

Perceptions of Binge Drinking as Problematic among College Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the way in which college students perceive binge drinking on college campuses in order to better understand the impetus behind this undesirable behavior. A survey administered on-line prompted undergraduate students to identify whether or not they perceived binge drinking to be a problem on college campuses, along with requesting an explanation for their response. Upon analysis of the qualitative data, five major categories of defining the behavior as problematic or not emerged: social norms, peer pressure, impact on academics, impact on health and impact on decision-making abilities. Many responses also provide examples of modeling and moral disengagement, both constructs of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, in the conceptualization and resulting behaviors of binge drinking reported by participants.

INTRODUCTION

Excessive drinking is a well-acknowledged problem on college campuses in America. National studies have shown that a large majority of college students consume alcohol, even though most of them are under the legal drinking age. More than 40% of college students are considered binge drinkers, which is defined by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism as consuming five or more drinks within about 2 hours for men and four or more drinks within about 2 hours for women (2004). Risks associated with heavy alcohol consumption include alcohol poisoning, rape and assault, blackouts, car accidents, unintentional injury and academic failure (McBride, Barrett, Moore, & Schonfeld, 2014). Nearly 25% of college students reported missed classes, incomplete assignments and poor grades caused by their drinking behaviors, and 33% of students lost at least three to five hours of productive time due to recovering from drinking (Yaccarino, 2001; Dotson, Dunn & Bowers, 2015).

When students go to college, they find themselves in a novel environment. They are usually away from parents and high school friends for the first time and are faced with many new situations. Students have more autonomy than ever before, and they are not allowed much time for this adjustment. Within this context, students often make decisions contrary to their established knowledge of right and wrong and this may be referred to as moral disengagement. Moral disengagement is categorized by the tendency to separate from moral self-control that would generally govern one's behavior (Newton, Andrews, Champion, & Teeson, 2014). College students are able to suspend their morals as a way to justify their negative behavior.

Another way in which students may justify their behavior is through their perception of social norms and influences. Acceptance of alcohol consumption and binge drinking is an identifiable feature of college culture as alcohol use is often perceived as a rite of passage for college students and is often a response to peer pressure (Ward, Galante, Trivedi & Kahrs, 2015; Yaccarino, 2001). Students who feel that alcohol is important to their college experience will participate in more frequent and intense binge drinking behaviors (Ward et al., 2015). Furthermore, students reason that the majority of their peers engage in drinking behaviors and believe that their peers see non-drinkers as non-sociable,

which also influences their own decisions and beliefs (Jackson, Walling, & Thompson, 2007; Conroy, Sparks & Visser, 2015).

PURPOSE/IMPORTANCE

With the popularity of alcohol consumption continuing to increase, society recognizes this as a serious problem among college students. The significance of this study lies in the potential to better understand, and thus, more effectively decrease binge drinking behaviors among college students. This study will look at college drinking from the framework of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. However, this study will focus on two specific aspects of the theory, namely moral disengagement and modeling. Through a better understanding, it is more likely that effective prevention and intervention efforts can be formulated in order to decrease the behavior.

This study investigates a relationship between participation in the behavior of binge drinking and moral disengagement among college students. The purpose of this study is to better understand why college students engage in binge drinking behaviors. By looking at the theory of moral disengagement as a possible means of more fully describing the acceptance of this behavior among college students there is potential to reveal the reasoning behind this behavior. This study also explores the potential influence of the role that social norms and peer pressure play in students' binge drinking behaviors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent trends suggest that alcohol is being consumed at earlier ages than in the past, with one of the most affected populations of alcohol abuse currently being college aged adults. There are four primary motives for drinking that include social motives, conformity motives, coping motives and enhancement (Paswan, Gai & Jeon, 2015). Alcohol consumption is also a way of coping with psychological stress (Newton et al., 2014). There are also intrinsic motivators for alcohol consumption, which include social, fun, taste, relaxation, escape and loneliness (Paswan, Gai & Jeon, 2015). Alcohol use and a positive attitude towards alcohol among adolescents can result in undesirable patterns of alcohol use as

these adolescents age into adulthood, such as more frequent and intense alcohol consumption, and eventually alcohol related problems (Newton et al., 2014). Heavy alcohol consumption is linked to many negative health consequences, including but not limited to: violence, injury, addiction, sexual abuse, physical diseases and even death. There is also a strong dose-response relationship between the frequency of binge drinking and potentially negative behaviors: poor academic performance, riding with a driver who has been drinking, being sexually active, smoking tobacco products, being a victim of dating violence, attempting suicide and using illicit drugs (Miller, Naimi, Brewer & Jones, 2007). Young people are most affected by these negative behaviors, as they tend to drink to the point of drunkenness more frequently than older adults (Lyons, Goodwin, & McCreanor, 2015).

