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The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Drinking Motives in First and Second-Year College Students

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for Graduation in the Honors College

By  
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*Educational use of this paper is permitted for the purpose of providing future students a model example of an Honors senior thesis project.*

## Introduction

High-risk alcohol use is a public health issue impacting the safety and success of college students. During college is time for the highest rates of alcohol dependence and alcohol use disorders (Grant, Dawson, Stinson, Chou, Dufour, & Pickering, 2004). Various factors can contribute to this increase in alcohol use and will be discussed in this study.

It is estimated that each year, over 1,800 college students die from alcohol-related unintentional injuries, including motor vehicle accidents, while an additional 696,000 experience a physical assault by another student who has consumed alcohol (Hingson, Zha, & Weitzman, 2009; Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2009). Approximately 97,000 college students between the ages of 18 and 24 experience an alcohol-related sexual assault or rape (Hingson, Zha & Weitzman, 2009). Alcohol use also impacts academic success, with 25% of college students reporting missed classes, performing poorly on an exam, or receiving lower grades due to alcohol consumption (Blanco et al., 2008).

Patterns of alcohol consumption prove to be problematic for college students. College is a time period for increased rates of binge drinking, alcohol abuse, and alcohol use disorders (Grant, Dawson, Stinson, Chou, Dufour, & Pickering, 2004). According to the National Institute on Alcohol Use and Alcoholism [NIAAA], binge drinking is the amount of alcohol raising one's Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) to .08 g/dL within a time of about 2 hours (2017). Most males reach this BAC in 5 alcoholic drinks, most females in 4 drinks. Roughly one-third of college students report to consuming more than 5 drinks last time they "partied," therefore binge drinking (American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment-II [ACHA-

NCHA-II], 2016). This same study resulted in 22% of respondents reporting never having consumed alcohol (ACHA-NCHA-II, 2016).

There is more to research beyond prevalence of alcohol consumption. Prevalence rates are useful in examining how much college students consume alcohol, however, researching the motives behind alcohol consumption, has the potential to inform intervention programming (Maggs, Williams, & Lee, 2010).

### **Drinking Motives**

During the transition to college, students navigate peer-intensive environments, demonstrate independent decision-making, and explore their identities (Abar & Maggs, 2010). New college students may be more likely to increase alcohol use and drink to cope with adverse feelings or to facilitate social activity (Schulenburg & Maggs, 2002; Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005). In addition to these motivations for alcohol use, students may also drink to enhance positive moods or conform to peer behaviors (Cooper, 1994). Drinking to cope is related to more negative consequences, while drinking for enhancement is linked to higher drinking rates and more negative consequences (Merrill & Read, 2010).

Established trends among motives include most common motives, motives most likely associated with higher drinking levels and more risky drinking behavior. The motives most commonly reported to influence alcohol use are the social and enhancement motives (Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005). The social motive warrants mild consumption of alcohol. The most problematic motives reported are enhancement and coping. Enhancement proves to be problematic because of use expectancy theory. This phenomenon can be described by having an expected and desired outcome for drinking alcohol and engaging in the behavior in order to achieve that outcome (Papies & Barsalou, 2015). Alcohol consumption increases as a result of

use expectancy as a motivating factor well as alcohol's regulating effect (Neighbors, Larimer, Geisner, & Knee, 2004). Coping proves to be problematic if alcohol is relied on as the primary mechanism for regulating emotions, by drastically increasing frequency and amount of alcohol consumed (Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel and Engels, 2005).

### **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem (SE) describes an individual's positive or negative assessment of themselves when compared to others (M. Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & F. Rosenberg, 1995). Low SE is linked to the use of fewer harm reduction strategies, more alcohol-related negative consequences and as a risk factor for alcohol consumption (Zeigler-Hill, Madson, & Ricedorf, 2012; Zeigler-Hill, Madson, & Stubbs 2013). Individuals with low SE are more likely to use alcohol for social motives (Korn & Maggs, 2004) and as a strategy to cope (Backer-Fulghum, Patock-Peckham, King, Roufa & Hagen, 2011). Inversely, if one possesses high self-esteem, the research suggests they are less likely to engage in negative behaviors when it comes to alcohol consumption (Zeigler-Hill, Madson & Stubbs, 2013).

