Published in final edited form as:

Addict Behav. 2015 June ; 45: 180–183. doi:10.1016/j.addbeh.2015.01.033.

The Impact of Campus Traditions and Event-Specific Drinking

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Abstract

Objective—Specific events (e.g., Spring Break, holidays) are associated with greater college student drinking. However, the ways in which specific events are celebrated at specific campuses may impact students' beliefs about the social acceptability of drinking during these events, which may impact students' event-specific drinking. The present study investigated whether two campuses with different traditions regarding St. Patrick's Day and Mardi Gras differed on event-specific normative beliefs, intent to drink, and actual alcohol consumption.

Method—Undergraduate students at two campuses ($N=570$, 59% female) were surveyed pre- and post-events. Campus 1 has specific campus-wide traditions regarding St. Patrick's Day whereas Campus 2 has specific campus-wide traditions regarding Mardi Gras. Prior to the events, participants were asked to indicate how much they expected their peers to drink and how much alcohol they intended to drink themselves during these events. After the events, students reported how much alcohol they actually consumed during the events.

Results—Campus 1 reported greater intent to drink and actual drinking during St. Patrick's Day than Campus 2, whereas Campus 2 reported greater intent to drink and actual drinking during Mardi Gras than Campus 1. Campus 1 reported greater norms during SPD than Campus 2,

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Contributors

Author A conceptualized the study and was the lead researcher throughout the project, in coordinating the multi-site efforts, statistical analysis, and writing of the manuscript. Author B conducted statistical analyses and contributed to the manuscript. Author C conducted statistical analyses and contributed to the manuscript. Each author collected data and implemented the project at their respective institutions.

Conflict of Interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest.

whereas Campus 2 reported greater norms during MG than Campus 1. Event-specific norms did not moderate the relation between event and student event-specific drinking.

Conclusion—Campuses with different event-specific traditions differed in intent to drink and actual event-specific drinking. Findings have important implications for campus-wide interventions and individual treatment.

Keywords

Alcohol; Event-specific drinking; Normative beliefs

1. Introduction

Risky drinking and associated negative consequences among college students are more likely to occur during specific celebratory events (e.g., Spring Break, 21st birthday) (Del Boca et al., 2004; Greenbaum et al., 2005; Neighbors et al., 2011). Yet, campuses may differ on drinking behaviors during specific events and campus differences may impact students' drinking during specific events. In fact, campus culture appears to impact some event-specific drinking (i.e., tailgating parties and athletic events; Merlo, Ahmedani, Barondess, Bohnert, & Gold, 2001). Further, although beliefs about other students' drinking (i.e., normative beliefs) are among the strongest predictors of college drinking (Borsari and Carey, 2001), few studies have investigated a possible interaction between event-specific normative beliefs and drinking during campus-specific celebratory events, specifically whether normative beliefs moderate the relationship between specific events and student drinking during specific events, such that students with greater event-specific normative beliefs would engage in more event-specific drinking (O'Grady, Cullum, Tennen, & Armeli, 2011). Although event-specific drinking may vary with regard to the event-specific normative beliefs and campus traditions regarding specific events, campus differences in normative beliefs regarding drinking during other specific events (i.e., events celebrated with different traditions across campuses) and the impact on event-specific drinking has not, to our knowledge, been examined.

The current prospective study sought to extend prior work by comparing two campuses with different campus-wide traditions regarding St. Patrick's Day (SPD) and Mardi Gras (MG) (celebratory events that pose potential risk for heavy episodic college student drinking; Neighbors et al., 2007) on students' expectations regarding peers' intentions to drink (i.e., descriptive normative beliefs), students' intentions to drink, and students' drinking during these holidays. To test whether campuses drink more during campus-specific celebratory events than a universal celebratory event such as Spring Break (SB; Del Boca et al., 2004), SB was included as a within-and between-subjects holiday. We hypothesized that: (a) Campus 1 (C1), with strong SPD traditions, would intend to drink more per day during SPD than those at Campus 2 (C2), whereas students at C2, with strong MG traditions, would intend to drink more per day during MG than those at C1. The two campuses were not expected to differ on SB intentions; (b) C1 would actually drink more than C2 during SPD whereas C2 would actually drink more than C1 during MG; (c) C1 would report more drinking during SPD than MG or SB whereas C2 would report more drinking during MG than SPD or SB; (d) students at C1 would expect other students to drink more during SPD

than those at C2, whereas students at C2 would expect students to drink more during MG than those at C1; and (e) event-specific normative beliefs would moderate the relationship between event and drinking such that students with greater event-specific normative beliefs would engage in more event-specific drinking.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The Institutional Review Boards at each campus approved this study. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

2.1.1 Campus 1 (C1)—Participants ($N=265$) were undergraduate students from a Midwest university (Table 1). This sample is representative of C1, which has a 3:1 male to female gender ratio and students are largely Caucasian.

