



# Self-consciousness moderates the relationship between perceived norms and drinking in college students<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The current research examines whether self-consciousness subscales have prognostic value in the relationship between perceived norms and drinking and if that differs among college men and women. Results indicate that self-consciousness moderates gender differences in the relationship between perceived social norms and drinking. A strong positive relationship was found between perceived norms (descriptive and injunctive) and drinking for men relative to women and this was more pronounced among individuals who were lower in public self-consciousness. Similarly, the relationship between perceived injunctive norms and drinking was significantly stronger among men than women and this was more pronounced among individuals who were higher in private self-consciousness or social anxiety. These results highlight the important influence of social factors in salient peer reference groups. This is promising information for future research attempting to identify useful indicators of candidates who would most benefit from social norms interventions. This also underscores the relevance of future norms based interventions using self-consciousness as a potential moderator of intervention efficacy.

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## 1. Introduction

The negative effects of heavy drinking among college students are numerous and include damaged property, poor class attendance, hangovers, trouble with authorities, injuries, and even fatalities (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994; Wechsler & Isaac, 1992; Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000). Further, high percentages of non-binge drinking students who live in residence halls reported experiencing secondhand effects of their peers' drinking (Wechsler et al., 2002). Both the primary (to the self) and secondary (to others) effects of excessive alcohol use in this highly social environment have prompted college administrators and researchers to examine the underlying causes of this high-risk behavior.

Over the years, a considerable amount of research has focused on the social attributes associated with individuals who engage in high-risk drinking, as social factors are known to play an important and distinct role in human behavior and decision making. During college, peers are the major means of support and guidance for most students, exerting greater impact on behavioral decisions than biological or familial influences (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986; Borsari & Carey, 2001). As a result, social influences have been identified as among the strongest and most consistent predictors of heavy drinking in the college environment (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007; Perkins, 2002; Wood, Read, Palfai, & Stevenson, 2001).

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### 1.1. The social norms approach

One approach that relies on college student influences on one another is the social norms approach to college student drinking (Berkowitz, 2004; Perkins, 2003). This approach suggests that peers influence alcohol use both directly (i.e., explicit suggestions to drink) and indirectly (i.e., perceived norms) (Borsari & Carey, 2001; Kandel, 1985). Perceived norms are beliefs about how members of one's social group think and act. They are typically distinguished as being of two types: descriptive norms (what people actually do; behavior) and injunctive norms (what people feel is right; attitudes). Both types of norms assist individuals in determining acceptable and unacceptable social behavior (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990) and have been found to be uniquely associated with drinking among college students (e.g., Neighbors, Lee et al., 2007).

Researchers have observed that there are consistent discrepancies between perceived and actual norms (e.g., Borsari & Carey, 2003). This discrepancy is often explained by attribution theory, which purports that students have limited knowledge about the actual behaviors and attitudes of other students. As the student observes others drinking heavily, it is assumed that such excessive use is typical, resulting in elevated norms (Perkins, 2002). As a result, overestimations of heavy drinking frequency are proposed to further increase [heavy] drinking, while underestimations of abstinence or moderate drinking presumably discourage individuals from engaging in those healthier behaviors. Perceived norms are much more powerful predictors of personal consumption than actual norms of school peers (Perkins, Haines, & Rice, 2005). Similarly, compared to their own attitudes, students consistently estimate that typical students are more comfortable with (Prentice & Miller, 1993) and more approving of (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986) alcohol use and this too is purported to have an effect on their behavior.

### 1.2. Moderators of drinking: self-consciousness

In addition to social influences, a variety of individual differences has been studied in tandem with alcohol consumption. It has generally been found that including various dispositional traits in the study of alcohol use may lend some predictive and explanatory value. In an attempt to predict drinking and problematic use among college students, studies have utilized such factors as vulnerability to peer pressure (Johnson, 1986), drinking motives (i.e. social, mood enhancement, conformity, coping; Cooper, 1994), personality type (Ham & Hope, 2003) and expectations about the effects of alcohol (Christiansen, Smith, Roehling, & Goldman, 1989). Self-consciousness (SC) is yet another variable of prognostic value, albeit less studied than others. Self-consciousness assesses the extent to which individuals direct attention inward or outward (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). This tendency typically occurs in a non-verbal fashion and appears to be an important behavioral determinant of interaction with others. As previously noted, the acquisition of perceived norms is also often based on unspoken cues and it too is a consistent predictor of behavior. Thus there may be an association between SC, perceived norms and subsequent drinking.

The SC domain encompasses preoccupation with one's and others' behaviors, sensitivity to inner feelings and emotions, introspective behavior, and concerns about others' evaluation of one's own physical appearance and presentation (Fenigstein et al., 1975). This construct has typically been defined by three subscales. Individuals high in *private* SC are concerned with attending to their inner thoughts and feelings. Reflections deal with the self and are attuned to one's needs, thoughts, wants, and ideas. *Public* SC refers to awareness of the self as a social object that is both influenced by, and affects others. An individual high in public SC exhibits various behaviors based on reactions of others to the self. As such, there is concern with self presentation and a strong emphasis is placed on one's social interactions and behaviors. *Social anxiety* is the third subscale and refers to a general discomfort felt in the presence of others. This may take the form of nervousness that arises in reaction to the process of self-focused attention, such as private and public SC.

Measures of SC have been employed in studies involving a variety of behaviors, including alcohol use. Early research into the effects of SC and related self-aware states on the consumption of alcohol found that alcohol interferes with the self-aware state by inhibiting processes related to the encoding of self-relevant information. By inhibiting these encoding processes, alcohol decreases the correspondence of behavior with personal standards of conduct and also decreases one's [negative] self-evaluation of performance, which in essence, serves as a protective factor for cognitive dissonance (Hull, 1981). Further research by Hull and Young (1983) supported the previous finding of alcohol as a mechanism to reduce a negative self-aware state. Subjects were randomly given success or failure feedback on an intellectual task. They then participated in a wine tasting experiment in which the amount of alcohol consumed was a function of SC and the quality of personal performance. Subjects higher in private SC who had received failure feedback drank significantly more wine than did subjects higher in private SC who received success feedback. Therefore, individuals may avoid alcohol consumption to retain a positive self-aware state, but increase alcohol consumption to reduce negative self-conscious affect. A similar finding examining this relationship with social anxiety and perceived norms was shown in a study by Neighbors, et al. (2007). They found that the relationship between perceived norms and drinking was stronger for male students who had higher social anxiety. This reaffirms a general consensus in alcohol research that peer influence is particularly important among males. A study by Prentice and Miller (1993) indicates that among college students, drinking is a greater part of the male social identity, relative to the female social identity. They also found that men perceive that they will be evaluated more negatively than do women if they don't drink. Further, drinking makes up a larger part of college men's self concept, than for women (Neighbors, Walker, & Larimer, 2003). Thus gender was included as a potential moderator in the current study with the anticipation that males will be more heavily influenced by perceived peer norms.

Research has also demonstrated how environmental factors and individual differences within a social group may yield important information affecting the drinking behavior and influences circulating in that group. Recent research focused on SC and drinking within Greek organizations (Park, Sher, & Krull, 2006). Although the authors acknowledged an over-sampling of

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