

Student Perceptions of Alcohol Promotion on Campus

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ABSTRACT

The reduction or elimination of alcohol promotions and sponsorship on college campuses recently has been promoted as an important alcohol prevention strategy. However, there has been relatively little research exploring this area. The present study therefore examines student perceptions of alcohol promotion at a large university in the southwestern United States. Using survey data, this study found that students differed in their perceptions of alcohol promotion based on their drinking patterns. Implications of these findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Alcohol consumption and alcohol problems are common among college students (Presley, Meilman, & Lyerla, 1995; Wechsler, Dowdall, Maenner, Gledhill-Hyot, & Lee, 1998). In light of high profile alcohol-related deaths and riots at several campuses, media coverage concerning the drinking behaviors of college students has become commonplace. Taking these persisting, alcohol-related incidents on campuses into account, college administrators have rejuvenated their searches for preventive policies and programs to ameliorate the consequences of heavy alcohol consumption among their students.

Beyond the traditional approaches of education and secondary prevention (i.e., identifying and targeting high-risk groups for prevention), university officials and college prevention specialists have begun to develop environmental approaches to alcohol problems (DeJong, et al., 1998). DeJong et al. (p. 6) suggested

“traditional approaches to prevention have tacitly accepted the world as it is and then tried to teach students as individuals how to resist temptations. In contrast, the environmental management approach is a coordinated effort to change the world.” Environmental alcohol prevention approaches include strategies such as limiting alcohol promotion, training bartenders to serve alcohol responsibly, and price controls of alcoholic beverages.

Alcohol and other drug (AOD) prevention professionals working with college students have long questioned the propriety of alcohol promotion on college campuses. AOD prevention professionals often suggest that, in addition to sending mixed messages, alcohol promotions on college campuses directly or indirectly contribute to alcohol consumption and its attendant problems. Direct influences might include low-cost price promotions for local taverns or

liquor stores that make alcohol more accessible and encourage students to drink heavily (Erenberg & Hacker, 1997). Indirect influences can be conceptualized as alcohol industry sponsorship (for campus sporting events or bulletins) or as advertising that fosters a proalcohol-use environment on campus (Ryan & Mosher, 1991).

The research literature supports these views. Although the causal relationship between advertising and drinking behavior is not firmly established, relational studies have found that exposure to advertising is related to drinking

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behavior among young adults (Atkin, Neuendorf, & McDermott, 1983) and intentions to drink among children (Grube & Wallack, 1994). Specifically, Atkin et al. (1983) found a positive correlation between the amount of daily exposure to AOD ads and excessive alcohol consumption. Exposure to AOD ads was also correlated with drinking in hazardous situations, such as driving (Atkin et al., 1983).

Despite these findings, relatively little is known about the association between alcohol promotion that occurs on college campuses and the drinking behavior of college students. Many of the studies in this area have been qualitative or descriptive (Erenberg & Hacker, 1997; Ryan & Moshèr, 1991) or are over a decade old (Atkin et al., 1983). As the popularity of environmental prevention approaches increases, research concerning alcohol promotion is increasingly important. Consequently, the present study contributes to the alcohol prevention field by addressing the following research questions: (1) To what extent do college students perceive alcohol is promoted on campus? (2) To what extent do different alcohol consumption patterns vary with perceptions of alcohol promotion on campus?

This study is, to our knowledge, the first to examine student perceptions of alcohol promotion on campuses. The distinction between exposure to environmental stimuli and perceptions of environmental stimuli is subtle but important. From a social psychological perspective, one's perception or beliefs about the environment may influence behavior as much as the actual environment (Perkins, 1997). Recent studies on misperceptions of drinking norms (Perkins & Wechsler, 1996) have demonstrated the relationship between such beliefs and drinking patterns. Misperceptions of alcohol consumption norms in which students overestimate the actual norm are positively associated with consumption (Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). Perkins and Wechsler suggested that "perceiving a

permissive environment encourages students to drink more heavily than they otherwise would based on their personal attitudes" (p. 961). Thus, norms can be seen as developing from the variety of formal messages, including alcohol advertising, that are given to students concerning what is acceptable.

