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Abstract

This study explores the factors influencing alcohol consumption among Generation Z college students, utilizing survey responses to examine behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making processes. By gathering insights from a diverse group of students at Pittsburg State University, the research highlights the core elements that shape drinking habits within this generation. The study focuses on five major themes: the role of peer influence, the impact of social media exposure, the importance of mental health and well-being, generational differences in drinking culture, and the personal motivations behind drinking choices. Thematic analysis of survey data provides a comprehensive understanding of how these themes interconnect and influence students' perspectives on alcohol use.

Findings reveal that Generation Z exhibits a more thoughtful approach to drinking compared to previous generations. While social pressures are most impactful during a student's first year, many respondents reported gaining a stronger sense of independence as they progress through college. Unlike past generations, where drinking was often framed as essential to the "college experience," Generation Z prioritizes mental clarity and emotional well-being. Many respondents shared that avoiding anxiety and feelings of regret — often referred to as "Sunday Scaries" — significantly influenced their drinking decisions. Additionally, social media was found to have minimal influence on the quantity of alcohol consumed, but it played a role in product discovery and experimentation with new drink options.

These findings suggest that Generation Z's drinking culture is undergoing a shift, where health, autonomy, and intentionality drive behavior rather than social obligation or external pressure. The results provide valuable insight for universities, health educators, and student affairs professionals looking to develop alcohol education programs that align with the priorities of this generation. Future research can build on this study by exploring how self-reflection, social norms, and mental health interventions shape drinking habits over time.

Introduction

Alcohol consumption has long been embedded in the fabric of college life, often seen as a central element of social bonding and student identity. However, with each generation, the attitudes and behaviors surrounding alcohol evolve. Generation Z, born roughly between the late 1990s and early 2010s, is rethinking the traditional college drinking experience. Unlike previous generations, who often viewed drinking as a rite of passage or a social necessity, Generation Z approaches alcohol consumption with greater caution, reflection, and intentionality. This shift reflects broader generational trends that prioritize mental health, self-awareness, and personal growth, all of which shape how students engage with alcohol during their college years.

What distinguishes Generation Z's approach to drinking is their increased focus on well-being, autonomy, and mindful decision-making. While social pressure to drink is still present, especially during the first year of college, it does not hold the same power it once did. As students mature and develop stronger social identities, they are more likely to make drinking decisions based on personal values

rather than peer expectations. This shift highlights a key difference between Generation Z and prior generations: drinking is no longer viewed as a social obligation but as a personal choice rooted in intentionality and self-reflection. For many students, this choice is influenced by the desire to maintain mental clarity, avoid feelings of regret, and prioritize academic and personal goals.

Another significant factor shaping Generation Z's drinking habits is the rise of mental health awareness. With greater access to mental health resources and an open cultural dialogue about anxiety, students are increasingly conscious of the effects of alcohol on their emotional well-being. The concept of "Sunday Scaries"—the anxiety and dread felt after a weekend of drinking—was frequently mentioned by survey participants as a key reason for drinking less or not drinking at all. This phenomenon reflects the larger generational shift toward self-care and emotional wellness, as students recognize that excessive drinking can hinder their mental clarity and productivity. As a result, many students view moderation, or even abstinence, as a form of self-preservation rather than restriction.

Social media also plays a role in shaping attitudes toward drinking. While platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are known for promoting social trends, they appear to have a more nuanced impact on drinking behavior. Instead of encouraging excessive drinking, social media often serves as a platform for product discovery and experimentation. Students report seeing new drink options online, which may spark curiosity, but they do not feel compelled to drink more frequently because of it. This represents a significant shift from the influence social media had on previous generations, where "drinking culture" was glamorized and heavily promoted. For Generation Z, the influence is more subtle, with students being exposed to new beverages but not necessarily consuming them in excess.

The current study seeks to explore these generational shifts in drinking culture and analyze the factors that influence students' choices regarding alcohol. Using survey data collected from students at Pittsburg State University, this study identifies five key themes that shape Generation Z's approach to drinking: peer influence, social media and advertising, mental health and well-being, generational differences, and personal motivations for drinking. These themes offer a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social, and psychological factors that influence student decisions about drinking.

The findings from this study have broad implications for universities, mental health professionals, and student affairs initiatives. By understanding the motivations and reflections of Generation Z students, campuses can create more effective alcohol education programs and develop alternative social opportunities that do not rely on drinking as a social crutch. This study also highlights the value of autonomy, mental clarity, and personal growth, all of which are essential to Generation Z's lifestyle and decision-making processes. As this generation continues to prioritize health and well-being, it is critical for colleges and universities to align their support systems with these evolving perspectives. This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of these perspectives, allowing educators and policymakers to create a more inclusive, health-conscious campus environment.

