**Influence of Positive and Negative Language on Alcohol Use Perception**

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**Abstract**

College students have been known to abuse alcohol during their time at university. Within these students, social norms or peer behavior can likely impact their alcohol usage overall. With this important factor, our study aimed to study the connotation between peer behavior, and its impact on the overall usage of alcohol in participants. This study hypothesized that a negative language connotation towards alcohol usage would lead to a more negative view of alcohol overall, regardless of a participant's prior interactions with alcohol. A self-report survey was sent out to several sources, with participants being randomly assigned to a negative or positive story variable. Demographic questions were asked prior to the vignette being read by participants. This study found no significant connection between language connotation and personal views of alcohol usage. While there is previous literature showing a frequent abuse of alcohol by college students within Greek Life and negative opinions towards alcohol holding firm throughout the tenure at university, our study found that there is no noticeable connection between language connotation and personal alcohol usage.

West Virginia University is currently ranked as the fifteenth party school in the nation, according to an article written by Tanner (2024). For students who find themselves a social butterfly, frequent party animal, or regular drinker, this can be an environment akin to heaven. For those who have negative connotations towards the usage of alcohol, this can make West Virginia University seem as though it is no longer an educational institution worth attending.

When students arrive at university, they tend to have predetermined perceptions of alcohol, able to impact the behavior and standards they conform to during their time at university. In a study by Gambles et al. (2022), they aimed to explore the impact of these perceptions on college drinking behavior. Results showed that alcohol was frequently viewed as a social lubricant, and cultural aspects of the student drinker identity left some to have negative connotations with those who did not follow the drinking norms. Heavy drinking among college students is also a constant issue. In a study by Colby et al. (2009), the goal was to examine the the factors that affect drinking during and after college. Students can perceive college as a time-out from real word responsibilities, making behavior standards lower and irresponsibility almost expected from the demographic. College versus the real world becomes an influential factor in drinking behavior. Thus, a student in college is more likely to engage in heavy drinking than that of a "real-world" adult.

In a study done by Bank et al. (1985), the aim was to test for distinctions in alcohol usage in adolescents, by interviewing several participants from varying countries. The final results observed showed that adolescents had a higher internal impact on their alcohol consumption, meaning the outside world had less of an impact than the researchers hypothesized. This does not mean that these students are immune to influence, however. Frequently, students rely on social interactions to determine their behavior. Thus, most social norm campaigns generally assume that college students will increase their drinking to match their perceptions of peers' drinking. In a study by Broadwater et al. (2006), 171 college students were asked to report their drinking, desired drinking, and perception of peers' drinking. 139 of these students were analyzed one month later. The hypothesis, that those who believed their peers drank more than them would

want to increase their alcohol intake, was unsupported. Though, 91% of participants were found to believe that their peers drank more than themselves. Another hypothesis, that participants who wanted to increase their alcohol intake would do so in the future, were not found to have a significant uptake by the one month mark, but rather were found to have decreased drinking behaviors instead. Social norm campaigns that aim to turn students away from the drinking "norm" should take into account the behavioral actions of the students they are campaigning to.

A study done by Yankofsky et al. (1986) tested the differing hypotheses of alcohol's perceptions of control and power, and that of reduced self-awareness, negative feedback perception, and negative self-evaluations. Forty college men were randomly assigned to each condition. Each participant then interacted with a confederate in positive conditions, then paused for a drink, and again reacted with the confederate under negative conditions. Participants were asked to view these interactions and rate their self-perception. The study found that perceptions of control decreased in sober subjects, but remained stable in intoxicated subjects. There was also noticeable affect on perception of negative feedback in the intoxicated subjects. Thus, alcohol can be seen as a negative impact on one's self-perception, especially influenced by the context in which the subject is intoxicated. While social interaction during drinking can affect personal views of participants, it is found that social interaction even without alcohol can influence drinking behavior and personal opinion as well. College drinking interventions usually incorporate interpersonal factors, such as descriptive norms, and intrapersonal factors, such as intended outcome towards drinking, to make them more relatable to those in the demographic. A study done by Mallett et al. (2009) wanted to extend previous work on this topic by further examining these relationships of inter and intra-personal perceptions. A group of 303 college students completed a questionnaire on drinking behaviors, perceptions of fellow students' drinking habits, perceptions of friends towards drinking habits, and their own perceptions of their drinking habits. Close friends' habits were the only interpersonal factors impacting personal drinking habits, whereas all intrapersonal factors showed a strong impact on such.