Method

To address the above research questions, survey data were collected in 1998 at a large urban university in southern California. A university-based social science research laboratory administered the survey using a random sample and telephone interview methodology. Trained interviewers conducted the telephone interviews and professional research staff monitored random interviews to ensure data quality. The average interview took 16 minutes ($SD=5.15$) to complete.

Given the questions of interest, the methodology employed was appropriate. Indeed, Babbie (1984) suggested telephone interviews might actually yield more valid results than face-to-face interviews when assessing sensitive topics. Furthermore, given that the study relied on self-reports of AOD use and problems, it is important to note that the validity of self-reports of AOD use has been established (Midanik, 1988).

Sample

The sampling frame consisted of undergraduate students enrolled at one university during the spring semester of 1998. Research staff conducted interviews with 403 randomly selected students. A random quota system for the variables of gender and class status was used to match the sample to the population. Students refusing to participate (12%) were randomly replaced.

Instrument

An original interview schedule was developed for this study. The instrument included several items from the short form of the Core Survey (Presely et al., 1995) including measures of AOD use and related problems. Presely and associ-

ates established the validity and reliability of the survey. In addition to the standard questions taken from the Core Survey, a series of questions concerning alcohol promotion were asked. The interview protocol also included several items measuring the contexts of student drinking (Clapp, Shillington, & Segars, 2000). The interview protocol was pilot tested and used in an earlier telephone survey in 1994. The investigators developed the perceptions of alcohol promotion questions specifically for this study.

Measures

The survey included four questions assessing alcohol promotion. Each of these items consisted of a 4-point Likert scale (1=not at all, 4=a great deal) concerning the extent to which alcohol was promoted on campus by the following entities: bars and nightclubs, grocery and liquor stores, bars and night clubs in Mexico (located within 50 miles of the study campus), and the alcohol beverage industry. A four-item scale was constructed to reflect the perceived extent of alcohol promotion on campus (Campus Promotion) by summing the four items assessing alcohol promotion for each case (Cronbach's $\alpha=.60$, valid value range=4-16).

To assess alcohol consumption, we queried the number of times respondents consumed five or more drinks at a single sitting during the past 2 weeks (binge drinking) as well as 30-day alcohol use. Consistent with Wechsler et al. (1998), we constructed a typology of alcohol consumption containing four categories. Abstainers were classified as those respondents who had not consumed alcohol in the year prior to the survey. Nonbinge drinkers were defined as those respondents who had consumed alcohol at least once in the past 30 days, but had never consumed five or more drinks in a single sitting. Occasional binge drinkers included respondents who had consumed five or more drinks in a single sitting one or two times in the 2 weeks before responding to our survey. Frequent binge drinkers

were those respondents who drank five or more drinks in a single sitting on three or more occasions in the 2 weeks prior to being surveyed.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics are presented for all variables of interest. Similar to Atkin et al. (1983), we analyzed students' perceptions of the extent alcohol is promoted on campus by their drinking patterns.

Results

Demographics of the sample and population are presented in Table 1, revealing that the sample generally reflected the characteristics of the study population. The sample slightly overrepresents white students and underrepresents minority students.

Students were asked to what extent they believed different establishments advertised alcohol on their campus (not presented in a table). When asked the extent to which students felt alcohol was promoted on campus by bars and clubs, 29.3% ($n=115$) of the students indicated that such promotion occurred a "great deal," whereas 36.4% ($n=143$) indicated that such promotion was "somewhat" prevalent. Bars and clubs in Mexico were perceived as advertising on campus "somewhat" (27.6%) or a "great deal" (20.0%) by nearly half of the respondents. Respondents most frequently indicated that they believed the alcohol beverage industry promoted alcohol on campus "somewhat" (29.0%, $n=112$) or "a little" (39.1%, $n=151$). In contrast, most students indicated that liquor stores and markets advertised alcohol on campus "a little" ($n=144$, 36.9%) or "not at all" ($n=138$, 35.4%).