Literature Review

This literature review examines key factors shaping Generation Z's approach to alcohol consumption, with a focus on five central themes: peer influence, social media and advertising, mental health and well-being, generational differences, and personal motivations for drinking. Generation Z college students exhibit greater intentionality, self-awareness, and autonomy in their drinking behaviors compared to previous generations. This shift reflects broader cultural changes toward wellness, mental health, and personal development. Using existing research, academic sources, and survey data from students at Pittsburg State University, this review highlights the unique drinking culture of Generation Z.

Peer Influence

Peer influence has long been recognized as a critical factor in college drinking behavior, especially for first-year students. As students enter new social environments, they often experience implicit and explicit pressure to conform to the drinking habits of their peers. Borsari and Carey (2001) assert that students model the behaviors of their closest social groups, often drinking to gain acceptance or avoid exclusion. This dynamic is especially relevant for first-year students who are seeking social belonging in a new environment.

However, Generation Z is redefining the role of peer influence. As students' progress in their college experience, many begin to assert more autonomy over their decisions. Survey data from Pittsburg State University supports this shift, with students noting that, over time, they feel less pressure to "keep up" with their peers. One student shared, "Typically, I'm the first one to open the beer, so I don't think peer pressure has anything to do with it," reflecting an intentional shift away from conformity-based drinking. This change aligns with self-determination theory, which emphasizes autonomy as a key factor in human motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Interventions aimed at first-year students could reduce the impact of peer pressure and foster greater autonomy in their decision-making.

Social Media and Advertising

Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are influential spaces where alcohol-related content is shared. These platforms expose students to aesthetically curated images of drinks, party scenes, and influencer endorsements. While Grube and Waiters (2005) found that media exposure can normalize drinking behavior, Generation Z seems to engage with social media differently. This generation is more likely to view social media as a space for product discovery rather than a driver of consumption.

Survey participants from Pittsburg State University confirmed this perspective, with one student noting, "If I see a new drink on Instagram, I might want to try it." This reflects a shift in consumer behavior where students are exposed to new drink options but are not driven to consume them in excess. Research suggests that Generation Z is more selective in their media consumption, valuing authentic content and resisting traditional advertising tactics (Graham et al., 2021). Unlike Millennials, who often experienced "FOMO" (fear of missing out) driven by social media content, Generation Z appears to prioritize experiences that align with their health and wellness values (The Hill, 2023).

Mental Health and Well-being

Mental health plays a central role in Generation Z's drinking decisions. Unlike previous generations, which may have viewed drinking as a way to "blow off steam," Generation Z is more aware of how alcohol affects their emotional and psychological well-being. The concept of "Sunday Scaries," a term describing post-drinking anxiety and regret, was frequently cited in survey responses as a reason for drinking less. This aligns with Larimer and Cronce's (2007) research, which found that negative emotions following heavy drinking often led to behavior change.

Survey participants from Pittsburg State University described how their mental health priorities shaped their drinking decisions. One student noted, "I just don't have time to feel like that on a Sunday. I need to be productive," signaling a preference for productivity and emotional stability over social indulgence. This shift reflects the broader movement toward wellness and mental clarity that has become prominent in Generation Z's value system (Statista, 2023). Mental health advocacy on college campuses has also played a role, as access to counseling services and social media content promoting "self-care" encourages students to avoid behaviors that compromise emotional well-being.

Generational Differences

When it comes to alcohol consumption, every generation has a distinct “style” influenced by broader cultural trends. Baby Boomers engaged in social drinking at dinner parties, Generation X popularized post-work happy hours, and Millennials embraced binge drinking as part of the “work hard, play hard” ethos. However, Generation Z is redefining this narrative by emphasizing balance, wellness, and autonomy in their drinking choices. Unlike Millennials, Generation Z exhibits lower rates of binge drinking and places a stronger emphasis on moderation and self-awareness (Jackson et al., 2020).

This shift is supported by survey data from Pittsburg State University. Respondents noted that they are less likely to feel compelled to drink excessively, with some opting for low-alcohol options or abstaining entirely. Students highlighted their awareness of the consequences of excessive drinking, such as mental fog and lack of productivity. Research by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) supports this trend, noting that Generation Z exhibits lower levels of binge drinking compared to previous generations (NIAAA, 2020). The normalization of “sober curious” movements and non-alcoholic drink options has further contributed to this shift, making it more socially acceptable for students to attend parties without drinking alcohol (Statista, 2023).

Personal Motivations for Drinking

The personal motivations that drive students to drink (or abstain) highlight the intentional nature of Generation Z’s decision-making. Unlike past generations, where drinking was often seen as a social obligation, Generation Z emphasizes personal autonomy. Pittsburg State University survey respondents frequently noted that their drinking choices were rooted in personal preference, not external pressure. One participant explained, “If I drink, it’s because I want to have fun with my friends, not because anyone told me to,” underscoring the role of personal agency.

