



An experimental study on the effects of peer drinking norms on adolescents' drinker prototypes



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Exposure to norms of popular and unpopular peers changed adolescent drinker prototypes.
- Peer norms influenced the evaluation of and similarity to heavy drinker prototypes.
- Peer popularity affected perceived similarity to all drinker prototypes.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Adolescents form impressions about the type of peers who drink (i.e., drinker prototypes). The evaluation of, and perceived similarity to these prototypes are related to adolescents' drinking. Peer drinking norms play an important role in the formation of prototypes. We experimentally examined whether manipulation of peer norms changed the evaluation of and perceived similarity to drinker prototypes and whether these changes were moderated by peers' popularity.

Methods: In a pre-test, we assessed heavy drinker, moderate drinker and abstainer prototypes, drinking behaviors and peer-perceived popularity among 599 adolescents. Additionally, 88 boys from this sample participated in a simulated chat room, in which they interacted with peers from school. These peers were in fact pre-programmed e-confederates, who were either popular or unpopular and who communicated either pro-alcohol or anti-alcohol norms. After the chat room interaction we assessed participants' drinker prototypes.

Results: Participants exposed to anti-alcohol norms were more negative about, and perceived themselves as less similar to heavy drinker prototypes, than participants exposed to pro-alcohol norms. We found no effects of peer norms on moderate drinker and abstainer prototypes. Effects were not moderated by peers' popularity. We did find a main effect of popularity on perceived similarity to all prototypes. This indicated that participants rated themselves as more similar to heavy and moderate drinker prototypes and less similar to abstainer prototypes when they interacted with unpopular peers than with popular peers.

Conclusions: Exposure to anti-alcohol norms of peers leads adolescents to form more negative prototypes of the heavy drinker. This could be an important finding for prevention and intervention programs aimed to reduce alcohol consumption among adolescents.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is characterized by a peak in risk taking behaviors (Steinberg, 2004). Although adolescents engage in considerably more

risk taking behaviors than adults, little difference between these age groups is found regarding the perception and evaluation of risks, and the judgments about the consequences of risky behavior (Beyth-Maron, Austin, Fischhoff, Palmgren, & Jacobs-Quadrel, 1993; Reyna & Farley, 2006; Steinberg, 2007). Intervention programs that provide information about the risks of certain behaviors, such as substance use, generally increase adolescents' knowledge about these behaviors, but are rarely effective in decreasing adolescents' engagement in these behaviors (Steinberg, 2007). These results indicate that adolescents' increased levels of risk taking behaviors are not due to a lack of knowledge or differences in perceptions about the consequences of risky behaviors.

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Adolescents have the capacities to make the right decisions about risky behaviors, yet, these decisions largely depend on the situations in which the decisions are made (Crone & Dahl, 2012). In certain situations, for example, when adolescents are accompanied by peers, they are likely to make worse decisions about risks than adults (Chein, Albert, O'Brien, Uckert, & Steinberg, 2011; Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Reyna & Farley, 2006).

Indeed, according to the Prototype–Willingness model (Gibbons, Gerrard, & Lane, 2003), adolescents' risk behaviors, such as alcohol use, are generally not planned or intended actions but rather reactions to social situations. Behavioral intentions, which are described as conscious decisions ahead of time to engage in behavior, are therefore less strongly related to adolescents' alcohol use (Gibbons et al., 2003). Although adolescents might not intend to drink alcohol, they encounter situations, such as a party with their friends, in which they have the opportunity to drink and may respond to these situations by drinking without premeditation. Adolescents usually acknowledge that they would be willing to drink alcohol in these situations, even if they have no intentions to drink. Willingness is, therefore, defined as an individual's acknowledgment that, under some circumstances, he or she might engage in the behavior, and is considered to be a better predictor of adolescents' alcohol consumption than adolescents' intentions to drink (Gibbons et al., 2003).

Alcohol consumption typically occurs at social and public occasions (Knibbe, Oostveen, & Van de Goor, 1991). During adolescence, young people start going out and have social gatherings with their peers. Some may go to public drinking places, such as bars or clubs, others may go to home parties or social events where alcohol is consumed (Verdurmen et al., 2012). Either way, adolescents rarely drink alone but predominantly in the company of peers. As a consequence, adolescents may form impressions about the type of adolescents who drink and about how drinking is perceived by the peer group. These stereotypical perceptions of drinkers are also referred to as drinker prototypes (Gerrard et al., 2002; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995). Drinker prototypes can range from positive to negative. For example, the typical peer who drinks may be perceived as amiable and sociable or as annoying and irresponsible, while the typical abstainer may be perceived as boring and unsociable or as responsible and determined (Van Lettow, Vermunt, De Vries, Burdorf, & Van Empelen, 2012). Previous research indicated that risk images, such as heavy drinker prototypes, are overall rather negative (Gerrard et al., 2002; Gibbons et al., 2003).