### **Transition**

The transition from high school to college proves to be high-risk for students, with an increased likelihood to abuse substances, especially alcohol (DeJong & Ross, 2008; Sutfin, Reboussin, McCoy, & Wolfson, 2009). Drinking behaviors are likely a result of the absence of adult supervision while students have increased access to alcohol and more opportunity for alcohol consumption (Corbin, Fromme, & Kruse, 2008). Additionally, peer influence is a contributing factor to transitioning students, as an adoption of peers' alcohol consumption behaviors (Osgood, Ragan, Wallace, Gest, Feinberg & Moody, 2013).

Negative alcohol-related consequences are associated with the transition from high school to college and with fluctuations of student self-esteem throughout this process (Crocker, 2002; Nordstrom, Goguen, & Hiester, 2014). Increase in alcohol use is consistent for pre-college drinkers and non-drinkers; for students that did not drink before college, they are likely to start drinking and for students that already initiated alcohol use prior to college, they are likely to increase use (Corbin, Fromme, & Kruse, 2008).

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of the study is to examine the relationships between alcohol use, self-esteem, and drinking motives among first and second-year college students. Relevant research has been conducted on these variables separately. This study aims to fill a research gap by examining the dynamic relationships and interactions between these variables. This study is focused exclusively on first and second-year students, as these populations are of a higher risk of alcohol use and its related consequences (Borsari, Murphy, & Barnett, 2007).

### **Methods**

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of a mid-sized public liberal arts institution in the Northeastern United States. Data were collected through electronic surveys administered through a campus-based survey platform. Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24. The survey was anonymous and all data were maintained electronically and only accessible by the researchers.

## **Participants**

Study participants (n=112) included first and second-year students enrolled at an institution located in the Northeastern United States. A random, representative sample of 2,000 first and second-year students in regard to gender, race, and place of residence received an e-mail solicitation to participate in the study. Informed consent materials were provided to all participants and indicated that the study was voluntary and participation could be discontinued at any time. Upon consenting to participation, participants were directed to the electronic survey consisting of questions regarding (a) demographic information, (b) drinking behavior, (c) drinking motives, and (d) self-esteem.

## **Measurement of Drinking Behaviors**

Three locally developed drinking behavior measures assessed 1) students' frequency of consuming 5 or more drinks at a sitting within the last 2 weeks, 2) average number of alcoholic drinks consumed per week, and 3) the environments in which alcohol beverages are consumed.

## **Measurement of Drinking Motives**

The Drinking Motives Questionnaire - Revised (DMQ-R) is a 20-question tool assessing motives of alcohol consumption (Cooper, 1994). For each of the drinking motive statements, participants selected a response from a five-point Likert scale that consisted: almost never or never, some of the time, half of the time, most of the time and almost always or always. There are four motives subscales which include conformity, social, coping, and enhancement.

## **Measurement of Self-esteem**

The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale is comprised of 10 items that measure positive and negative feeling about one's self. (Rosenberg, 1965). Items are assessed using a four-point

Likert scale that consisted of: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. Items consisted of statements including "I take a positive attitude toward myself," "I certainly feel useless at times," and "I feel I do not have much to be proud of." Scores are determined based on participant responses, with higher scores indicated higher self-esteem.

### **Data Analysis**

Demographic characteristics of the sample were determined using descriptive statistics regarding age, year in school, gender identity, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, on-campus involvement, and place of residence. Chi-squared analyses were used to identify significant associations between drinking behavior and drinking motives, as well as drinking behavior and self-esteem. A Pearson's R Correlation analysis was computed to determine the relationship between self-esteem and drinking motives.

## **Results**

### **Participant Demographics**

Participants consisted of 112 students between the ages of 18 and 23 years old. First-year students accounted for 58.9% of students and the remaining 41.1% were second-year students. The gender identity distribution reported females at 75.9%, 22.3% for males, and 1.8% at transgender / gender non-conforming, an over-representation of females as compared to the university distribution. The backgrounds for race and ethnicity were at 72.3% White, 15.2% African American, 7.1% Hispanic or Latino, 2.7% Asian, and 2.7% other. For more information on participant demographics, refer to *Table 1.1*

### **Drinking Behaviors of Participants**

The participants' drinking behavior regarding two-week binge drinking history was measured with frequency of binge drinking within this period. The distributions were between a

frequency of 0 and 5 times, with the greatest frequency at 0. An overwhelming 65.2% of students reported 0 times during the two-week binge period, 15.2% at 1 time, 11.6% at 2 times, 4.5% at 3 times 2.7% at 4 times and .9% at 5 times.

Mean drinks per week were also assessed. The mean drinks per week having reported numbers between 0 and 16. On the low end, 44.6% of respondents reported 0 mean drinks per week, 12.5% with 1 drink per week, 12.5% with 2, 6.3% with 3, 4.5% with 4, 6.3% with 5, and 13.5% with 6 or more mean drinks per week. For more information regarding participant drinking behaviors, refer to Table 1.2.