C1 officially begins celebrating SPD 10 days prior to March 17th. Further, in October students begin selling SPD memorabilia (e.g., t-shirts) on campus, across from a life-size statue of St. Patrick, next to a sign counting down the “daze” until SPD (“days” appears intentionally misspelled). Classes are suspended for the two days prior to SPD but not for MG.

2.1.2 Campus 2 (C2)—Participants ($N=305$) were undergraduate students from a large public university in southern Louisiana (Table 1). This sample is representative of psychology students at C2, the majority of whom are female and Caucasian.

Mardi Gras (French for “Fat Tuesday”) season includes a series of carnival celebrations (characterized by parades, parties, King Cakes, etc.) that take place between the Christian holidays Epiphany (January 6) and MG day (47 days before Easter). The school colors are thought to have derived from the purple, gold, and green that characterize MG. Celebrations in the region in which C2 is located culminate during the last week of the MG season. As a result, C2 suspends classes for 2.5 days the week of MG but does not suspend classes for SPD.

2.2 Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses with research participation components. Participants completed two 30-minute sessions: Time 1 [T1] (1/30-2/10/12) occurred prior to MG (2/21/12), SPD (3/17/12), and Spring Break [SB] (at C1, 3/24-3/31/12; at C2, 4/7-4/14/12) and Time 2 [T2] occurred after these events (conducted 4/2-4/20/12). Participants earned ½ hour of research participation credit for each time point. Participants who completed both sessions were entered into a \$100 cash prize raffle.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 The Timeline Followback (TLFB; Sobell and Sobell, 1992)—At T1, data were collected using a three month, prospective calendar similar to the standard retrospective TFLB: one assessed students’ intent to drink, and one assessed expectations of

how much students at their university would drink. At T2, a three month, retrospective TLFB assessed students' self-reported actual drinking during SPD, MG, and SB. Each campus received versions of the TLFB on which general events (e.g., Super Bowl), specific campus events (e.g., Career Fair day, university closures), and local events specific to each campus (e.g., parades) were labeled. The TLFB is a widely used, reliable, and valid measure of alcohol use (e.g., Sobell et al., 1986).

2.3.2 The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT; Babor et al., 2001)

—The AUDIT is a 10-item questionnaire that assesses drinking frequency, quantity, and related problems during the past year. It has good validity and reliability among undergraduates (Fleming et al., 1991; Kokotailo et al., 2004). Internal consistency in this sample was good ($\alpha=.80$). Total AUDIT score was used to compare groups at baseline. Item 3 on the AUDIT was used to assess frequency of consuming six or more drinks on an occasion (0 = *never*, 4 = *daily or almost daily*).

2.4 Data analytic strategy

Given that the celebratory periods for SPD and MG may vary by region, but that SB is typically a week-long event, we computed the average number of drinks per day over the 8-day period leading up to each event, including the event day. The 8-day period for SB was determined per each campus calendar, beginning and ending on a Saturday.

First, independent samples *t*-tests and chi-square analyses were conducted to determine differences between campuses at Time 1. Given between-campus differences in gender and baseline heavy drinking (Table 1), these variables were included as covariates in all analyses. Second, mixed-model analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) with campus as the between subjects factor and event as the within subject factor were used to test within and between campus hypotheses. Third, to test the moderational role of norms, a 2 (Referent group: students vs self) X 2 (Campus) X 3 (Event) mixed-model ANCOVA was conducted. This model accounts for potential campus differences in variables of interest and includes the two-way interaction of referent group and event. For all mixed-model ANCOVA analyses, Greenhouse-Geisser corrections were applied when appropriate based on Mauchly's Test of Sphericity. Significant interactions were graphed using estimated marginal means.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

3.1 Intentions

The 2 (Campus) X 3 (Event) mixed model ANCOVA interaction significantly predicted drinking intentions, $F(1.97, 824.16)=111.78, p < .001, \omega^2=.00$ (Figure 1a). As predicted, simple contrasts indicated that C1 reported greater intentions to drink during SPD than C2, $F(1, 419)=89.00, p < .001, d=1.27$. C2 reported greater intentions to drink during MG than C1, $F(1, 419)=27.13, p < .001, d=.38$. C1 did not differ from C2 on intentions for SB, $F(1, 419)=0.47, p=.492, d=.09$.

3.2 Event-Specific Drinking by Campus

The 2 (Campus) X 3 (Event) interaction significantly predicted drinking (Figure 1b), $F(1.66, 452.25)=47.95$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2=.03$. Simple contrasts indicated that C1 reported greater drinking during SPD than C2, $F(1, 272)=32.54$, $p < .001$, $d=.43$. C2 reported greater drinking during MG than C1, $F(1, 272)=34.41$, $p < .001$, $d=.45$. C1 did not differ from C2 on SB drinking, $F(1, 272)=0.18$, $p=.670$, $d=.10$.

