

Three exploratory studies of college theme parties

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Abstract

Introduction and Aims. The objectives of this exploratory research were to (1) explore the characteristics and risks associated with college theme parties, (2) assess differences in risk associated with college theme parties compared to non-theme parties and (3) to assess differences in risk associated with risqué theme parties as compared to non-risqué theme parties. **Design and methods.** We used a mixed methods design. Results are presented from three exploratory studies of alcohol consumption in college theme parties: (1) four qualitative focus groups of students who have attended such events, (2) a web-based survey and (3) a multi-level (observational, survey, breath blood alcohol samples) study of 226 college parties, 29 of which were themed events. Focus group participants included a convenience sample of 17 college students aged 18–24 years; participants for the web survey included a convenience sample of 407 college students; participants for the multi-level study of college parties included 1725 randomly selected individuals at college parties. **Results.** Themes tended to be highly sexualised. Compared to non-themed parties, theme parties have been observed to be more rowdy, louder, involve drinking games, feature kegs and feature hard liquor. **Discussion and Conclusions.** Themed parties are associated with heavy drinking and are consistent with environments sought by heavy drinkers. As a result, themed parties are marked by a greater number of alcohol-related problems. Further research is needed to understand more clearly the risks involved in themed and risqué themed events. [Clapp JD, Ketchie JM, Reed MB, Shillington AM, Lange JE, Holmes MR. Three exploratory studies of college theme parties. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2008;27:509–518]

Introduction

The infamous Toga party, immortalised in the film *Animal House*, has long represented an archetypal college party—a wild sexualised bacchanal. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in recent years such ‘themed’ parties have taken on more explicitly sexualised and gendered themes (e.g. ‘Pimp and Ho’, ‘Lingerie,’ etc.). To date, such parties have not been studied systematically as they relate to alcohol consumption or alcohol-related problems.

The examination of drinking settings has both applied and basic importance. From a prevention perspective, environmental interventions have become increasingly popular in recent years. Conceptually, aetiological explanations of heavy drinking have

tended to focus much more heavily on individual-level characteristics than environmental factors. The small body of literature examining private parties as a distinct drinking context suggests that in such events high proportions of students drink heavily [1]. Using multi-level modelling, Demers and colleagues illustrated that both individual and situational factors contribute to alcohol consumption [2].

Further examination of such themed parties is warranted, given that almost half of all alcohol consumption by college students occurs in private parties [3]. Further, given heavy drinking is associated with unwanted and unsafe sexual behaviour within this population [4–7], the sexualised nature of such events is of particular interest.

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Table 1. Bivariate and logistic regression model for themed and non-themed events

	Bivariate results			LR model results		
	Themed	Not themed	χ^2	AOR	95%CI	
Environmental characteristics						
Food available	50.90%	65.00%	14.287*	0.88	0.39	1.99
Paid bartender	14.80%	29.30%	18.818*	0.30	0.09	0.95
Many people intoxicated	84.20%	61.70%	36.942*	1.05	0.42	2.62
Free alcohol available	55.90%	44.90%	8.002†	2.37	0.97	5.78
Large party	66.10%	30.50%	92.293*	3.66	1.52	8.85
BYOB	21.00%	14.30%	5.746‡	1.06	0.37	2.99
Witnessed a fight	14.00%	6.00%	16.015*	2.41	0.81	7.14
Cops broke up party	15.40%	4.20%	34.829*	1.54	0.39	6.06
Saw someone get sick	36.00%	25.00%	10.559†	1.18	0.51	2.73
Illegal drugs available	27.20%	23.80%	0.863			
Drinking games present	31.40%	27.60%	1.097			
Reported outcomes from event						
RWDD	2.20%	3.80%	1.279			
Get into fight	0.40%	1.00%	0.7			
Got injured	2.20%	1.30%	0.981			
DUI	12.30%	15.60%	1.045			
Felt drunk	58.60%	52.80%	1.742			
Felt nauseous	8.80%	4.80%	4.465‡	2.30	0.45	11.76
Hung-over the next day	19.10%	17.90%	0.131			
Reported behaviours						
Smoked pot	10.20%	10.60%	0.032			
Used other drugs	5.30%	2.60%	4.142†	5.95	1.19	30.30
Played drinking games	11.20%	14.50%	1.59			

* $p < 0.001$; † $p < 0.01$; ‡ $p < 0.05$. BYOB: bring your own booze; RWDD: riding with drinking driver; DUI: driving under the influence; AOR: adjusted odds ratio; CI: confidence interval.

