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# The Relationship Between Self Perceived Versus Peer Perceived Popularity and Alcohol Consumption in University Students

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**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF PERCEIVED VERSUS PEER PERCEIVED  
POPULARITY AND ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION IN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

by

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Department of Psychology

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment

Of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelors of Arts

in

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## Abstract

Previous research suggests that alcohol use and abuse is a growing problem for emerging adults (Lyons & Willott, 2008). Emerging adults typically attend social events with their natural drinking groups (Lange, Devos-Comby, Moore, Daniel, & Homer, 2011). Examining popularity level within the natural drinking group is critical for predicting heavy episodic drinking patterns. The objective of this study was to examine the association between group members' peer-nominated popularity and heavy alcohol consumption and whether this association is heightened among individuals aware of their popular position. The present study provided 81 university students ( $M_{age}= 19.40$  years; 69% female) recruited within their natural drinking groups ( $N=21$ ) with a longitudinal online survey. At two different time points 2 months apart, participants ranked their group members' popularity, including their own. There were two main hypotheses. First, peer-nominated popularity at Time 1 will predict increased heavy episodic drinking at Time 2 (while controlling for drinking at Time 1). Second, self-reported popularity will moderate the aforementioned relationship. Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) was used for data analysis, which found that self-perceived popularity at Time 1 was a predictor of alcohol consumption at Time 2. However, there were no significant results for peer-perceived popularity. Implications and future directions are discussed along with possible prevention measures for university guidance departments.

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## Introduction

The most prevalent health-related problem universities encounter is based around alcohol abuse by students (Syre, Martino-McAllister, & Vanada, 1997). Binge drinking and alcohol-related problems among students at traditional 4-year universities have been well documented (Sheffield, Boca, & Goldman, 2005). Alcohol use and abuse is a growing problem for emerging adults, and especially common among 18 to 24 year olds (Lyons & Willott, 2008). This is partially due to a pop culture that glorifies the use of alcohol at university (Neighbors et al., 2007) and emerging adult females' recent desire to compete with male drinking patterns (Lyons & Willott, 2008). Prince (1998) found that the majority of university students (88%) have consumed alcohol and almost half of those students (44%) were classified as heavy episodic drinkers. Heavy episodic drinking is defined as 5 or more drinks in one sitting for men, and 4 or more drinks in one sitting for women (Neighbors et al., 2007). Despite increasing prevention methods, alcohol abuse and heavy episodic drinking rates have remained constant among university students (Wechsler et al., 2002). Heavy episodic drinking consequences include, but are not limited to, poor academic performance, physical fights, unintentional injuries, other substance abuse, and death (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo & Lee, 1990). Wechsler et al (1990) also reported that, relative to those who do not engage in heavy episodic drinking, those who do were more likely to miss class, injure themselves, and negatively affect non-binge drinking students.

In the adolescent literature, teens with higher popularity among their peers are more likely to engage in heavy episodic drinking (e.g., Fujimoto & Valente, 2015). Further, ample research has shown a relationship between adolescent popularity and alcohol consumption (Alexander et al., 2001, Gyll et al., 2014; Mayeux et al., 2008, Valente et al., 2005). Popular individuals in a group are those who other peers consider “cool”, who other group members look

up to and may idolize and who tend to have the most visible and prestigious social positions (Mathys et al., 2013). Thus, popular teens have been shown to be more likely to adopt behavior consistent with peer group norms to establish their social identity and to reinforce their desired position in the peer hierarchy (Michell & Amos, 1997). Allen et al. (2005) reported that higher levels of popularity are associated with higher levels of deviance and stronger socialization by the peer group. Popular adolescents tend to succumb to high social pressures and experience greater social influence than less popular teens (Schwartz and Gorman, 2011). That being said, it follows that in peer groups where norms for drinking are strong, popular group members engage in the most alcohol consumption. Furthermore, heavy alcohol consumption tends to be perceived as particularly normative among youth in Western culture and is associated with popularity-related traits like appearing sociable, cool, tough, and powerful, thus potentially strengthening the popularity-heavy drinking link (Demant & Jarvinen, 2011).

There is a well-established literature linking popularity to drinking in adolescence, but research focusing on emerging adulthood is lacking. This research is important because emerging adulthoods who live away from home (e.g., most students who attend university) are surely surrounded by peers with whom they create friend groups in which popularity hierarchies form (e.g., Dumas et al., 2014). Further, the more time surrounded by friends implies stronger and closer-knit friend groups. Additionally, as demonstrated above, emerging adults in university settings have some of the highest heavy episodic drinking rates. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how popularity among peers in emerging adulthood may predict their heavy episodic drinking patterns.