By engaging in drinking behavior, adolescents may believe that they acquire some of the characteristics associated with the drinker prototype. Adolescents can therefore perceive drinker prototypes as social consequences of drinking. Since adolescence is characterized as a developmental period in which social consequences are highly important, drinker prototypes may influence adolescents' drinking behaviors substantially. Longitudinal research shows that relatively favorable drinker prototypes predicted increased willingness and intentions to drink, and increased alcohol consumption among adolescents (Andrews, Hampson, Barckley, Gerrard, & Gibbons, 2008; Blanton, Gibbons, Gerrard, Conger, & Smith, 1997; Gerrard et al., 2002; Spijkerman, Van den Eijnden, Overbeek, & Engels, 2007).

A key assumption of the Prototype–Willingness model is that prototypes influence willingness and behavior via social comparison processes. Adolescents compare drinker prototypes to their self-image. The more similar adolescents think they are to a prototype, the more likely they are to engage in the behavior associated with that prototype (Gibbons et al., 2003; Ravis & Sheeran, 2003; Ravis, Sheeran, & Armitage, 2006). Previous studies on alcohol use showed that perceived similarity to abstainer prototypes was cross-sectionally related to willingness to drink, while similarity to drinker prototypes was related to intentions (Zimmermann & Sieverding, 2010). Lane, Gibbons, O'Hara, and Gerrard (2011) showed in an experimental study that young adults' willingness to drink decreased when they perceived themselves as dissimilar to the drinker prototype, but only when they were

encouraged to compare themselves with these types of drinkers. Moreover, Norman, Armitage, and Quigley (2007) found that perceived similarity to binge drinker prototypes was cross-sectionally related to young adults' intentions to engage in binge drinking and predicted self-reported binge drinking at one week follow-up.

Given the findings that drinker prototypes are related to adolescents' alcohol use, drinker prototypes may be relevant targets in prevention and intervention programs. However, little is known about whether and how drinker prototypes can be changed. Peers may play an important role in this process. Peers can have direct (active) or indirect (passive) influences on adolescents' drinking behavior. Direct influence refers to explicit offers from peers to consume alcohol, while indirect influence refers to modeling (i.e., adolescents' drinking behavior resembles that of their peers) and social norms (Borsari & Carey, 2001; Graham, Marks, & Hansen, 1991). Peer drinking norms are defined as adolescents' perceptions of the quantity and frequency of peers' drinking behavior, and approval of drinking (Borsari & Carey, 2001). Peer norms can have direct effects on drinking behavior, yet they can also affect drinking behavior via alcohol related cognitions (Borsari & Carey, 2001, 2006; Maisto, Carey, & Bradizza, 1999).

According to the Prototype–Willingness model, there is an important link between peers' behaviors (i.e., peer norms) and prototypes (Gibbons et al., 2003). This link suggests that peer norms may play a key role in the formation of prototypes. This assumption is in line with longitudinal research showing that affiliation with drinking peers and higher perceived drinking norms of friends are related to the development of more favorable drinker prototypes (Blanton et al., 1997; Gerrard, Gibbons, Zhao, Russell, & Reis-Bergan, 1999; Ouellette, Gerrard, Gibbons, & Reis-Bergan, 1999). If adolescents think alcohol use is a common behavior among their peers and if they admire their peers, their perceptions of the typical peer who drinks may be more positive and they may perceive themselves to be more similar to this type of peer than adolescents who think that alcohol use is an unusual behavior among their peers.

Although peer norms seem to be an important predictor for the formation of drinker prototypes, experimental studies that focused on the causal relationship between peer drinking norms and drinker prototypes are scarce. As a consequence, little is known about whether changing peer drinking norms may actually lead to changes in drinker prototypes. During adolescence, peer drinking norms are likely to change due to, for example, changes in peer groups or maturation. It is yet unknown whether these changes in peer drinking norms will lead to changes in drinker prototypes or whether drinker prototypes are relatively stable once formed. To our knowledge, only one study tested whether manipulating peer drinking norms affected adolescents' drinker prototype favorability and similarity. Litt and Stock (2011) randomly assigned 13 to 15 year old adolescents to one of two Facebook conditions, which were used to manipulate the peer drinking norm. Participants were asked to look at the Facebook profiles of four high school students for 40 min. In the alcohol condition, three profiles showed pictures of a student drinking alcohol; in the control condition the same students were displayed but only one profile showed pictures of a student drinking alcohol. The comments of the "friends" on the Facebook page also referred to past or future alcohol use in the alcohol condition, and to social activities in the control condition. The results showed that adolescents in the alcohol condition reported more favorable drinker prototypes after the Facebook manipulation than adolescents in the control condition. These findings suggest that changing perceived peer drinking norms may be a promising method to change adolescents' evaluations of drinker prototypes.

During adolescence, social status is highly valued and perceived popular peers are found to be especially salient (Cillessen & Rose, 2005; Prinstein, Meade, & Cohen, 2003). Popular peers are generally admired and, therefore, their behavior and norms can be influential to others (Cillessen & Rose, 2005; Cohen & Prinstein, 2006; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Teunissen, Spijkerman, Prinstein et al., 2012). This is

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