Young people view heavy drinking as pleasurable due to social characteristics that are part of their normal routine (Lyons et al., 2015). Social norms and peer pressure play a critical role in the drinking behaviors of college students. Peer pressure to use alcohol is one of the strongest determinants of adolescent alcohol use (Newton, Barrett, Swaffield & Tesson, 2014). Seventy percent of college students consumed alcohol in the past month and were immersed in a culture where alcohol use was accepted and normal (Mussleman & Rutledge, 2010; Brown-Rice, Furr & Jergensen, 2015). In a college environment, where alcohol is accepted and normal, students will be encouraged to maintain, and even escalate, their drinking behaviors (Brown-Rice et al., 2015).

Media plays a large role in this normality. Alcohol marketing and advertising has been related to an increase in alcohol consumption among young people. Low sale prices and promotions near college campuses catch the eye of college students and positively influence the purchase and consumption of alcohol (Paswan et al., 2015). While perhaps not always intended to be, social media has proven to be a powerful new marketing tool. The use of social media is an important part of creating identity and relationships for this age group, which includes their drinking behaviors, friendships and socialization patterns. Social media is a platform in which drinking behaviors are frequently seen as both humorous and positive (Lyon et al., 2015).

Perception of their peers' normal behaviors also plays a role in individual's choices. The social norms theory suggests that an

individual's behavior is influenced by their perception of how those around them think and act (Dotson, Dunn & Bowers, 2015). Students' perceptions about alcohol consumption levels among other students may cause a student to change, or increase, their own consumption habits (Brown-Rice et al., 2015).

Moral disengagement may be occurring when students increase their own alcohol consumption based on the behaviors of other students. The concept of moral disengagement is categorized by the tendency to separate from moral self-control that would generally govern one's behavior; therefore, where moral disengagement increases, the chances of a person using alcohol in a risky manner may also rise. When individuals engage in a behavior that goes against their moral code, they must somehow disengage their behavior from their moral code in order to avoid feeling stress (Newton et al., 2014). This theory provides one explanation as to why people may experience a lapse in judgment as they mentally remove the links between their own actions and possible negative outcomes (Johnson & Buckley, 2015). Individuals often internalize behavior principles by societal values and views. As a new college student enters a society which views binge drinking as the accepted norm (a college campus), it may influence previously held values and subsequent behavior. Moral disengagement allows for justification of conduct disapproved of by society at large and redirects responsibility away from the individual and towards the circumstance in order for the individual to act without guilt (Newton et al., 2014; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Trevino, Baker & Martin, 2014).

Other risk factors for binge drinking include age and gender. Males were found to be more likely to binge drink, and were found to drink more drinks more often (Brown-Rice et al., 2015). The pressure to be seen as masculine is a major risk factor for young men when examining drinking behaviors, as self-perceived masculinity increases with the amount of alcohol a male is able to consume per sitting (Mayhew, Caldwell & Hourigan, 2008). In addition to gender, first year college students were also at a higher risk for binge drinking patterns than those who were upperclassman (Dotson, Dunn & Bowers, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

This study was conducted at a public university in suburban Middle Tennessee, where IRB approval was obtained prior to data collection. Students enrolled in the freshman level, general education Health and Wellness course were offered extra credit points for their participation (unrelated opportunities for earning extra credit were also available). Before beginning the study, an informed consent page was viewed by all potential participants. Students were informed that participation was completely voluntary and could be terminated at any time without consequences. The majority of the participants, 62.08% ($N = 286$), were female. Most (69.43%) described themselves as being Caucasian, with 20.38% describing themselves as African American.

Instrument

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected on-line utilizing a survey administered via Survey Monkey. The survey included quantitative questions regarding both demographic information as well as questions related to binge drinking recommended by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (Task Force on Recommended Alcohol Questions, 2003). In addition, qualitative data was collected within the same survey through the use of open-ended questions. For this analysis, the open-ended question which resulted in the qualitative data examined was worded as follows:

Do you perceive binge drinking to be a problem on today's American college campus? Why or why not?