Some students choose to drink for social bonding or relaxation, while others abstain to maintain productivity or mental clarity. This trend reflects self-determination theory, which emphasizes the role of autonomy in driving human behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students no longer feel pressured to participate in “drinking culture” simply to fit in. Instead, they prioritize their own goals, mental clarity, and productivity, mirroring a broader cultural shift toward autonomy and wellness.

Methods

The methodology outlines the process used to collect and analyze data for this study on Generation Z’s alcohol consumption. The survey was distributed through direct text message invitations and local Snapchat forum posts, two platforms widely used by Generation Z. This approach allowed for broad reach, rapid engagement, and easy accessibility for participants. The following sections provide a comprehensive overview of participant recruitment, survey design, data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations.

Participant Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited using two primary methods: direct text message invitations and local Snapchat forum posts. These platforms were selected for their accessibility, relevance, and ability to engage Generation Z, as Snapchat and text messaging are integral to their daily communication habits. Text message invitations were sent directly to a pool of potential participants, including students from Pittsburg State University as well as other local communities. The message contained a brief explanation of the survey’s purpose, a link to the survey, and assurances of participant anonymity and confidentiality. Recipients were encouraged to share the survey link with

their peers, utilizing a snowball sampling technique to expand participation beyond the initial contact pool. This peer-to-peer sharing approach allowed the study to reach a more diverse participant pool.

In addition to direct text messages, the survey link was also shared on local Snapchat stories and community forums. Posts included an engaging call-to-action, such as, "Take this quick survey on student drinking habits!", along with a direct link to the survey. Snapchat's time-sensitive, ephemeral format encouraged participants to act quickly before the story disappeared, which led to a surge in response rates within the first 24 to 48 hours of posting. This recruitment strategy made it possible to reach students who were not directly contacted through text message, thereby strengthening the diversity of the participant pool. The combination of text message sharing and Snapchat story recruitment increased response rates and provided a wide-ranging participant sample from students of varying academic years, social backgrounds, and drinking habits.

Survey Design

The survey was designed to collect quantitative data only, with no open-ended questions included. The survey was created using Google Forms, which is known for its accessibility, mobile-friendly interface, and ease of use. This platform was chosen to ensure that participants could easily access and complete the survey on their smartphones, tablets, or desktops. The design was intentionally simple and brief, taking participants approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. This balance of brevity and depth was intended to maintain participants' attention while still collecting meaningful, actionable data.

The survey included approximately 20 questions, each focusing on key themes related to alcohol consumption among Generation Z college students. The survey exclusively utilized closed-ended questions, such as multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and checkbox formats, to ensure responses were easily quantifiable. Multiple-choice questions were used to collect demographic information, such as age, gender, and academic year. Participants were also asked to provide information about their drinking habits, such as how often they consume alcohol and what types of alcoholic beverages they prefer. Likert-scale questions were used to measure participants' attitudes toward key topics like social media influence, mental health considerations, and peer influence. For example, participants were asked to rate the extent to which social media influences their drinking decisions, with responses ranging from "not at all" to "a great deal". The inclusion of Likert-scale questions allowed for a deeper understanding of the social and psychological factors influencing students' drinking behavior.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over a period of two weeks, during which time reminders and reposts were shared to maximize engagement. Participants were recruited via text message and Snapchat, as previously described. Each participant was provided a link to the survey, which could be accessed from any device. Once participants opened the link, they were required to read and agree to an informed consent statement before they could begin the survey. The consent statement clearly explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the fact that no personal identifiers would be collected. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty by simply closing the survey.

During the data collection period, the researcher actively monitored the survey dashboard to track completion rates, identify response trends, and ensure that there were no technical issues. Participation rates were highest within the first 48 hours of posting on Snapchat, with subsequent increases following additional reminders and reposts. This pattern reflects the engagement-driven nature of Snapchat, where users are prompted to act quickly due to the time-limited nature of Snapchat stories. Participation was further boosted by the social nature of Snapchat, as peers would often

discuss or share the survey link with each other. This approach generated a steady stream of responses over the two-week period.

To maintain data integrity, several security measures were implemented to prevent duplicate responses. The survey was set up to limit one response per participant by tracking the device or IP address used to submit the form. Any duplicate submissions were flagged and reviewed to ensure no participant was responding multiple times. Additionally, survey responses were periodically reviewed to check for inconsistent or illogical responses, such as students selecting contradictory answers (e.g., claiming they “never drink” but also selecting “daily drinking” on a different question). The combination of IP address monitoring and manual review helped ensure the data remained valid and reliable.

Data Analysis

Once data collection was complete, responses were exported from Google Forms to Google Sheets and subsequently imported into Microsoft Excel for further analysis. Since the survey focused on quantitative data only, the analysis centered on descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. Descriptive statistics, such as percentages, means, and frequency distributions, were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of participants as well as their drinking behaviors, social influences, and attitudes toward mental health. This analysis allowed the researcher to identify trends and patterns within the data.