students were required to read a description of the study and provide consent to participate. Each survey ran for approximately 3 weeks during the regular semester. The web-based survey queried a random sample of undergraduate students attending a large public university in the southwestern United States about student achievement, lifestyles, alcohol and other drug behaviour. We originally drew random samples of 4500–6000 students each semester. Due to the poor response rates (<35%), we treated these data as if from a convenience sample. Given that we were not attempting to estimate population parameters in this study, but to understand more clearly this emergent social drinking context, this sampling approach is appropriate. Across the three semesters of data collection, 1634 students completed the survey. Respondents accessed the survey using their student ID, ensuring that each student took the survey only once per semester. For human subjects protection identifiers (including student ID number) were stripped from this data; therefore, it is impossible to determine the number of students that may have been sampled more than once.

Demographic measures in the survey included: age, gender, race/ethnicity, recent semester's grade point

average (GPA). Substance use questions included measures of maximum past 28 days, maximum past 2 weeks, past year and month drug use questions. The survey included a series of items including the last occasion attended where alcohol was available (last event) and the last themed event they attended. Questions in the last event section were used to compare themed events to non-themed events.

Demographic variables and drinking variables were examined (drinks per occasion, maximum number of drinks in the past 28 days, maximum number of drinks in the past 2 weeks, usual number of drinks) by semester. There were no statistical differences between survey waves on previous semester's GPA; however, discrepancies between demographics and drinking variables existed by semester. Age, race and gender were therefore controlled for in the analysis (April 2005 had fewer male participants, and April 2006 had older participants and fewer white participants). The three data sets were collapsed into a single dataset. The variance between semesters cannot be explained by any one event and may give additional information about the nature of themed events.

Given our exploratory purposes, survey items were modified and added after each wave of data collection;

At larger parties, we interviewed as many partygoers as possible in 30 minutes; based on head counts, we averaged surveying 34.4% of the students attending these larger parties. The refusal rate within small parties was 6.0% and in large parties 11.6%.

This study included a self-report survey as well as an observational component. The partygoer survey included: demographics, length of stay at party, length of drinking event, number of drinks consumed, drinking plans for evening, places alcohol has been consumed prior to party, drinks consumed at party, how alcohol was obtained, whether drinking games were played and whether problems occurred at the party. Additionally, breath samples were collected from partygoers using handheld BrAC test units (CMI Intoxilyzer SD-400; CMI, Inc., Owensboro, KY, USA). Units were manufactured between 2000 and 2003 and were calibrated monthly. All units were programmed to conceal BrAC values (respondents could call the following day to obtain BrAC). In order to keep breath samples discreet, the BrAC test units were programmed to clear a sample prior to allowing a new sample.

While respondents were completing the survey, two observers independently drew a map of the physical party layout and assessed: number of people present, party theme, rowdy behaviour, loud music, drinking games, illicit drug availability, types of alcohol present and evidence of any alcohol-related problems. The average inter-rater reliability coefficient across all observed variables was 0.77 (average agreement across all parties and observations was 88.4%).

Results

Study 1

The descriptive classification gives general background information on themed events within this college community. Participants described there have been recent increases in the frequency of themed parties. Similarly, these events have become increasingly popular among college student partygoers. The parties are marketed through word of mouth, lending an air of safety because all participants are friends and acquaintances. Common party themes were noted and incorporated into ongoing research (study 2).

One important aspect of the environment category is the type and availability of alcohol. Participants reported alcohol consumption at themed events typically exceeds that of non-themed events. This is due probably to the increased availability of alcohol, which respondents said was generally provided free at themed events. They also suggested that hosts of themed events usually offer hard liquor and mixed drinks, while beer is offered typically at regular parties;

I think there is more of a variety [of alcohol], usually at themed parties they have a lot of mixed drinks and a bar. But other parties it is just, kind of more like a keg, so all beer (21–24-year-old female).

I think they are more organised, so they might bring more alcohol (21–24-year-old male).

Women said that they engaged in pre-party drinking while preparing for themed parties. Such drinking typically was 'to get drunk'. Consistent with this purposeful intoxication, female students suggested that themed parties were nights to 'go wild'.