Questions specific to alcohol use behaviors were used to categorize students as either binge drinkers or not binge drinkers using recognized standards. Males who have consumed 5 or more drinks per drinking occasion and females who have consumed 4 or more drinks per drinking occasion were categorized as binge drinkers. A "drink" was specified as either 1 oz. of liquor, 5 oz. of wine, or 12 oz. of beer or wine cooler. Therefore, if a student consumed 1 mixed drink that contained 2 shots of liquor at 1 oz. each, that mixed drink would be the equivalent of 2 drinks.

Data Analysis

In the first stage of the qualitative analysis, a coding scheme was used to reduce the responses for the open-ended questions to a manageable number of categories with numeric codes. For example, responses to the question, "Do you perceive binge drinking to be a problem on today's American college campus? Why or why not?" would be coded as positively (yes, it is a problem), negatively (no, it is not a problem), not sure, no response, etc. Additional coding was developed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) and conducted based on the reasoning behind responses that were provided by participants. For example, some participants explained that they did not perceive binge drinking to be problem because it is a normal, expected behavior for college students. All responses that gave this same reasoning were given the same code. After all responses had been coded, coding categorization was checked by both researchers for reliability and validity.

The resulting codes were entered into the data set in SPSS along with the quantitative data. After organizing the data by splitting it by the qualitative codes generated in response to the question of whether participants perceived binge drinking to be a problem on college campuses, descriptive statistics and frequencies were analyzed. In addition, insightful quotes of responses given by students were included in order to form a more complete narrative about their perception of binge drinking.

RESULTS

Social Norms

Eleven respondents did not perceive binge drinking to be a problem on campus and cited a reason related to social norms. One example is a male sophomore living at home with parents, who reported having 18 drinks within a 24-hour time period 3 times in the past year. He stated, "No it is a part of the college life. College is a key time to have fun and try new experiences. Go for it, just behave accordingly." Only 18.2% were of a minority ethnicity, but a large percentage (27.3% as compared to 14% of the entire sample) were members of a fraternity or sorority. Only 2 reported not having used alcohol in the past month. Interestingly,

they all reported that they thought the typical college student at their school used alcohol more days than they did themselves. All reported having at least one alcoholic beverage in the past year, even though none of them were yet of legal drinking age. The participant in this category with the most number of friends who binge drank (70) was also the participant with the highest number of reported binge drinking episodes within the past year (30) – this 20-year-old male was also a member of a fraternity and stated that binge drinking “is common, but not a problem.”

On the opposite side of the spectrum, some students believe binge drinking is a problem because of social norms. The majority (71.7%) of those that stated binge drinking to be a problem on college campuses due to social norms were female. While 38.3% (23) had not used any alcohol in the past month, all believed that the typical college student had used alcohol at least twice in the past month. Sixty-five percent believed that the typical college student participated in binge drinking the last time they drank alcohol and 10% admitted to having driven after a binge drinking episode within the past month.

These students, averaging 19.95 years old, perceived that other college students averaged about 5.9 drinks per drinking session, which meets criteria for binge drinking among both males and females. One 19-year-old female African American sophomore student who lived off campus with roommates wrote, “Yes! Hello it’s college!!!” when asked if she thought binge drinking was a problem on college campuses. Another of these students was a 22-year-old Caucasian male junior who lived at home with parents. He reported binge drinking 5 times in the past month (and driving after at least one of those episodes), but thought the typical college student binge drank even more frequently; 8 times in the past month. He perceived alcohol use by college students to be ubiquitous, reporting that he perceived 98% of college students to have used alcohol within the past month and stating, “College students are going to drink no matter what. You are never going to stop them.”

Another, an 18-year-old white male freshman who lived off campus by himself and reported binge drinking once in the past year wrote, “Yes, because the stereotype is that it’s what happens when you go to college.” While not having had alcohol at all in the past month himself, he perceived that the typical college student

drank alcohol 7 times in the past month with a typical 8 drinks per drinking episode. Another student stated, "Yes, because it's what college has become about. It's not about education any longer. It's about who can get the most f*cked up." This student was a 19-year-old male white sophomore who lived at home with parents. He had used alcohol twice in the past month, had engaged in binge drinking on both occasions and had driven after at least one of those episodes, but thought the typical college student had used alcohol 16 times within the past month. He reported binge drinking 50 times in the past year and had up to 38 drinks per drinking episode.