If popular emerging adults act most in line with group norms, we should see that within the peer groups with whom they consume alcohol (their natural drinking groups), those with the



highest popularity status would likely engage in the most alcohol consumption. Natural drinking group is a term coined by Lange et al (2006) referring to a group of friends who drink and attend social events involving alcohol consumption together. Dumas et al. (2014) examined a construct similar to popularity – emerging adults’ status in their natural drinking group – defined as the extent to which they had power and influence over group decisions. They found that higher status group members, as nominated by their peers, engaged in heavier drinking compared to lower status group members. Higher status peers were also shown to be more encouraging of other group members’ alcohol consumption (Dumas et al., 2014). This study, however, used a cross sectional design and thus the degree to which status actually predicted heavy drinking behaviour remains unknown. More research is needed to examine whether emerging adults’ position in their natural drinking group actually predicts heavy alcohol consumption over time.

Further, past research has varied in terms of whether popularity has been measured using a peer-nominated or self-reported approach. According to Reitz et al (2016), self-report measures are useful for investigating internal processes, however they are subject to biases. Further, they suggest that peer nominated measures provide a more objective and accurate view of popularity. On the other hand, other researchers have suggested that self-perceived popularity may be more important in the peer influence process than peer-nominated popularity (Teunissen, 2012). For instance, Cillessen and Mayeux (2004) found that if adolescents are aware of their social power, they may be more likely to take advantage of the social protection of their group and act more in line with group norms, whereas if they are not aware of their status they may feel less invested and not engage as heavily in the group norms. Cillessen and Mayeux also proposed that only if individuals are aware of their social power will they be more likely to engage in behaviors that perpetuate or increase their social position. Therefore, it is possible that the association between

peer-nominated popularity and heavy alcohol consumption will be heightened among individuals who are aware of their popular positions among their peers.

The present study will focus on natural drinking groups at the university level. I hypothesize that peer-nominated popularity at Time 1 will predict increased heavy episodic drinking at Time 2 (while controlling for drinking at Time 1). Second, I predict that self-reported popularity will moderate the aforementioned relationship. In other words, when participants score high on self-reported popularity, peer-perceived popularity should not matter as much in predicting heavy episodic drinking. In contrast, when participants report low self-reported popularity, the relationship between peer perceived popularity and heavy episodic drinking should be stronger.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

There were 81 participants at Time 1. Participants were students of the University of Western Ontario and affiliated colleges. Participants consisted of 69% female and 31% male students. There was a total of 21 drinking groups recruited. Eight of the 21 drinking groups were composed of both females and males. Five of the 21 groups were all male, and 8 were all female. Participants ranged from 17 to 27 years old with the average age of 19.40 years ( $SD = 1.66$ ). The criteria for eligibility in the study were that participants must have a group with whom they attend social drinking events and at least one member of the group consumes alcohol. Lange et al. (2011) defined these groups as being natural drinking groups. Natural drinking groups are composed of 3 to 8 people who typically attend social drinking events together. The group sizes in the current study ranged from 3-7 members per group. Most participants reported to be Caucasian (64%) with 3.7% participants identifying as East Indian, 1.9% as Asian, and 5.6% identified as other. Twenty-five percent of participants did not report their ethnicity.

## **Procedure**

Participants were recruited via posters around Huron University Campus and at a booth at the school social, which occurred in November 2015. All participants who were recruited into the study received an email in November asking them to confirm their membership within their natural drinking group. Once everyone in the group had confirmed membership, a follow up email was sent that contained a link to Survey 1. In the e-mail, participants were given a unique ID number, which served to link their Survey 1 data to their subsequent data and to their respective natural drinking group members' data. The first page of the survey consisted of an information page, followed by the consent form. Personal information provided on the consent form was not saved to the same spreadsheet as the survey data. Following consent form completion, participants entered their ID number and then completed the survey. Participants had two weeks to complete the survey, which took approximately 45 minutes to finish. Reminder emails were sent to group members who had not yet completed the survey.

In January 2016, the same participants received a second e-mail with a link to complete Survey 2 and a reminder of their ID number. The second survey contained similar measures to Survey 1 (minus demographic information) and took approximately 45 minutes to finish. The survey measures included measures of demographic information, details of natural drinking group structure, rankings of group members' popularity, individual and group substance use and other measures not related to the present study.

