvinen, 2011; Lange, Devos-Comby, Moore, Daniel, & Homer, 2011), which is linked to many serious harms, such as injury, violence and later alcohol problems (Adlaf, Demers, & Gliksman, 2005; Hingson, Zha, & Weitzman, 2009). To help inform prevention initiatives, it is important to identify positive social attributes that are associated with frequent and heavy drinking by

young adults because these associations might reinforce risky drinking practices. This study focuses on one such attribute – *social status* within one's peer group.

Through regular drinking, young adults attempt to portray themselves to peers as being gregarious and fun (Demant & Järvinen, 2011; Engels, Wiers, Lemmers, & Overbeek, 2005) and tend to view others who refrain from drinking as aloof, reticent and/or dull (Demant & Järvinen, 2011). Thus, more frequent drinking may be associated with increased social status. Also, heavy episodic drinking (HED) – the consumption of a large number of drinks in one sitting – can function as a bonding activity for young adults (Nezlek, Pilkington, & Bilbro, 1994), particularly through the joint experience of drunkenness (Demant & Järvinen, 2011). Moreover, young adults tend to equate HED with status-related traits, such as being tough, cool, and outgoing (Demant & Järvinen, 2011) and, for young men, the tolerance of

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large amounts of alcohol is perceived as an indication of power and masculinity (Campbell, 2000; Peralta, 2007; Tomsen, 1997). Given these positive perceptions related to heavy drinking and social standing in young adult peer groups, both engagement in HED and demonstrating tolerance for large quantities of alcohol relative to one's peers are likely to be particularly important in helping young adults achieve and maintain positive and powerful social standing among peers (Allen, Porter, McFarland, Marsh, & McElhaney, 2005).

The link between drinking behavior and status is supported by relevant theory. Social Identity Perspective (Hogg, 2005) posits that higher-status group members engage in the most normative behavior in the group and, in Western culture, heavy drinking is considered normative among young adults (Borsari & Carey, 2001). Further, the popularity-socialization hypothesis (Allen et al., 2005) suggests that popular youth are the most attuned to and socialized by prevailing norms of the larger peer culture and are especially susceptible to normative mild-to-moderate risk behaviors, such as heavy alcohol use (Laursen, Hafen, Kerr, & Stattin, 2012).

Extant research, demonstrating a positive association between drinking and peer status, has focused primarily on adolescent samples (Diego, Field, & Sanders, 2003; Mayeux, Sandstrom, & Cillessen, 2008; Pearson et al., 2006). However, Phua (2011) revealed that young men with higher status positions in their fraternities' organizational hierarchies drank more heavily in the presence of peers than lower status members. Further, we recently conducted the only study, to our knowledge, on the association of young adults' drinking on a single occasion with their social status within their natural drinking group (NDG) that night (Dumas, Wells, Flynn, Lange, & Graham, 2014). We found that in both male and female NDGs, members with higher peer-nominated status were more likely to be intoxicated and to consume more drinks that night compared with lower-status members. This was especially true for members of heavier-drinking groups. These results likely imply that higher-status group members are heavier drinkers in general. However, results might also reflect the situational effects of interacting with heavy drinking groups on any given night. Higher-status peers, who are often quite socially skilled (Allen et al., 2005), may be especially likely to modify their behavior to the immediate norms of a social situation (e.g., heavier drinking when with heavy drinking peers) but may not be heavier drinkers generally. Thus, research is needed to uncover how specific patterns of young adults' drinking relate to status. The goal of the present study, then, was to examine the association of within-NDG status with young men and women's drinking patterns in the past year. In line with previous research (Demant & Järvinen, 2011; Diego et al., 2003; Mayeux et al., 2008; Pearson et al., 2006; Phua, 2011) and theory (Allen et al., 2005; Hogg, 2005), we hypothesized that: a) more frequent drinking, b) consuming a larger number of drinks during one's heaviest drinking episode, and c) engaging in more HED occasions in the past year would be associated with higher within-peer group status (H1).