One 20-year-old white female junior, who lived off campus with roommates, reported having consumed 10 drinks in a row twice in the past year and engaged in binge drinking 12 times. When asked about binge drinking being a problem, she said, "In some situations I do, but most of the time I think it is part of the college experience." Another respondent was a 19-year-old white female sophomore athlete living off campus with roommates. While she had not used alcohol at all in the past year, she perceived that the typical college student used alcohol 20 times per month and consumed 15 drinks per drinking episode. She stated that, "Yes, everyone around me at college drinks except for me and one of my friends. They think it is fun and that they are in college and should." One 18-year-old African American male freshman athlete, who was living on campus, had not used alcohol at all in the past year but perceived that the typical college student used alcohol 5 times a month and averaged 7 drinks per drinking episode. He stated, "Yes. Every Monday I always hear about how someone had so much to drink they don't remember what they did."

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure also plays a major role in students' decisions to take part in drinking behaviors. Students who did not believe that binge drinking was a problem did not have any comments related to peer pressure. However, those who thought binge drinking is an issue indicated that peer pressure played a major role in this trend. One such participant was a 19-year-old African American female sophomore who lived off campus with roommates and reported binge drinking five times in the past year. She responded, "Yes! College students think it's cool.... EVERYBODY'S DOING IT

MAN!!!!” when asked if she thought binge drinking was a problem on college campuses.

One student stated that, “This is the perfect opportunity for those that haven’t or have not drank often to experiment. Students binge drink with others to fit in.” A 19-year-old female African American sophomore, who lived off campus with roommates, who had not used alcohol at all herself in the past year but thought the typical college student used it 10 times in the past month wrote, “Yes, because there are a lot of college students drinking because their peers are doing it.”

One 18-year-old white female freshman athlete living on campus who had not used alcohol at all in the past year but perceived that 70% of college students had, and that they typically consumed five drinks per drinking episode said, “Yes, college students have a ton of pressures all around them. Many of them resort to this to relieve stress and not think about the surrounding pressures. It is an easy out. There is a lot of peer pressure to do it. Many people think it to be fun.” An 18-year-old female freshman athlete living in a dorm who reported having a maximum of three drinks only once in the past year, and typically having two drinks when she drank said, “Yes, because people believe that when they go to a party they have to get drunk, they don’t understand that it is possible to have one drink, or even none at all and still have fun. Binge drinking is also a result of peer pressure I think. Freshmen who don’t know any better will just keep drinking because they think that is what you are supposed to do in college.”

Impact on Health

Another reason that binge drinking was identified as a problem was due to health reasons. These students perceived that their peers were drinking 11.46 times per month and consuming an average of 6.23 drinks per session. When asked if she thought binge drinking was a problem on campus, one 18-year-old female Caucasian freshman athlete who lived in a dorm wrote, “Yes, there have been reports of students dying from alcohol poisoning. There is no need for college students to be dying from drinking too much alcohol. It is a problem that is much more serious then [sic] people realize.” This student reported having used alcohol once in the past month, but perceived that the typical college student had used it 20 times in the past month.

One other student, a 19-year-old African American female sophomore, who lived off campus with roommates, reported only having binge drank once in the past year, but having consumed 11 drinks in that episode. Coincidentally, she also had the perception that 11 drinks was the average number the typical student drank the last time they drank. She stated, “Yes. It becomes a problem when college students are dying from this ‘habit’.”

Impact on Academics

Twenty-three students reported that binge drinking was a problem because it affected academics. The average age of these students was 19.42 years old and they averaged 2.39 drinking days a month and consumed an average of 3.56 drinks per episode. One such student was a 19-year-old Hispanic freshman male who shared, “Yes, I came to class hung over and failed my test” when asked if he thought binge drinking was a problem. While this student had used alcohol 3 times in the past month, his perception was that the typical college student had used it 9 times in the past month. He reported having had 12 drinks per drinking episode on 8 different occasions over the course of the past year and also admitted to having driven after binge drinking within the past month.

Another student, a 21-year-old white male junior, living off campus with roommates, was a member of a fraternity who had used alcohol 12 times in the past month (10 of those he categorized as binge drinking episodes) and thought the typical college student only had 10 times. It is worth noting that this participant was one of the very few who perceived his own drinking behaviors to be more frequent than the typical college student. He reported the number of times he binge drank in the past year as, “I don’t know. Too many to count.” He did recall consuming a maximum of 30 drinks in one of those past year drinking episodes. He reported, “Yes, because some students don’t know when to stop and miss class because of drinking,” when asked if binge drinking was a problem on college campuses.