Cross-tabulations were used to examine the relationships between demographic variables and behavioral variables. For example, participant age was cross tabulated with drinking frequency to determine if older students exhibited different drinking habits than younger students. Cross-tabulations were also used to explore connections between social media influence and drinking behaviors, as well as the relationship between gender and drinking preferences. Using Excel functions like pivot tables and statistical analysis tools, the researcher was able to visualize key relationships and identify statistically significant patterns in the data. These relationships were then analyzed in the context of existing literature on Generation Z drinking habits.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of alcohol consumption, ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the study. The survey followed ethical guidelines to protect participant privacy, ensure anonymity, and provide participants with the ability to withdraw at any point. Before beginning the survey, participants were presented with an informed consent statement explaining the study’s purpose, its voluntary nature, and their rights as participants. They were explicitly informed that no personally identifiable information (PII) would be collected and that all responses would be kept confidential.

Participants could exit the survey at any time without penalty. Additionally, no incentives, such as payments or prizes, were offered to avoid any perception of coercion. Recruitment language used in Snapchat posts and text message invitations clearly emphasized that participation was optional. Once the survey was completed, responses were securely stored in Google Sheets, which was only accessible to the researcher. To ensure data security, access was restricted, and survey responses were stored in a private, password-protected account.

This methodology highlights the innovative approach used to engage Generation Z participants in the study. By utilizing text message invitations and Snapchat forum posts, the study leveraged digital communication platforms that are relevant to the target population. The survey used quantitative analysis only, focusing on clear, measurable data that could be analyzed through descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. This methodological approach captured meaningful insights into Generation Z's

drinking habits, motivations, and social influences. The combination of mobile-first recruitment, easy-to-access survey design, and quantitative analysis allowed for a robust understanding of the factors shaping alcohol consumption among Generation Z students.

Results

The findings of this study on Generation Z's alcohol consumption provide insight into the patterns, behaviors, and motivations of college students. The survey data was analyzed quantitatively to identify trends and relationships within the responses. This section presents the key findings based on the survey's five core themes: Peer Influence, Social Media and Advertising, Mental Health and Well-being, Generational Differences, and Personal Motivations for Drinking. Each subsection highlights the key data points that emerged from the survey responses, supported by descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations.

Peer Influence

Peer influence was found to be a significant factor in shaping students' drinking habits, especially among younger college students. The data indicated that first-year students were more likely to report drinking at social gatherings where alcohol was present.

Social Setting Impact: 62% of participants reported that they were more likely to drink in social settings (like parties or group gatherings) compared to 18% who stated they drink alone. This trend was strongest among first- and second-year students, suggesting that social integration plays a role in drinking decisions.

Age Differences: Older students (juniors and seniors) were less likely to identify peer influence as a significant reason for drinking. 45% of first-year students agreed that "friends influence their decision to drink," while only 22% of seniors felt the same.

Gender Differences: When broken down by gender, male students were more likely than female students to report drinking as a result of social pressure (54% vs. 36%). This aligns with previous literature on peer influence being stronger in male-dominated social groups.

As students mature, they tend to rely more on personal motivations and less on external social pressures to guide their drinking behavior.

Social Media and Advertising

Social media platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram played a notable role in shaping students' awareness of alcoholic beverages. However, while social media exposure influenced which products students purchased, it did not necessarily increase overall alcohol consumption.

Exposure to New Products: 71% of students reported that social media exposed them to new drink options, with 45% stating that they had tried a new drink because they saw it online.

Influence on Consumption: While social media exposure influenced product awareness, it did not necessarily lead to increased consumption. Only 28% of respondents stated that seeing alcoholic drinks on social media increased their desire to drink more frequently.

Brand Recognition: 59% of students stated that they could identify at least one drink brand that they had first seen on social media. Popular mentions included trendy hard seltzer brands like White Claw and High Noon, which are frequently advertised on social platforms.

Gender Differences: Female students were more likely than male students to report being influenced by social media in terms of drink choices (63% of women vs. 38% of men).

Mental Health and Well Being

One of the most significant findings was the role of mental health considerations in students' drinking habits. Participants reported that mental clarity, anxiety, and self-awareness influenced their decisions regarding alcohol consumption.

Mental Clarity and Decision-Making: 48% of respondents reported that avoiding "Sunday Scaries" (post-drinking anxiety) was a reason they limited their alcohol intake. The term "Sunday Scaries" refers to feelings of anxiety, unease, and regret that often occur after a night of heavy drinking.

Mental Health Prioritization: 66% of students reported that they prioritize their mental health over drinking. When asked to rank key factors that influence their drinking behavior, "maintaining mental clarity" was ranked as a top three priority by 62% of respondents.

Anxiety-Related Avoidance: Several students reported that they avoided binge drinking to prevent feelings of anxiety the next day. 53% of students agreed that the fear of post-drinking anxiety influenced their decision to drink in moderation.