**Overview of Current Study**

This semester, our research group studied the impact of a language connotation on the perception of drinking among college students by using two vignettes describing a college drinking event. We used a Qualtrics (2020) Self-Report survey, which consists of nineteen questions. Our questions all contained several word-choice answers. Our hypothesis was that a negative language connotation about alcohol usage in a vignette will result in a negative perception of alcohol usage from participants. The previous findings that support our hypothesis are strong, as most research done on the connotation of Alcohol Usage in college students shows a negative response to a negative connotation of alcohol. A self-report survey link was shared with as many participants over the age of 18 that we could gather, and demographics data assisted in our data sorting upon final collection.

**Methods**

**Participants**

By the end of data collection, we had 154 participants complete the self-report survey. We then sorted this data for incomplete responses or inaccurate survey data. After data cleaning, we had 116 valid responses to use for in analysis. Each participant was asked to consent to their data being used as part of a study prior to answering any demographic questions. The gender breakdown was 68 female, 45 male, and 3 self-identify. The age range of participants was between 18 and 75, with a mean of 24.36 (SD = 11.80). The amount of participants that were not a part of Greek Life within college was 114. Participants were recruited through Facebook, Snapchat, text messages, and word-of-mouth. For further information on the calculated descriptive statistics, see Table 1 and Figure 1.

**Materials**

Our survey was created on Qualtrics (2020) software. The final survey contained seven questions on demographics, with fourteen questions on their personal opinions towards alcohol usage. We used the Drinking Norms Rating Form, created by Baer et al. (1991), to aid in creation

of the personal opinion questions for the survey. Following the demographics questions, the participants were randomly assigned a vignette on college alcohol usage, a positive or negative story, with Group 1 being the positive variable and Group 2 being the negative variable (see Appendices A and B, respectively). Our goal with these questions was to see how the language connotation of their assigned vignette affected their answers on perception of alcohol usage.

**Design and Procedure**

Our study was a between-subjects convenience-sample research design. Data was collected through an online survey, distributed through Facebook, Snapchat, text messages, and word-of-mouth. Debriefing was provided at the end of the survey to inform participants of the creation of falsified stories within the vignettes. The average time spent completing the survey was 185.78 seconds, or 3.10 minutes (SD = 95.70). For further information on the calculated descriptive statistics, see Table 1.

**Data Analysis**

Our survey contained questions that asked participants their personal views on alcohol usage both in college environments, and current alcohol usage regardless of demographic. Our data was self-report, due to the use of an online survey to measure participant responses. The only changes made to the collected data was deletion of invalid responses, and assigning a five-point scale to responses of measured questions. We used JASP Team (2024) software to calculate Descriptive Statistics of our participant demographics, as well as an Independent Samples t-Test to determine the significance of our results (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics, and Figure 2 for Independent Samples t-Test).

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**Results**

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When calculating the data, we used a five-point scale for sum totals of participant responses. A higher score was associated with a positive opinion towards alcohol, regardless of the dependent variable the participant had been assigned to. Demographics were not included in the final data analysis. Based on our analyses, the hypothesis was not supported.

A sample of 116 participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups for the

independent variable. The positive independent variable group contained 63 participants, and recorded a mean score of 32.79 (SD = 5.24). The negative independent variable group contained 53 participants, and recorded a mean score of 32.43 (SD = 5.34). A one-sample t-Test stated that the data was not statistically significant, $t(114) = 0.36$, $p = 0.72$, $d = 0.07$, 95%CI [-0.30, 0.43].