Impact on Decision-Making Abilities

Thirty-three students shared that they thought binge drinking was a problem on college campuses because it affects decision-making. The average age for these students was 20.06 years

old and they reported partaking in drinking activities 3.27 times per month. These students perceived that their peers consumed an average of 6.21 drinks per drinking session. One of these students was an 18-year-old African American female freshman who was an athlete and lived in the dorms. While she reported binge drinking once in the past month herself, she stated, "Yes. People binge drink and mess up the rest of their lives and they could have done something so much better but they made the wrong decision."

Although primarily thought of as a problem, some (six) students agreed that binge drinking was not a problem as long as their decisions and behaviors were controlled. The majority of these students thought the typical college student used alcohol 15-16 times within the past month. One student, a 19-year-old female sophomore, who reported binge drinking four times per week every week for the past year, stated that, "It can become a problem if it gets out of hand, but not all the time."

All respondents in this category thought that the typical college student binge drank the last time they drank alcohol. Half of them had driven after binge drinking at least once in the past month. One 19-year-old freshman male Caucasian student, who lived at home with his parents and reported binge drinking 6 times in the past year, shared that he felt "it can be social and make some funny memories if you don't go overboard" while an 18-year-old African American freshman male, living in a dorm, said, "No they handle themselves." Another of these respondents, an unaffiliated 19-year-old female sophomore, who lived off campus with a roommate, reported having consumed up to 25 drinks in one drinking episode and having binge drank 40 times within the past year. When asked if she thought binge drinking to be a problem on college campuses, she responded, "Only when people let the drinking take over their life."

DISCUSSION

This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the relationship between binge drinking behaviors among college students and the motives behind these behaviors. Overall, participants expressed an understanding of the role of social norms and peer pressure on college campuses. It is commonly an accepted, and by many, an expected behavior. This cultural norm

leads to an increase in students participating in these activities in order to fit in, meet expectations or cope with the stressors of college in a way that is socially acceptable within the context of their immediate environment. Student responses indicate that those who perceive that their peers are partaking in binge drinking activities for these reasons may alter their behaviors and beliefs to match their friends, illustrating Bandura's concept of modeling. A 19-year-old female African American sophomore, who lived off campus with roommates, who had not used alcohol at all herself in the past year, but thought the typical college student used it 10 times in the past month, wrote, "Yes, because there are a lot of college students drinking because their peers are doing it." This response illustrates the concept of modeling in that she reports students behaving in a certain way based on how they see their peers behaving.

Almost all students who reported participating in binge drinking behaviors also perceived that their peers consumed more alcohol than they did, which could explain why students did not see binge drinking as an issue. Many students perceived that the drinking patterns of their peers were more extreme than their own, which may have lead them to justify their own actions and alcohol consumption; an illustration of moral disengagement in action through the mechanism of advantageous comparison. These findings suggest that moral disengagement may provide a lens through which the more traditional concept of peer pressure, or even social norms, function to influence college student behavior. For example, one participant perceived alcohol use by college students to be ubiquitous, reporting that he perceived 98% of college students to have used alcohol within the past month and stating, "College students are going to drink no matter what. You are never going to stop them." This response seems to insinuate that since it is going to happen, he may as well participate. Responsibility is being diffused into the situation in which he finds himself rather than recognizing his own actions. Diffusion of responsibility is one mechanism of moral disengagement proposed by Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli (1996).

Due to the fact that these students perceived that their peers' alcohol usage was similar to, or more heavy than their own alcohol usage, they might justify their own actions and alcohol consumption. Justification and advantageous comparison are two mechanisms by which moral disengagement functions. For example,

one respondent was an 18-year-old African American male freshman, living in a dorm, who was both an athlete and a member of a fraternity. He self-reported 3 episodes of binge drinking within the past month and drove a vehicle after at least one of those episodes. His response to the question of whether or not binge drinking is a problem on college campuses was, "No. Because every bodies [sic] does it." Another 18-year-old male freshman, a member of a fraternity who lived at home with parents, reported having up to 70 drinks at one time in the past year, and one episode of ingesting 15 drinks within the past month. While this self-report is obviously an embellishment of his actual behavior, in that ingesting that much alcohol would lead to death, it does indicate that his perception of feasible drinking behaviors is exaggerated, possibly due to inflated social norms. He also reported having had 100 binge drinking episodes in the past year, 10 of those within the past month. He stated that, "I don't think college students drink every day; they just appear to," which implies that when asked about binge drinking, he is referencing frequency of drinking instead. He appears to be distancing his own behavior (binge drinking) from the problematic behavior in question by viewing drinking frequency, or daily drinking, as the problematic behavior in question rather than binge drinking.