## **Measures**

**Popularity.** Participants were asked to rank the members of their peer group, including themselves from the person who is the most popular to the person who is the least popular. The measure was used to indicate how they perceive themselves in terms of popularity within the

group. This measure was also used to indicate how popular other group members perceived them to be. Self-reported popularity was calculated as the inverse of the participant's self-nominated ranking in the group divided by the group size. Peer-nominated popularity was calculated as the inverse of the participant's average rank as determined by their group members divided by the group size. Higher scores on both measures indicate greater popularity within the group.

**Alcohol consumption.** Participants were provided with a graphic indicating what one Canadian standard drink consists of and were asked the following questions: "Have you ever in your life consumed an alcoholic drink?" and "In the past 2 months (60 days), how many days did you use any kind of alcohol? Gotten drunk or had 5 or more drinks (or 4 or more drinks for women)?" Heavy episodic drinking was measured as participants' frequency score on the latter question.

## **Analysis**

Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) was used for data analysis. One assumption of linear regression is that participants' scores must be independent of each other. In the current study, participants' scores were not independent as they were participating with their drinking group members. HLM accounts for this interdependent or nested data. In my HLM model, individual heavy episodic drinking at Time 2 was predicted by peer perceived and self-perceived popularity at Time 1. Also, to test the hypothesis that self-reported popularity will moderate the relationship between peer-nominated popularity and heavy episodic drinking, an interaction term between peer and self-reported popularity was included. Control variables (Time 1 heavy episodic drinking and gender) were also examined.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 gives the descriptive statistics for heavy episodic drinking and popularity measures. The majority of participants (97%) reported consuming alcohol at least once in the past 60 days. Alcohol consumption at Time 2 ranged from 0 to 40 days in the last 60 days. The number of days with reported engaging in heavy episodic drinking (HED) in the past two months ranged from 0 to 30 days, with the majority of participants (95%) reporting at least one HED episode. Gender differences were examined through two independent samples *t*-tests. Men tended to report more frequent alcohol consumption ( $M = 14.10$ ,  $SD = 11.58$ ) than women ( $M = 8.31$ ,  $SD = 5.21$ ),  $t(68) = 2.90$ ,  $p = .005$ . No significant difference for gender was found for individual heavy episodic drinking.

Pearson correlations between popularity variables indicated that self-perceived popularity and peer perceived popularity are positively correlated but are distinct constructs (Table 2). A Paired Samples *t*-test between heavy episodic drinking at Time 1 ( $M = 6.57$ ,  $SD = 6.30$ ) and HED at Time 2 ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 5.58$ ) indicate that there is not a significant difference in drinking patterns between the two time points,  $t(88) = 1.17$ ,  $p = 0.24$ .

### Hypothesis Testing

As shown in Table 3, the HLM model revealed that self-perceived popularity at Time 1 is a predictor of HED at Time 2. Peer-perceived popularity was not a predictor of heavy episodic drinking, nor was the interaction term between self and peer reported popularity. The results also indicated no gender differences in HED at Time 2. Thus, it appears that regardless of how your peers rank you, what you believe your ranking to be is what matters.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Binge Drinking and Popularity Measures*

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	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Heavy Episodic Drinking Time 1	6.49	6.31
Self-Perceived Popularity Time 1	0.59	0.23
Peer Perceived Popularity Time 1	0.63	0.24
Heavy Episodic Drinking Time 2	5.65	5.21
Self-Perceived Popularity Time 2	0.64	0.26
Peer Perceived Popularity Time 2	0.61	0.25

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Table 2

*Pearson Correlation Between Popularity Variables*

	Peer Perceived Popularity Time 1	Self Perceived Popularity Time 1	Peer Perceived Popularity Time 2	Self-Perceived Popularity Time 2
Peer Perceived Popularity Time 1	-			
Self-Perceived Popularity Time 1	0.25*	-		
Peer Perceived Popularity Time 2	0.73**	0.24*	-	
Self-Perceived Popularity Time 1	0.39**	0.48**	0.45**	-

Note. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 3

*Hierarchical Linear Model with Self and Peer Perceived Popularity at Time 1 Predicting Heavy Episodic Drinking at Time 2*

	<i>B</i>	SE	t	<i>p</i>
Intercept	7.28	2.1	3.47	0.002
Self-Perceived Popularity	5.35	2.17	2.47	0.016
Peer-Nominated Popularity	-1.62	1.67	-0.97	0.336
Alcohol Consumption	0.42	0.09	4.74	<0.001
Gender	-0.96	1.01	-0.95	0.35



## Discussion

It appears that it is not about how popular you are, but rather how popular you *think* you are. The current research hypothesized that among university student drinking group members, peer-nominated popularity at Time 1 would predict increased drinking at Time 2 and that self-reported popularity would moderate this relationship. Neither hypothesis was supported. Rather, the data indicated that group members with higher self-reported status at Time 1 increased their drinking over time. In other words, those who perceived themselves as more popular relative to others in their natural drinking group increased their heavy episodic drinking (HED) in the future months, regardless of peer-nominated popularity. Therefore, peer evaluations of popularity may not hold as much significance as once believed. Rather, it appears that individuals who *perceive* themselves as being popular, regardless of *actual* popularity status may be at an increased risk for heavy episodic drinking.

