

College drinking culture in Spain, Argentina, and USA: An examination of impulsivity, college alcohol beliefs, and alcohol outcomes

Across many countries and cultures, college students drink heavily. Students who drink heavily are at risk for a wide range of problems ranging from hangover to unsafe and unplanned sex to poor academic performance to developing an alcohol use disorder. Decades of research has found college student drinking culture to be a barrier towards effective prevention efforts. Recent research has also shown that the internalization of college student drinking culture, or beliefs about how important alcohol use is to the college experience, may explain why personality traits like impulsivity and sensation seeking put students at risk of having alcohol problems. Unfortunately, previous studies were cross-sectional and conducted only in the United States, so we cannot assume cause-and-effect and we do not know if these beliefs about alcohol use in college are specific to the United States or more universal.

Using longitudinal data collected in the United States, Spain, and Argentina, we wanted to see if these college-related alcohol beliefs could help explain (i.e., mediate) why impulsivity-related personality traits are related to having alcohol problems. Also, we wanted to know if these beliefs were more or less important in these different cultures.

The present study was part of a larger project examining young adult drinking habits and outcomes among college students in the U.S., Spain, and Argentina. Participants completed an online survey about personality traits, college alcohol beliefs, and alcohol use behaviors. A sample of 1429 past month drinkers completed the baseline survey, and 242 of them completed the follow-up survey about three months later. We tested a cross-sectional and a longitudinal model to answer a few different questions. First, do impulsive people drink more and have more problems with alcohol because they believe alcohol is an important part of the college experience? Second, is this true in different countries that have very different attitudes and beliefs about alcohol?

First, consistent with previous research, we found internalization of college student drinking culture predicted more alcohol use and problems among college students. Second, we found these beliefs to be a plausible mediator of the effects of multiple impulsivity-related traits on alcohol use and problems. Third, we found that these relationships were consistent across gender and the different cultures (i.e., United States, Spain, and Argentina).

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Our findings suggest that tackling these college alcohol beliefs may be a valuable and effective intervention to reduce alcohol problems among college students. For example, a discussion of these beliefs could be incorporated into an individual-based intervention such that some of the perceived benefits and problems with a view on college life that over-values heavy drinking could be discussed in the context of a student's goals, desires, and current concerns.

In summary, efforts to address widely held beliefs about the role of alcohol in college life may help to prevent alcohol-related harms in the U.S. and around the world. Such efforts may also help to shift broader perceptions about the college experience away from drinking, and instead toward the many other rewarding and meaningful activities that students can experience during their college years.

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