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the Campus Promotion index by drinking patterns. As shown in the table, abstainers and nonbinge drinkers perceived there was more alcohol promotion on campus than their binge-drinking counterparts. Analysis of variance revealed statistically significant differences for drinking categories by Campus Promotion. Post hoc Scheffe tests revealed the following

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample and Population

Variable	Sample (N=401)		Population (N=23,772)	
Age	24.0 (6.75)		24.0 (6.27)	
Mean (SD)	22.0		22.3	
Median				
Race/ethnicity	N	%	N	%
American Indian	2	.5	251	1.1
African American	20	5.0	1293	5.4
Hispanic	76	19.0	4755	20.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	59	14.8	3606	15.2
White	218	54.5	10,681	44.9
Other	25	6.3	3185	13.4
Gender	N	%	N	%
Male	178	44.2	10,715	45.1
Female	225	55.8	13,057	54.9

differences: (1) abstainers differed from occasional binge drinkers (mean difference=1.4, $p=.009$) and 2) nonbinge drinkers differed from occasional binge drinkers (mean difference=1.3, $p=.023$).

Discussion and Conclusion

This descriptive study examined perceptions of alcohol promotion on a college campus at a large public university located in the southwestern United States. Using survey methodology, we were able to describe how students perceived alcohol promotion both in terms of their drinking behavior and the extent to which they perceived it occurred on campus.

Interestingly, abstainers and nonbinge drinkers expressed the perception that alcohol was promoted to a greater extent on

campus than did respondents classified within the binge-drinking categories. The survey did not afford us with the opportunity to determine the reasons for this difference. Previous research, however, has suggested that about a third of all students would eliminate alcohol from their campus if given a choice (Presely et al., 1995). Other studies (Wechsler, Moeykens, Davenport, Castillio, & Hansen, 1995) found that heavy drinkers often adversely impact nondrinkers and light drinkers (e.g., by disturbing study time, etc). It is therefore possible that abstainers and nonbinge drinkers in our survey are so affected by the alcohol consumption of their peers that they are more sensitive to alcohol promotion on campus.

Perkins (1997) suggested behavior might

TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics for Extent of Alcohol Promotion Variable by Drinking Pattern

Drinking Category	Perceived Alcohol Promotion	
	Mean	SD
Abstainers ($n=131$)	10.0	2.5
Nonbinge drinkers ($n=135$)	9.9	2.6
Occasional binge drinkers ($n=49$)	8.6	2.5
Frequent binge drinkers ($n=50$)	8.9	2.5

*Notes: $F=5.7$, $p=.001$. Total $N=365$ due missing values and list-wise deletion of cases.

be influenced by perceptions of the social environment regardless of the actual environment. Consistent with this, previous research has shown that misperceptions of drinking norms (Perkins, 1997; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996) contribute to alcohol consumption. Thus, although we are unable to assess the disparity between actual alcohol promotion and perceptions of that promotion, perceptions of alcohol promotion are theoretically important to consider when modeling student alcohol consumption. The findings presented here are consistent with this notion.

Although the above findings shed some light on this issue, the present study has some important limitations. First, we were unable to account for variance in the Campus Promotion index based on exposure to specific types of on-campus promotion. Different media types of promotion were not distinguished or measured in this study. Therefore, it is unknown whether newspaper ads might have a different impact on student drinking behavior than flyers or handbills. Future studies would benefit from monitoring and examining exposure to different outlets for campus promotion.

Second, the interview schedule used to collect the data used in this study has not been fully evaluated for validity and reliability. Items included in the interview schedule were taken from the Core Survey, which does have established reliability and validity (Presley et al., 1995). However, the entire Core was not used in this study, nor were the questions from it used in a self-administered format. It is unclear how the interview format might have affected the reliability of the instrument. Internal reliability analysis of the alcohol promotion items indicate an adequate level of reliability (see Nunnally, 1967) given that the study was exploratory in nature.

Although the sample used in the present study adequately represents the study population, the study population is somewhat older than the typical college population. Given that younger students are more likely than their older peers to be

binge drinkers (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000), the age of the study population is important to consider. Replications of this study, or studies addressing similar issues with more typical college students, would be worthwhile.

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