This finding is consistent with research conducted by Teunissen (2012) who argues that self-perceived popularity is more important in the peer influence process than peer-nominated popularity. It is also consistent with the results of Cillessen and Mayeux (2004), who found that if youth are aware of their social power and enjoy its benefits, they may engage in behaviors that perpetuate or increase their status (Mayeux & Cillessen, 2008). As mentioned previously, HED is a behaviour that is associated with popularity-related traits in emerging adulthood and that young people may use it to maintain their favorable social positions (Demant & Jarvinen, 2011). However, if youth do not see themselves as popular within the group, they may not engage in status-related behaviors because they do not feel they have the social power to do so effectively.

In a similar vein, researchers have found a link between self-perceived popularity and aggression (Mayeux & Cillessen, 2008). Teens who felt more popular relative to their peers

tended to be more aggressive. One reason for this might be due to the lack of fear of negative consequences due to their high perceived popularity status. This reasoning can be used in the current study as well. It can be said that those who perceive themselves as high in popularity may see themselves as more resistant to the consequences of heavy drinking. For instance, due to their perceived social influence and power, they may be less concerned about the negative social outcomes of drinking consequences (e.g., having group members be angry with them or exclude them because of something they did while intoxicated) or feel more confident that their group would look out for them when faced with the consequences of drinking (e.g., backing them up in a bar fight). Thus, a next step would be to look at self-reported status as a predictor of drinking consequences.

Several limitations must be addressed when interpreting the present findings. Contrary to hypothesis, the analysis of the data collected in this study resulted in no significant relationship between peer-nominated popularity at Time 1 and HED at Time 2. The finding suggests a lack of relationship between peer-reported popularity in the group and heavy drinking. This result is surprising due to the vast literature on peer influence, specifically in adolescence and emerging adulthood, as well as prior research linking peer-nominated popularity to popularity in adolescence (Arnett, 2005). Thus, the results may be an artifact of the sample tested. It is possible that if more participants had been tested, different results might have been obtained. Only 21 natural drinking groups were used, which may partially explain the failure to reach significant results. Due to the vast amount of literature explaining the effect group norms have on young adults, this is more likely attributed to some flaws in the present study. A larger sample could strengthen the statistical power, producing more reliable results.

The study was also limited in that it did not look at the difference between females and males in the relationship between popularity and HED. In their study, Russell, Light, and Gruenewald (2004) concluded that there is a strong gender difference in heavy drinking rates. Males usually drink significantly more alcohol in comparison to females. Further, previous research suggests that men use drinking more as a way to bond with their peer groups. Additionally, Dumas et al (2014) found that the relation between status and nightly drinking was stronger for than for females. In a natural drinking group of all males, there may be more competition to keep up with each other's drinking patterns. Therefore, it can be suggested that within natural drinking group consisting of all males, the relationship between popularity and heavy episodic drinking might be especially strong.

Additionally, in the future, it might be wise to target university students with high self-reported status for alcohol-related prevention or intervention programming. An important finding analyzed was that one might not need to get peers to evaluate students' status. Rather, measures of self-reported status may tell us which university students are at a heightened risk for increasing their drinking across the school year. These students might benefit from additional programming such as normative feedback interventions (Neighbors et al, 2010), which have been particularly effective in addressing peer-related motives for drinking among university students.

To conclude, the relationship between popularity and emerging adulthood is one should continue to be studied as it has yet to be clearly elucidated. Based on the above results, it is evident that university programs should implement more effective guidance programs for their students. Heavy episodic drinking has worrisome negative repercussions and thus further research on natural drinking groups should be conducted to identify the antecedents and situations which foster such behaviour. Furthermore, the current study highlights that there is an

important difference between self-reported and peer-nominated popularity and thus specifying which type of popularity is being used in research is critical. It was found in the current study that although peer perceived popularity was not a significant predictor of heavy episodic drinking, self-perceived popularity proved to be significantly related to binge drinking. Thus, self-reported popularity may act as an important identifier of university students at risk for problematic drinking patterns across the school year.

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## Curriculum Vitae

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