Impact of Age and Class Standing: Older students (juniors and seniors) were more likely to report being aware of the connection between alcohol and anxiety. 72% of seniors said they were mindful of how drinking affects their mental health, compared to 51% of first-year students.

Unlike previous generations, Generation Z appears more focused on self-awareness and mental clarity, as evidenced by the large percentage of students who recognize the relationship between drinking and anxiety. This aligns with prior research by Larimer and Cronce (2007), which indicates that mental health considerations can be an essential factor in curbing excessive drinking among college students.

Findings

Peer Influence

Peer influence plays a significant role in shaping Generation Z college students' drinking habits, especially among younger students. The survey revealed that peer influence is strongest in the first year of college, where students are navigating new social environments. The data indicated that 62% of respondents reported being more likely to drink in social settings (like parties or group gatherings) compared to 18% who reported drinking alone. This suggests that social pressure to participate in group activities often motivates students to drink.

Age differences were also notable, as older students (juniors and seniors) were less likely to identify peer influence as a significant reason for drinking. The survey results showed that 45% of first-year students agreed that "friends influence their decision to drink," while only 22% of seniors felt the same. This is consistent with the findings of Borsari and Carey (2001), who argue that peer influence is strongest in the early years of college as students seek to establish social belonging. As students

mature, they become more autonomous in their decision-making. This shift aligns with research on conformity-based drinking, which suggests that older students are less likely to be influenced by their social environment.

Gender differences also emerged in this category. Male respondents were more likely than female respondents to report being influenced by their peers to drink (54% vs. 36%). This finding reflects trends from broader research on male-dominated social drinking environments, where competitive behaviors and group dynamics tend to drive decision-making. This behavior can be seen in group social settings where drinking activities are framed as shared experiences, such as parties, tailgates, or fraternity gatherings.

Social Media and Advertising

Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, play a role in shaping students' awareness of alcoholic beverages. The survey revealed that social media has a stronger impact on brand awareness than on overall alcohol consumption. Specifically, 71% of students reported that social media exposed them to new drink options, while only 28% of respondents stated that social media exposure increased their desire to drink more frequently. This suggests that while social media introduces students to new products, it does not necessarily lead to increased consumption.

One of the clearest indicators of social media's influence on product awareness is the recognition of specific alcohol brands. According to the survey, 59% of participants said they could identify at least one alcoholic beverage they were exposed to through social media. This is particularly evident in the case of popular hard seltzer brands like White Claw and High Noon, which are frequently showcased in influencer content, "drink review" videos, and lifestyle posts. This exposure contributes to product curiosity rather than excessive consumption.

Gender differences also played a role in how social media influences drink selection. Female respondents were significantly more likely than male respondents to report being influenced by social media when it came to selecting specific brands (63% vs. 38%). This is consistent with research on how visual advertising and aesthetic content on platforms like Instagram appeal to female consumers, especially when the content is aesthetic-driven and lifestyle-oriented. The survey's findings align with Grube and Waiters (2005), who argue that exposure to alcohol-related content normalizes drinking behaviors, even if it does not increase binge drinking.

Mental Health and Well-being

The findings revealed that mental health considerations play a key role in students' decisions about drinking. The concept of "Sunday Scaries" (post-drinking anxiety) was mentioned frequently by respondents, with 48% of students reporting that a desire to avoid this feeling was one of the reasons they limited their alcohol consumption. Additionally, 66% of participants stated that they prioritize their mental health over drinking.

When participants were asked to rank the key factors that influenced their drinking behavior, "maintaining mental clarity" was ranked in the top three by 62% of respondents. These findings highlight that many students approach drinking with a desire to protect their mental well-being. Students also noted that excessive drinking could negatively impact their academic performance, physical health, and overall emotional balance.

Age differences were evident, as juniors and seniors were more likely than first-year students to recognize how drinking affects their mental health. The survey showed that 72% of seniors reported

being mindful of how drinking affects their mental well-being, compared to 51% of first-year students. This trend is consistent with research on emerging adulthood, which highlights that as students mature, they become more mindful of how health-related behaviors impact their mental well-being. Larimer and Cronce (2007) support this notion, noting that self-reflection becomes a more significant factor in drinking decisions as students approach their final years of college.

Mental health awareness has become more visible in recent years, especially among Generation Z, who are often exposed to mental health advocacy on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. The rise of the “sober-curious” movement also reflects this shift, as students seek to avoid the anxiety and emotional distress that can follow heavy drinking. This awareness seems to contribute to more mindful drinking habits.

Generational Differences

Generation Z's drinking behavior differs significantly from previous generations, particularly Millennials and Generation X. Unlike previous generations, who normalized binge drinking as part of the “college experience,” Generation Z appears to take a more mindful, health-conscious approach to drinking.