### **Relationship between Drinking Behaviors and Motives**

Findings showed that students who reported coping motives ( $\chi^2(90, N = 112) = 138.68, p = .001$ ), enhancement motives ( $\chi^2(100, N = 112) = 190.73, p < .001$ ), and social motives ( $\chi^2(190, N = 112) = 149.66, p < .001$ ) for alcohol use consumed more drinks per week. Binge drinking rates were higher for those reporting coping motives ( $\chi^2(90, N = 112) = 122.03, p < .05$ ) and enhancement motives ( $\chi^2(100, N = 112) = 138.35, p = .007$ ).

### **Relationship between Drinking Behaviors and Self Esteem**

Neither the relationship between weekly alcohol consumption and self-esteem nor binge drinking and self-esteem were found to be significant.

### **Relationship between Self Esteem and Drinking Motives**

Participants with low self-esteem were more likely to report coping motives for alcohol consumption ( $r_s(112) = -.364, p < .01$ ). There were no statistically significant relationships between self-esteem and conformity, enhancement, or social motives.

## **Discussion**

The current study examined a gap within existing research which evaluated relationships between drinking motives, self-esteem and alcohol consumption. Significant findings are to be discussed as well as what future research and future preventative programming can do based on findings from this current study.

### **Drinking Motives and Alcohol Consumption**

With regard to drinking motives, Cooper's foundational research discovered there are predictable patterns of alcohol consumption relating to each of the four drinking motives. These patterns have been discussed in other supporting research and are also supported by this study. (Cooper, Russell, Skinner & Windle, 1992).

**Conformity motives.** The results of the current study have findings consistent with existing research examining self-esteem, drinking motives and alcohol consumption among college students. With regard to the drinking motive of conformity, the current study concluded that this population had no significant relationship between this motive and drinking behaviors nor self-esteem. There is little research present which examines the relationship between these variables, however, the conformity motive has varied findings on whether the research has proved it to be a problematic motive (Lewis et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2006).

**Coping motives.** The results of the current study found significant relationships between those who reported for the coping motive and increased levels of drinking per week as well as binge drinking. Additionally, those who reported for the coping motive were also more likely to report low self-esteem. The current study's findings are consistent with previous research; drinking to cope with negative emotional states is associated with alcohol-related problems and

greater alcohol consumption (Cooper, Russell, Skinner & Windle, 1992; Merrill, Wardell, & Read 2013; Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005).

**Enhancement motives.** The current study found the enhancement motive significant with relation to drinks consumed per week and binge drinking rates. Consistent with this current study, previous research demonstrates that enhancement motive is linked to higher drinking rates and more negative consequences (Merrill & Read, 2010).

**Social motives.** The results of examining the social motive proved no significant findings with relation to self-esteem, however, demonstrated a significant relationship with weekly drinks consumed. This finding is consistent with previous that the social motive facilitates more alcohol consumption (Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel and Engels, 2005). Research is varied on whether drinking for the social motive could eventually lead to problematic alcohol consumption, however, it is the most commonly reported motive for why young people drink alcohol (2005; Vaughan, Corbin & Fromme, 2009).

### **Self-esteem and Drinking Motives**

With regard to self-esteem levels, research has shown low self-esteem to be a factor that increases alcohol consumption (Zeigler-Hill, Madson, & Ricedorf, 2012; Zeigler-Hill, Madson, & Stubbs 2013). This same relationship between low self-esteem and the coping motive with high-risk drinking was found in this study. What has been concluded from previous research is that those with low self-esteem are likely to use alcohol as a strategy to cope (Backer-Fulghm et al., 2011).

There were no statistically significant relationships between self-esteem and conformity, social or enhancement motives.

## **Programmatic Implications**

Findings from this study may inform preventative programming for alcohol consumption among college students. In order to decrease the problematic alcohol consumption for college students as well as conduct self-esteem enhancement, an intervention program with a counseling component is proposed. Self-esteem enhancement, also known as self-enhancement, consists of strategies for maintenance and improvement of self-esteem through specialized programming (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, Swann, 2003).

The proposed programs to come from these research findings can test for low self-esteem levels and those at risk for drinking for coping as well as for the enhancement motives. By creating a tailored intervention towards the priority population, those who demonstrate low self-esteem, drinking for coping or enhancement, and consume alcohol, the problematic drinking and the associated negative consequences could be prevented.