... you kind of want to be drunk when you get there; like, for us we will start drinking at our house when we are getting ready: take a shot here and there, and then go to the place and have more drinks. And its not even beer...but take a couple shots when you get there, like, you are already drunk... I know I am more apt to get drunker [sic] than I would going to a keg party or a house party because I am like drinking hard alcohol and I am trying to get drunk (21–24-year-old female).

Respondents described theme parties as being very large and occurring most often at private homes or apartments. Students reported that theme parties are broken up by police more often than regular parties. The students attributed increased police attention to the mixture of increased alcohol consumption, a large number of people and the costumes. Given police attention, students do not limit themselves to one party or themed event per night. Additionally, the absence of enough alcohol may motivate students to seek out another party.

Especially at a themed party, you know that... there's going to be a big party, there's going to be more alcohol, because once the alcohol is [gone] people want to leave and they want to find another place that has alcohol. When it's done they move on (18–20-year-old male).

Hosts regulate themed event attendance to boost the proportion of women to men. Given the gender imbalance, males reported being motivated to attend these events. In order to attend a themed event, males usually bring something additional to offer, typically women or alcohol.

Well the lingerie one I went into to... a bunch of guys said that there was this rule that there should be more girls than guys in the party so they do monitor how much guys are in the party and how many girls are in the party (18–20-year old male).

really want to dress up then they do or they don't. I think guys get away with it easier (18-20-year-old male).

In addition, groups discussed the role of themed parties in facilitating interactions between acquaintances. Because these parties are marketed through word of mouth, everyone at the party is assumed to be an acquaintance. This and the theme aids in facilitating interactions between partygoers.

Study 2

A majority (65.8%) of respondents had attended a themed party at least once, with nearly half (48.4%) having attended such an event in the past year. Commonly reported themes for these parties and prevalence by last event attended are presented in Table 3. Theme parties were located mainly in private homes and apartments (63.7%), followed by Greek-letter organisation houses (24.2%). Those who had attended a themed event were on average much younger [mean standard deviation; SD) = 20.90 (2.38) years] than those who had not [mean (SD) = 22.18 (5.20) years, $p < 0.001$], suggesting that such events are a recent phenomenon.

Last drinking event questions were used to compare themed events to non-themed events. These events were not restricted to private parties; bars and restaurant promotions were included. Respondents reported significantly higher drinking rates at themed vs. non-themed events, averaging 3.09 drinks for themed and 1.98 for not themed ($t = 5.165$, $p < 0.001$). Heavy episodic drinking rates at last event were also significantly higher ($p < 0.001$) at themed parties (26.4%) compared to non-themed events (12.4%). The mean reported size of themed parties was 89.83 people,

significantly larger than the mean size (46.16) of non-themed events ($t = -3.610$, $p < 0.001$).

Bivariate comparison suggests that the environment is different between themed and non-themed parties: nine of 11 measures were significantly different between the party types (Table 1). At the respondent level, there was a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between feeling nauseous [8.8% (95% confidence interval: CI: 6.9-10.7%) themed vs. 4.8% (95 CI: 3.4-6.2%) not-themed] and using drugs other than marijuana [5.3% themed (95% CI: 3.9-6.7%) vs. 2.6% (95% CI: 1.6-3.6%) not themed] when comparing themed and non-themed events.

Correlates with a significant bivariate relationship were entered stepwise as predictors into a binary logistic model with party type (themed/not) as the dependent variable. Demographic variables were entered into the first step and include gender, age, race (white/non-white) and number of drinks consumed during the event. Dichotomous environmental, behavioural and outcome variables with a significant bivariate relationship were added into the second step. Significant variables within the model included: paid bartender present, being at a large party, witnessing a fight, illegal drugs available and smoking marijuana (Table 1). Based on adjusted odds ratios, themed events have three times greater odds than non-themed events to be large and for partygoers to witness a fight. The odds of drugs being reported were 2.6 times higher for non-themed parties in contrast to themed parties; however, our data indicate that marijuana use was greater at themed events than it was at non-themed events.