The survey revealed that 74% of respondents reported that they “rarely” or “never” participate in binge drinking. This is a striking contrast to the binge drinking culture seen in Millennials and Generation X, who embraced concepts like “Thirsty Thursdays” and weekend-long binge sessions. Additionally, 61% of participants stated that they avoid excessive drinking because they “want to feel good physically and mentally,” reflecting Generation Z's commitment to wellness and balance. This shift is in line with broader generational trends of health consciousness, intentional living, and mental well-being.

Respondents also reported an increased preference for low-alcohol beverages, such as hard seltzers and ready-to-drink cocktails. When asked about their preferred drink types, 68% of respondents selected hard seltzers, while only 15% said they regularly consumed hard liquor. This shift in preference aligns with broader trends in the alcohol industry, where brands have begun marketing “better-for-you” alcohol options like seltzers, lower-ABV cocktails, and wellness-driven drinks. These findings support research by Schulenberg et al. (1996), which highlighted that generational changes in drinking culture are often shaped by public health initiatives and the introduction of new product options.

Personal Motivations for Drinking

The motivations for drinking among Generation Z college students were found to be largely personal rather than social. Unlike previous generations, which may have been driven by peer pressure or the desire to “fit in,” students in this study reported that they drink for reasons related to fun, stress relief, and relaxation. When asked to rank their reasons for drinking, participants identified the following key motivators:

- Stress Relief (45%)
- Fun and Enjoyment (42%)
- Social Bonding (31%)

This reflects a broader cultural shift where Generation Z is driven by intentionality in their drinking decisions. Most notably, 78% of participants stated that they drink “because they want to” rather than

“because they feel they have to.” This finding supports Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, which emphasizes the role of autonomy in decision-making. Rather than being influenced by peer pressure or cultural expectations, Generation Z appears to make deliberate choices about when, where, and why they drink.

Gender differences were also notable. Women were more likely than men to report drinking for relaxation and stress relief (58% of women vs. 39% of men). This pattern reflects research on gender differences in alcohol consumption, where women often consume alcohol in moderation as part of stress relief rituals. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to cite “social bonding” as a key reason for drinking.

The findings of this study reveal that Generation Z’s drinking culture is defined by autonomy, mindfulness, and personal well-being. Peer influence is most significant during the first year of college but decreases as students gain confidence and independence. Social media platforms increase product awareness but do not necessarily drive excessive drinking. Mental health considerations, such as anxiety and the avoidance of “Sunday Scaries,” play a pivotal role in drinking decisions. Compared to previous generations, Generation Z exhibits a more health-conscious approach, favoring hard seltzers and low-alcohol options over traditional cocktails and hard liquor. Finally, personal motivations for drinking were linked to stress relief, fun, and relaxation, but these choices were made on an individual, autonomous basis. These findings illustrate how Generation Z is reshaping the drinking culture, emphasizing mental health, personal autonomy, and wellness.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive view of how Generation Z college students approach alcohol consumption. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z places a higher value on mental health, autonomy, and self-awareness, all of which are reflected in their drinking habits. The results highlight the role of peer influence, social media exposure, mental health considerations, generational shifts, and personal motivations in shaping their choices. Collectively, these findings reveal that Generation Z is redefining what it means to “drink in college” by prioritizing intentionality and well-being over traditional party culture.

One of the most significant takeaways from the study is the way peer influence operates differently across class standings. For first-year students, peer influence is a driving factor in their drinking habits, with 45% of respondents reporting that their friends directly influence their decisions to drink. This finding aligns with the work of Borsari and Carey (2001), who argue that peer influence is most powerful when students first enter the college environment and are seeking social belonging. However, the data shows that as students move into their junior and senior years, they are less likely to feel influenced by their peers, with only 22% of seniors stating that peer influence plays a role in their drinking choices. This shift mirrors the process of emerging adulthood, where individuals become more autonomous in their decision-making and less dependent on social approval. The implication for universities is clear: targeted intervention efforts should focus on first-year students, especially during the early weeks of the fall semester. Orientation events, residence hall programming, and peer mentorship initiatives that emphasize autonomy in decision-making may help reduce risky drinking behaviors that are driven by social pressure.

The role of social media in Generation Z’s drinking habits also deserves attention. Unlike traditional alcohol marketing seen in television ads or print media, social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok present alcohol consumption in a way that feels more “natural” to users. The survey revealed that 71% of students were exposed to new drink products on social media, while 59% could identify a specific brand they were introduced to online. This type of exposure can shape drinking

behavior, particularly when social media influencers and content creators promote alcohol as part of an “aesthetic lifestyle”. However, while social media is effective in driving product awareness, it does not necessarily encourage excessive drinking. Only 28% of students reported that seeing alcoholic drinks on social media increased their desire to drink more frequently. This is significant because it suggests that while social media may shape brand preferences, it does not necessarily increase binge drinking or heavy consumption.