## Discussion

The data collected within our study showed no significant information, aside from what previous literature had stated about a higher likelihood of alcohol abuse within the Greek Life community. Our data contained a disproportionate amount of West Virginia University undergraduate students, making it challenging to generalize the results to outside populations. In a review of our survey questions, we found that the self-report survey lacked a proper manipulation check. We also found that a demographic question was written wrong, as the question of "On days that you drink, how much alcohol do you consume?" had no option to state "Not applicable". We had based our hypothesis on previous literature stating a high rate of binge-drinking and alcohol usage in Greek life. Thus, when we received a lack of Greek life participants, our data was not significant when compared to our hypothesis.

| | Duration (in seconds) | | | Age | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Man | Nonbinary | Woman | Man | Nonbinary | Woman |
| Valid | 45 | 3 | 68 | 45 | 3 | 68 |
| Mean | 182.18 | 189.33 | 188.00 | 23.73 | 19.33 | 25.00 |
| Std. Deviation | 120.09 | 58.32 | 78.31 | 10.53 | 1.53 | 12.82 |
| Minimum | 96.00 | 122.00 | 86.00 | 18.00 | 18.00 | 18.00 |
| Maximum | 841.00 | 224.00 | 484.00 | 68.00 | 21.00 | 75.00 |

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of Participants*

## Descriptives

*Group Descriptives*

| | Group | N | Mean | SD | SE | Coefficient of variation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SUM-TOTAL | 1 | 63 | 32.79 | 5.24 | 0.66 | 0.16 |
| | 2 | 53 | 32.43 | 5.35 | 0.73 | 0.16 |

**Figure 1**

*Descriptives of Participant Genders within Variable*

## Independent Samples T-Test

*Independent Samples T-Test*

| | t | df | p | Mean Difference | SE Difference | Cohen's d | SE Cohen's d | 95% CI for Cohen's d Lower | Upper |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SUM-TOTAL | 0.36 | 114 | 0.72 | 0.36 | 0.99 | 0.07 | 0.19 | -0.30 | 0.43 |

*Note.* Student's t-test.

**Figure 2**

*Independent Samples t-Test of Sum Data*

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**Appendix A**

**Positive Vignette**

"When I first arrived at college, I felt overwhelmed by the social scene. I was shy, unsure of how to approach people, and constantly worried about fitting in. But at my first frat party, after having a couple of drinks, I noticed my nerves eased. Conversations felt more natural, and I was able to let go of my self-consciousness. That night, I made friends who I'm still close with, and it was all because I finally felt comfortable enough to join in. As the semester progressed, drinking became a way for me to connect with others in a casual setting. I joined a group that frequently hung out over beers after class, and that social routine helped solidify my place in the college community. It wasn't about drinking excessively but about having a common activity that brought us together and made it easier to bond. - Anonymous Student"

**Appendix B**

**Negative Vignette**

"It was the night of April 19, 2016, and we were all gathered for the bid night party, excited to introduce the pledges to their fraternity and sorority siblings. Miles had just met his big brother, who handed him a bottle of whiskey as part of the final challenge. We were all watching as he began to drink, cheering him on as he tried to finish it within the hour. At first, it seemed like everything was going fine—just another wild night— but after Miles finished the bottle, he started to slump. Soon after, he passed out. At the time, no one thought much of it. We laid him out on a table, thinking he'd just sleep it off, as many had done before. Hours passed before anyone realized something was wrong. His breathing had stopped, and the panic set in. We called 911, but by the time the paramedics arrived and began CPR, it was clear Miles was in serious trouble. He was rushed to the hospital, but it didn't look good. Later, we found out his blood alcohol level was eight times the legal limit. Two days later, his family had to say goodbye. He died from alcohol poisoning, and none of us saw it coming. -Anonymous Student"