Another student, an 18-year-old female Hispanic freshman athlete, who lived at home with her parents, perceived the alcohol intake of the typical college student to be four times higher than her own consumption. Even though she reported having three binge drinking episodes in the past six months, she shared, "Yes, it can cause students to make lifetime mistakes like getting injured, injuring someone else, dropping out or getting pregnant or arrested," indicating that she was well aware of the risks, but was still engaging in the behavior. A 20-year-old male Native American junior, who lived at home with his parents and reported binge drinking 10 times in the past year stated, "Yes. Students are stressed out and drinking 'relaxes' them. So they do it a lot. Not to mention wanting to have sexual relations without the awkward conversations and dating." While he had not had any alcohol in the past month, his perception was that the typical college student had used alcohol 20 times and that 99% of college students drank in the past month. Here, it appears that the student is justifying the use of binge drinking in order to accomplish the end goal of sexual gratification without the social customs that would ordinarily precipitate such behavior. It is of note that typically in

moral justification, the means are justified by the high moral ends. In this case, it seems that the ends of anonymous sexual gratification may be highly sought after, but not necessarily associated with morality.

In another case, a 23-year-old unaffiliated male junior, who lived by himself, reported having 24 drinks per episode 6 times in the past year and having binge drank 200 times in the past year. He also reported binge drinking 15 times in the past month and driving after at least one of those episodes. This student stated that, "As long as you don't do it every day, then it's OK," conflating daily drinking with binge drinking as the problematic behavior in question. Another participant of note was a 20-year-old female junior who lived at home with her parents. She reported having used alcohol 10 times in the past month but perceived that the typical student had used it 20 times in the past month. She reported having up to 30 drinks when she drank in the past month and a remarkable 60 drinks in one episode over the past year. While these numbers are not physically possible, she explains that, "Yes, many people try to drink a whole lot to impress others, especially a person that has never drank before and has told people they have in order to fit in." While it is obvious that she is partaking in excessive binge drinking, her response implies that she perceives this to be a problem for others, who are not used to heavy alcohol consumption, but not for herself. Due to her self-reported alcohol consumption patterns, one can surmise that she is not referring to herself as the person who drank excessively in order to fit in. Since she claims not to be drinking to impress others, she seems to be justifying her own behavior as not problematic. Displacement of responsibility and euphemistic labeling are mechanisms of moral disengagement that seems particularly fitting in both of these cases. The language used to describe the behavior is altered in order to make it sound better (euphemistic labeling) and responsibility for the actions in question is placed on someone other than the individual actually engaging in the behavior.

Previous studies primarily used quantitative approaches, which although beneficial, often leave researchers searching for more in-depth answers. This study utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the relationship between binge drinking behaviors among college students and the attitudes related to this behavior more thoroughly. A few previous studies

have posed similar questions but were exclusively quantitative in nature. One such study was conducted across an eighteen-month period and found that increased moral disengagement, increased alcohol-related expectancies and decreased perceived self-regulatory efficacy to resist peer pressure were all associated with increased binge drinking behaviors over time (Newton et al., 2014). However, due to the quantitative nature of the study, further insights from participants were not collected. A second study also used an online questionnaire as the major research tool to measure students' alcohol consumption and participants' beliefs regarding alcohol consumption in the college environment. While Ward et al. (2015) found a relationship between alcohol salience and social affiliations, their study was entirely quantitative in structure and focused more on eating and drunkorexia behaviors rather than binge drinking specifically.

Additionally, a third study of note used focus groups as the main method of data collection (Lyons et al., 2015). This qualitative study provided insight that helped to structure the methods used in the present study. Focus groups were used to explore participants' drinking behaviors and social network practices. The qualitative methods in this study allowed valuable insights into young adults drinking practices that can be used to promote health interventions (Lyons et al., 2015).