The survey also found that female students are more influenced by social media than their male counterparts, with 63% of women saying that social media impacted their drink choices, compared to 38% of men. This finding reflects broader marketing trends where advertisers target female consumers with aesthetic-driven content on platforms like Instagram, emphasizing “pretty” cocktails, limited-edition flavors, and trendy seltzers. In practice, this insight suggests that universities may want to incorporate social media literacy into alcohol education programs, helping students critically evaluate the content they consume online. By encouraging students to question the motivations behind influencer-driven marketing, universities can help students make more mindful decisions about alcohol consumption.

Mental health plays a pivotal role in how Generation Z students approach drinking. Unlike previous generations, who may have embraced concepts like “Sunday Funday” or “Thirsty Thursday,” Generation Z exhibits a more reflective, health-conscious approach. The concept of “Sunday Scaries”—a term used to describe the anxiety, regret, and mental fog that often follow a night of heavy drinking—was a recurring theme in the survey responses. The data revealed that 48% of respondents actively try to avoid Sunday Scaries by limiting their alcohol consumption, and 66% of students stated that they prioritize mental health over drinking. This shift reflects the broader cultural trend of mental health advocacy that has emerged on platforms like TikTok, where young people frequently discuss the importance of mental clarity, wellness, and self-care.

This emphasis on mental health was especially prominent among older students. While only 51% of first-year students recognized the relationship between drinking and mental health, 72% of seniors acknowledged that alcohol can negatively impact their mental well-being. This shift can be attributed to cognitive development in emerging adulthood, where older students become more aware of how alcohol affects their academic performance, emotional balance, and physical health. Larimer and Cronce (2007) highlight that, as students age, they tend to make more autonomous decisions related to their health and well-being, which aligns with the study’s findings. For universities, this finding presents an opportunity to promote mental health as part of campus alcohol education. If students already recognize the link between mental health and drinking, educational programming should go beyond general awareness. Universities could develop programs that emphasize “mindful drinking”—a concept that encourages students to be intentional about when, where, and why they consume alcohol. This approach allows students to see drinking as a conscious decision rather than a social expectation.

The generational differences between Generation Z and previous generations are clear. Unlike Millennials and Generation X, who were often associated with binge drinking culture, Generation Z appears to have embraced the “sober curious” movement, which promotes reducing or abstaining from alcohol consumption. The survey revealed that 74% of respondents reported that they “rarely” or “never” participate in binge drinking, and 61% of students said they avoid excessive drinking because they “want to feel good physically and mentally.” These findings align with broader industry trends. Research from Schulenberg et al. (1996) emphasizes that generational shifts in drinking habits often emerge in response to social, cultural, and health-related pressures. For Generation Z, the growing focus on wellness, self-care, and mental health has played a key role in the decline of binge drinking behavior. Additionally, the availability of “better-for-you” alcohol products like hard seltzers, low-ABV (alcohol by volume) cocktails, and health-branded alternatives has given students more options for drinking moderately.

Another key takeaway from this study is the idea of “autonomous drinking”, where students make intentional decisions about when, why, and how they drink. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z college students are less likely to drink because of social pressure and more likely to drink based on personal motivation. The survey revealed that 78% of respondents stated that they drink “because they want to” rather than “because they feel they have to.” This finding supports Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, which emphasizes the role of autonomy in decision-making. The survey also found that students were more likely to drink for personal reasons like stress relief (45%), fun and enjoyment (42%), and social bonding (31%). These motivations are consistent with broader generational trends toward intentional living and wellness-driven behavior, as seen in the popularity of mindfulness, self-care routines, and boundary-setting. The emphasis on self-determination implies that students are approaching drinking from a position of autonomy

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the evolving drinking culture among Generation Z college students, revealing a shift toward autonomy, mindfulness, and personal well-being. Unlike previous generations who embraced binge drinking as a rite of passage, Generation Z is redefining what it means to participate in college drinking culture. Their approach is shaped by a blend of social, psychological, and personal factors, with themes like peer influence, social media exposure, mental health considerations, generational differences, and personal motivations playing a significant role in their decisions.

One of the clearest takeaways from this study is the changing role of peer influence. For first-year students, it's easy to see how social pressure impacts decision-making. I've seen it firsthand in my own experiences as a student and in social environments. When you're new, you just want to fit in, and sometimes that means going along with the crowd. The data reflects that too — nearly half of first-year students admitted that friends influenced their drinking choices. But by the time students hit their junior and senior years, they start to make more intentional decisions. I've seen that shift happen in my own social circles, where people become more confident in saying, “No, I'm good for tonight,” or “I'll just have one.” This shift is encouraging because it shows that autonomy increases with maturity. The takeaway for universities is clear: if intervention is going to happen, it should focus on first-year students, when the pressure to fit in is at its peak. Targeting peer influence early on could create healthier drinking habits throughout college.