Sexualised themed events were defined by the risqué ranking scale (see Methods, study 2) and included: lingerie, anything but clothes, toga, pimp & ho, Vegas, cowboy & cowgirl and pajama jam. Parties were divided

Table 3. Common themes by party location

	Home (<i>n</i> = 341)	Fraternity or sorority (<i>n</i> = 122)	Bar or club (<i>n</i> = 18)	Elsewhere (<i>n</i> = 33)	Total (<i>n</i> = 514)
Anything but clothes	8	2	0	0	10
Cowboy/cowgirl	12	3	0	0	15
Decade (1960s, 1970s, etc.)	11	4	1	2	18
Halloween	202	47	16	19	284
Hawaiian	24	7	0	2	33
Highlighter	15	14	0	0	29
Holiday	9	0	1	0	10
Lingerie	6	7	0	0	13
Pajama jam	7	10	0	4	21
Pimp & ho ^a	30	6	0	4	40
Pirate	4	4	0	1	9
Toga	12	13	0	1	26
Vegas	1	5	0	0	6

^aPimp and ho category collapsed; 'CEO and office ho', 'Golf pro and tennis ho', etc. included.

occur internationally. In sum, our studies suggest that theme parties tend to be large, sexualised events with high levels of alcohol availability. Interestingly, our data from study 1 suggest that women begin drinking earlier in the day to prepare for such events. This finding is supported in study 3, where we noted a cross-level gender interaction with women drinking more than men at such events.

Indeed the issue of gender seems to be particularly salient to theme parties. One interesting aspect of these events is that women seem to embrace being objectified. That is, women ostensibly place themselves on display while males attending such events put little effort into costumes. One potential explanation for this behaviour is the self-objectification theory, which posits that females can be triggered to internalise the objectification of women and apply this viewpoint to themselves; this is said to be triggered by salient contexts [27]. Additionally, recent research [28–31] suggests that the current college-aged birth cohort has unique psychological attributes that may be useful in explaining the person-level characteristics associated with attending and drinking at sexually themed events.

Characteristics of the current college-aged birth cohort often represent the current cultural environment [32] with each birth cohort having distinct personality and behavioural characteristics. The current college-aged birth cohort differs from previous cohorts in levels of narcissism, locus of control and sexual behaviour [28–31]. A recent meta-analysis indicates that college students today exhibit significantly more narcissistic characteristics than 24 years ago [28,31]. Cynicism toward cultural and behavioural norms is a product of the self-centred personality [29]. Cynicism may be related to decreased conformity to social rules. Few behaviours are considered taboo in this birth cohort because all behaviour is individualistic. This birth cohort is more sexually active and at a younger age than previously studied birth cohorts in the past 56 years [30]. This is clear from the numerous books for women on the subject of 'hooking-up', including *The Hookup Handbook*, *The Happy Hook-up: A Single Girl's Guide to Casual Sex* and *Hooking up: A Girls' All-Out Guide to Sex & Sexuality*. In fact, women today act more like men in previous birth cohorts. There was a significant increase in masculine characteristics exerted by women between 1973 and 1995 [33].

These shifts in personality characteristics may be interacting with drinking contexts to form a high-risk environment for females, particularly in regard to self-objectification. Future research is needed to examine more clearly how such shifts in personality characteristics might impact and interact with drinking contexts.

The studies presented above have some key strengths. We were able to use qualitative methods to inform quantitative data collection and observational

methods to complement both approaches. Combined, our exploratory studies yield a foundation for understanding of themed drinking events. These events tend to be large, rowdy and sexualised and result in heavy drinking. They are the types of environments that Lange & Voas [10] and Clapp *et al.* [3] found to be sought out by heavy drinkers.

There are a few limitations and areas of future inquiry to be addressed. First, the studies presented here are limited to one university and a surrounding community in southern California. Only the observational study of student parties has external validity for that population. Further research using random samples in other university settings is needed to understand this drinking context more clearly.

Secondly, the studies presented here are descriptive and only begin to explore the potential impact that themed settings have on drinking behaviour and potential negative outcomes. Further research, using more refined measures and prospective designs, are needed to better understand this phenomenon.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the reasons students plan and attend such themed events might vary widely both within and across universities. For instance, a recent *New York Times* story chronicled 'naked' partying at elite eastern universities [34]. Several of the students interviewed offered fairly sophisticated reasons for such events. An e-mail for a naked party invited students to 'join us in refusing to comply with a culture that tells us to hide our body, to be ashamed of its scents, secretions, curves, and hair, to conceal those parts that have been dealt sexual connotations' [34]. In contrast, the students in our study suggested that risqué events are simply an excuse to create an exciting party atmosphere. The popular press has begun to address the issue of themed parties [35] as well as changes in costume dress for women [36]. These articles suggest that there may be an increase in the trend to sexualise drinking environments. Research in multiple settings and types of universities is needed to understand these differences, if they truly exist.

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