Instead of a retroactive program for solving alcohol dependency and maladaptive coping strategies, a self-esteem enhancement program is proposed in conjunction with motivational interviewing (MI). Motivational Interviewing is a process best explained as guided exploration in order for a client to reflect on behaviors, realize the need for change and establish goals for necessary change (Rollnick & Miller, 1995; Cormier & Nurius, 2003).

This program would have a component to test for self-esteem levels and what causes fluctuations in self-esteem for the individual. Additionally, the program would conduct intake surveys on alcohol consumption. These combined evaluations would establish a quantitative procedure for establishing concern levels for students enrolled in program. Additionally, it could test for improvements throughout proposed program.

## **Research Implications**

The current study examined the relationship between drinking motives, self-esteem and alcohol consumption among first and second-year students with quantitative methods. Further research could be conducted and adapted to a qualitative study, possibly lending to more insights for why people consume alcohol. Adapting the study to a qualitative format could reveal more by offering new insights derived from a small-group or interview setting.

While conducting a qualitative study regarding these variables, more could be examined regarding the commonly reported social and enhancement motives – why are they so prevalent among college students? And what does this tell us? Additionally, other mediating factors could be examined for fluctuations in self-esteem and other factors that could cause increases in college student alcohol use and potential abuse.

Given that there were few significant findings regarding the relationship between self-esteem levels and alcohol use directly, more research should be conducted to examine the motives as they may serve as a mediator for drinking behaviors and self-esteem. Previous studies have found significant relationships between self-esteem and drinking behaviors as motives mediate through anxiety, depression, and other variables (DeMartini & Carey, 2011; Cadigan, Martens & Herman, 2015).

An aspect of research to explore more is the concept of positive deviants, or those that engage in “intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways” (Spreitzer & Sonenshen, 2004). Relating to this research, a theoretical example of positive deviance could be those that report low self-esteem, drinking for the coping motive, but they choose not to partake in alcohol consumption; those that function as exceptions to the general findings or conclusions of research. This study could have positive deviance embedded within

for those that do not consume alcohol, those that have high self-esteem and frequently binge drink and so on. There are many possible examples of positive deviance within this current study as well as previous research.

The current study helps to inform behaviors and patterns of alcohol consumption and variables that may contribute to use. The information provided by this research could be useful for Health Counselors for conducting of preventative interviewing and assessments, while also proving useful for faculty and staff of universities. Especially for program planners at the college, such as Resident Directors and Resident Assistants, they may see this to be useful for adapting programs with these research findings.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study include a small student sample from a single university. Within this small sample, it was overrepresented of female students compared to the institution's demographics. Given the study's focus on alcohol consumption, and many students being underage, they could have been skeptical of a confidentiality breach, however, confidentiality was ensured. Socially desirable responding (SDR) is a known limitation where respondents have a tendency to unconsciously respond with more positive answers than what is true (Melson, Monk, Heim, 2016). This could be especially problematic when reporting about alcohol consumption, responding with lower usage values than actual usage.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the relationship between drinking motives, self-esteem and drinking behaviors among first and second-year college students, with significant findings among these

variables. These findings can inform programming for prevention of harmful drinking behaviors and associated consequences among the priority population of those with low self-esteem and coping motives as well as enhancement and social motives. Future studies could expand on these variables to learn more, doing so through detailed studies and larger study samples.

Table 1.1

*Demographics of Study Sample (n=112)*

Characteristic	N	%
<b>Current Age</b>		
18	36	32.1
19	49	43.8
20	22	19.6
21	3	2.7
23	2	1.8
<b>Year in School</b>		
First Year Students	66	58.9
Second Year Students	46	41.1
<b>Gender Identity</b>		
Male	25	22.3
Female	85	75.9
Transgender/ Gender Non-Conforming	2	1.8
<b>Race or Ethnicity</b>		
African American	17	15.2
Asian	3	2.7
Hispanic or Latino	8	7.1
White	81	72.3
Other	3	2.7

Table 1.2

*Drinking Behaviors of Study Sample (n=112)*

Drinking Measure	N	%
<b>Two- Week Binge</b>		
0	73	65.2
1	17	15.2
2	13	11.6
3	5	4.5
4	3	2.7
5	1	.9
<b>Mean Drinks per Week</b>		
0	50	44.6
1	14	12.5
2	14	12.5
3	7	6.3
4	5	4.5
5	7	6.3
6	5	4.5
7	2	1.8
8	1	.9
10	4	3.6
12	1	.9
15	1	.9
16	1	.9

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