Study Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study explores the role that social influences have on college students' drinking behaviors. It illustrates that many of these students' attitudes and beliefs seem to be influenced by their perception of their peers' habits. The researchers posit that this influence may occur via the Social Learning Theory construct of moral disengagement. The data, both qualitative and quantitative, for this study was collected by means of an online survey administrator. This did not allow for the investigators to discuss participants' answers more at depth than what was provided through their response. More in depth qualitative data collected via focus groups or interviews could provide more thorough results. Further, the participants consisted of a convenience sample of students enrolled in a health and wellness course. Their current enrollment in such a course at the time of the study could have potentially influenced some of their responses. More research involving a wider variety of students and those attending univer-

sities across all areas of the country needs to be conducted in order to strengthen generalizability. As noted in the discussion, several participants exaggerated their responses. While a potential explanation grounded in Social Learning Theory is posited, more research needs to be conducted in order to provide further evidence.

Implications for Practice

There are a few practical implications of this study for interventions aimed at reducing binge drinking in colleges across the country. These findings can be used to help develop new programs for incoming freshman to decrease peer pressure and moral disengagement as students enter into college. Reinforcing values and morality rooted in society as a whole, rather than the insulated culture of a college campus, may be of benefit. For example, even though underage drinking among college students was found to be very widely accepted in this study, alcohol use is nevertheless illegal for those under the age of 21; it may be accepted within the campus culture, but is not accepted by society at large. Another potential application may be in support of encouraging student engagement and involvement in activities and organizations that do not involve alcohol. By becoming immersed in other types of activities, students are likely to be surrounded by peers who are engaging in behaviors that may be more beneficial to their health and well-being. In this way, modeling may lead to outcomes that are positive rather than negative.

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TABLE 1
Mean characteristics, binge drinking behaviors, and alcohol use perceptions of coded categories (SD)

	Age	Level	Highest # of drinks past year	Binge episodes past year	Binge episodes past month	Perceived typical number of drinks
Total Sample (N=286)	20.38 (4.713)	1.67 (.972)	6.32 (8.253)	8.37 (23.481)	1.65 (3.927)	5.99 (6.569)
Problem (n=191)	19.98 (3.540)	1.68 (.876)	5.86 (7.385)	5.14 (12.252)	1.52 (4.260)	6.28 (7.617)
Social norms (n=60)	19.95 (3.072)	1.75 (.895)	6.08 (6.619)	5.64 (11.070)	1.35 (2.399)	5.92 (3.381)
Peer pressure (n=25)	20.60 (4.103)	1.60 (.764)	5.12 (11.882)	3.56 (11.941)	1.28 (2.807)	6.28 (2.283)
Health (n=13)	20.92 (7.868)	1.69 (1.109)	5.38 (5.253)	3.15 (8.112)	0.77 (2.242)	6.23 (3.539)
Academics (n=23)	19.43 (1.647)	1.87 (1.058)	6.26 (7.617)	3.45 (6.696)	1.22 (2.628)	5.87 (4.975)
Decision Making (n=33)	20.06 (3.699)	1.52 (.795)	7.15 (6.119)	4.53 (8.020)	1.27 (2.226)	6.21 (3.435)
Too much freedom (n=21)	19.62 (1.987)	1.67 (.913)	5.81 (6.493)	12.15 (24.943)	1.76 (2.644)	9.95 (20.767)
None provided (n=16)	19.50 (2.098)	1.56 (0.629)	3.38 (6.120)	2.06 (4.725)	3.75 (12.418)	3.63 (12.418)
Not a Problem (n=37)	20.08 (5.356)	1.49 (.837)	10.84 (12.984)	28.03 (52.176)	3.08 (3.707)	6.14 (3.310)
Social norm (n=11)	18.82 (.874)	1.64 (.674)	8.18 (5.193)	9.64 (9.584)	1.82 (1.940)	7.09 (2.914)
None provided (n=10)	19.50 (2.321)	1.70 (1.252)	9.20 (12.994)	11.80 (31.144)	1.90 (2.283)	4.90 (4.581)
As long as it's controlled (n=6)	19.67 (1.966)	1.50 (.837)	11.67 (7.941)	67.50 (99.587)	5.00 (6.693)	7.67 (1.862)
Misunderstood (n=10)	22.30 (9.922)	1.10 (.316)	14.90 (20.251)	40.80 (48.803)	4.50 (3.536)	5.40 (2.547)
Unsure/Depends (n=12)	19.08 (1.240)	1.42 (.669)	5.92 (7.354)	7.92 (12.580)	0.83 (1.528)	5.50 (3.233)

*Note: Those who did not answer this particular question but did provide other data were still included in the total sample analysis.

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