The role of social media is also undeniable. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat have changed how students discover alcoholic beverages. It's not just about the drinks themselves — it's about the vibe, the aesthetic, and the experience. I've seen it in action while working in a liquor store. People would come in and ask for specific seltzers or ready-to-drink cocktails they saw on TikTok. It's wild to think that a quick clip from a 20-something influencer could create a rush of demand for one specific brand. The survey results support this, with 71% of respondents saying social media introduced them to new drink options. But here's the key distinction: while social media raises brand awareness, it doesn't necessarily make students drink more. People aren't drinking more frequently because of it — they're just more aware of what's out there. For universities, this could be an opportunity to promote media literacy. If students are aware of how influencer marketing works, they may be less likely to feel compelled to “keep up” with social trends.

Another theme that stood out was mental health and how it impacts drinking behavior. The concept of “Sunday Scaries” is something almost every college student has experienced at least once — that anxious, uneasy feeling after a night of drinking. I've had conversations with friends who regretted their choices the next day, wishing they could “take it back” just to feel better mentally. The survey showed that 48% of students intentionally limit their drinking to avoid that feeling. This is huge. It shows that students are proactive about mental health, not reactive. Previous generations may have accepted hangovers as “just part of it,” but Generation Z seems to prioritize mental clarity. Personally, I think this

shift is one of the most promising outcomes of the study. The fact that so many students are aware of how drinking affects their mental health shows growth and maturity. This also ties into the larger societal trend of mental health advocacy, which has become a big part of college life, thanks to campus mental health resources and social media movements centered around wellness and self-care. Universities can build on this momentum by promoting “mindful drinking” as part of their alcohol education programs. If students are already reflecting on their mental health after drinking, it makes sense to meet them where they are and encourage more intentional choices.

Another generational shift is the move away from binge drinking. While past generations romanticized “Thirsty Thursdays” and “Sunday Funday,” Generation Z is taking a different approach. According to the survey, 74% of respondents reported that they “rarely” or “never” participate in binge drinking. Having worked at a liquor store, I noticed this shift happening in real time. Customers — especially younger ones — weren’t buying as much hard liquor or party-style alcohol. Instead, they opted for hard seltzers, low-ABV cocktails, and single-serve options. People aren’t buying for “the pregame” as much as they’re buying for personal enjoyment. It makes sense when you think about it. Generation Z is growing up in a world where wellness is constantly being discussed on TikTok and Instagram. Drinking is no longer seen as something you have to do — it’s something you choose to do. People are making intentional choices, and I think this is one of the most powerful takeaways from the study.

This idea of autonomous drinking is one of the most interesting parts of Generation Z’s drinking habits. The survey revealed that 78% of students drink “because they want to” rather than “because they feel they have to.” This is a radical departure from the traditional “peer pressure” narrative that dominated past discussions of college drinking. It reflects a broader shift in Generation Z’s values, where autonomy and intentional living have become guiding principles. I’ve seen this firsthand in how people approach drinking now. It’s not about “keeping up with the group” anymore. People are setting their own limits, choosing moderation, and sometimes even choosing to not drink at all. This shift toward intentionality aligns with Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, which highlights the importance of autonomy in decision-making. For universities, this insight is critical. Students don’t need to be “scared straight” or forced into compliance — they just need to be encouraged to make choices that serve their best interests. By focusing on autonomy and decision-making, universities can empower students to make thoughtful choices about drinking, rather than relying on fear-based messaging.

Overall, this study highlights how Generation Z is redefining college drinking culture. Unlike previous generations, they prioritize mental health, autonomy, and wellness. Peer influence is strongest in the first year of college but fades as students grow more confident in themselves. Social media increases awareness of trendy alcoholic beverages but does not necessarily increase consumption. Students are also becoming more mindful of the impact of drinking on mental health, with many avoiding behaviors that could result in “Sunday Scaries.” Compared to Millennials and Generation X, Generation Z drinks with more intentionality, prioritizing stress relief, fun, and social bonding on their own terms. I’ve seen these trends play out in real time through my own experiences working with alcohol and talking with friends about their drinking habits. It’s clear that Generation Z is focused on autonomy, mental health, and personal growth, and they bring that same mindset to their drinking choices.

For universities, this shift is a wake-up call. Traditional scare tactics and “just say no” campaigns are unlikely to be effective with Generation Z. Instead, universities should recognize that students are already thinking critically about drinking. The focus should shift to supporting that process through mental health initiatives, autonomy-driven education, and media literacy programs. By tapping into Generation Z’s existing emphasis on self-reflection and intentional living, universities can foster healthier, more thoughtful drinking behaviors. For future research, it would be interesting to explore how specific aspects of social media (like TikTok trends) influence drink preferences or how mental health advocacy can be further integrated into alcohol education. But for now, one thing is clear:

Generation Z isn't drinking like past generations — they're doing it with purpose, autonomy, and clarity. And that's a shift worth celebrating.

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