On the other hand, there are reasons why frequent drinking to excess may be less likely to be associated with high status. While young adults tend to promote intense drinking and acknowledge that occasionally becoming sick or unable to care for themselves is an inevitable part of intoxication, they also perceive these outcomes as signaling an inability to handle alcohol (Demant & Järvinen, 2011). People who drink to excess and appear "out of control" on a regular basis may be perceived by peers as burdensome, immature and annoying (Demant & Järvinen, 2011). Thus, in the present study, we also hypothesized that the positive association between within-peer group status and HED frequency would be weaker when examining HED episodes in which participants consumed 12 or more drinks, as opposed to episodes in which participants consumed 5 or more or 8 or more drinks (i.e., more normative drinking quantities) (H2).

Further, heavier drinking may be more likely to be associated with higher status for men than for women. Women tend to consume less alcohol than men (e.g., Tremblay et al., 2010) and HED is more normative

in young male as opposed to female peer groups (e.g., Nezlek et al., 1994; Thombs, Beck, & Mahoney, 1993). Young men report more pressure to engage in HED (Suls & Green, 2003) and less ability to turn down a drink than do women (see Borsari & Carey, 2001). Further, heavy drinking is tied to young men's sense of masculinity (Campbell, 2000; Peralta, 2007; Tomsen, 1997) and to male bonding (Nezlek et al., 1994). Thus, HED (as opposed to drinking in general) may be particularly important for young men's status. In the present study, we hypothesized that the association between within-peer group status and frequency of HED would be: (a) stronger for men than for women and (b) stronger than the relationship between status and frequency of any drinking for men (H3).

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

This study was conducted as part of a larger project examining the alcohol-related experiences of young adult bar-goers (see Dumas et al., 2014). Teams of research assistants (RAs) recruited all-male or all-female groups of young adults (groups of 3–5 members) as they entered the downtown bar district in a mid-sized city in Southern Ontario, Canada on Thursday–Saturday nights in May–July 2012. Participants completed three surveys: (1) upon entry to the bar district (entry survey), (2) upon leaving the bar district (exit survey), and (3) a follow-up online survey. For the purposes of this study, we focus on the entry and online surveys only.

The "fixed line" method (Voas et al., 2006) was used to randomly select groups, with the first group to cross a predetermined fixed line on the sidewalk selected for recruitment. Interested groups who were of legal drinking age in Ontario (>19 years) were escorted to the data collection site, in a nearby, well-lit parking lot in the downtown core. First, participants were asked as a group to list the first names or nicknames of all participating group members so that RAs could write them down in preparation for the status ranking task (described below). Then, each group member completed a 10-minute (entry) survey at a private research station with an assigned RA. Afterwards, participants were reimbursed with \$10 gift cards and given a pseudo gift card for either \$50 or \$100 that they could redeem by completing the 30-minute online survey (the amount varied because one component of the study was to test the effect of differing incentives on participation). Pseudo gift cards were labeled with the survey website and an ID that allowed participants to access the online survey. Participants willing to share their phone numbers with RAs (78%) received a text message via a study cell phone that contained their ID and details of how to access the online survey. The large majority of participants completed the online survey within one week (87.2%) or month (96.3%) of initial recruitment, with a minority of participants completing the survey 1–3 months after initial recruitment (3.7%).

2.2. Participants

Entry survey participants were 357 young adults (218 men and 139 women; $M_{age} = 21.86$ years, $SD = 2.50$) recruited in 104 groups (63 male groups and 41 female groups) with an average of 3.4 members. Participating groups represented 27.2% of eligible groups approached (aged 19–29 years, community residents, and in same-sex, 3–5 member groups). Two-hundred-and-ninety-three participants (80% of men and 86% of women) completed the online survey. Independent samples *t*-tests revealed no significant differences between participants who did and did not complete the online survey on status $t(355) = -1.58$, *n.s.* and total number of alcoholic beverages consumed on the night of the entry survey $t(284) = 0.68$, *n.s.* A chi-squared test revealed no differences in gender distribution from entry to online survey, $\chi^2(1) = 1.94$, *n.s.*

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