C1 reported greater drinking during SPD than MG, $F(1, 164)=139.58$, $p < .001$, $d=.29$, and SB, $F(1, 164)=96.50$, $p < .001$, $d=.22$. SB drinking was slightly greater than MG drinking, $F(1, 164)=3.90$, $p=.050$, $d=.09$. C2 reported greater drinking during MG than SPD, $F(1, 110)=30.22$, $p < .001$, $d=.44$, and SB, $F(1, 110)=15.75$, $p < .001$, $d=.20$. SPD drinking did not differ from SB drinking, $F(1, 110)=0.41$, $p=.524$, $d=.04$.

3.3 Normative Beliefs

The 2 (Campus) X 3 (Event) ANCOVA significantly predicted normative beliefs, $F(1.90, 795.68)=149.76$, $p < .001$, $\omega^2=.07$ (Figure 1c). C1 reported greater norms during SPD than C2, $F(1, 418)=109.98$, $p < .001$, $d=.30$. C2 reported greater norms during MG than C1, $F(1, 418)=10.52$, $p=.001$, $d=.09$. C1 did not differ from C2 on norms for SB, $F(1, 418)=1.90$, $p=.169$, $d=.03$.

The 2 (Referent group: students vs self) X 2 (Campus) X 3 (Event) interaction significantly predicted number of drinks, $F(1.84, 499.23)=16.51$, $p < .001$. However, contrary to prediction, the 2 (Referent group) X 3 (Event) interaction did not significantly predict number of drinks, $F(1.81, 491.59)=1.38$, $p=.253$, $\omega^2=.00$. In other words, there was not support for the moderational role of event-specific norms on the relation between event and event-specific student drinking.

4. Discussion

Although previous studies have demonstrated that college students are vulnerable to drinking more during specific events (e.g., Neighbors et al., 2007; Neighbors et al., 2011), this is the first known study to compare students' drinking at two campuses with different traditions to determine whether between-campus differences exist in event-specific drinking. Consistent with our hypothesis, C1 (with specific traditions regarding SPD) reported more intention to drink and actual drinking during SPD than C2 and C2 (with specific traditions regarding MG) reported more intention to drink and drinking during MG than C1. C1 also reported greater normative beliefs for SPD drinking whereas C2 reported greater norms for MG; however, event-specific norms did not moderate the relation between event and actual drinking.

One interpretation of these data is that students at C1 believe it is more common to drink during SPD whereas students at C2 believe it is more common to drink during MG. Indeed, C1 reported that same-campus peers would drink more during SPD than MG and C2 reported that same-campus peers would drink more during MG than SPD. Our finding adds to the body of literature on the important role of normative beliefs in college drinking

(Borsari & Carey, 2001) by suggesting that normative beliefs about specific events may play a powerful role in event-specific drinking.

Data have important treatment and prevention implications. Campus-wide efforts to prevent and reduce risky alcohol consumption may consider targeting specific drinking-related traditions at specific campuses. Further, given that brief interventions for college drinking are effective for reducing risky drinking (Larimer, Kilmer, & Lee, 2005) and that changes in normative beliefs are related to better outcomes (e.g., Carey, Henson, Carey, & Maisto, 2010; Neighbors, Lewis, Bergstrom, & Larimer, 2006; Terlecki, Buckner, Larimer, & Copeland, 2012), our data suggest targeting normative beliefs regarding specific events may result in even better outcomes.

Data must be considered in light of limitations that suggest avenues for future research. Future work could benefit from a multi-method (e.g., breathalyzers), multi-informant (e.g., collateral report of drinking) approach. Although the C1 sample was representative of students at C1 and the C2 sample was representative of psychology students at that campus, there were differences between the two campus' sample sizes and the C2 sample was not representative of the general gender distribution at that campus. The current study did not assess general regional norms and future work could benefit from testing whether normative beliefs reflect beliefs about students at one's university specifically or about people in one's region more generally. T2 retrospective recall could have been differentially impacted by different time periods for SB at each campus as well as by proximity of each event to date of T2 completion.

Despite these limitations, these data serve as an important first step in understanding the cross-campus differences in event-specific drinking and suggest more research is needed to identify campus differences among event-specific drinking to help inform treatment and prevention efforts.

Acknowledgments

Funding for this study was provided in part by grants from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (5R21DA029811-02, 1R34DA031937-01A1). NIDA had no further role in study design; in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to submit the manuscript for publication.

The authors would like to acknowledge the efforts of the following research assistants: Cecelia Bergeria, Stephanie Clarkson, Tim Hakenewerth, Amber Julien, Sam Kempker, Daveon McMullen, Zac Pittman, Dawn Savage, and Katherine Welch.

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Highlights

- A campus with specific traditions regarding a celebratory event (St. Patrick's Day) reported more intention to drink during St. Pat's compared to campus without the same traditions
- A campus with specific traditions regarding a celebratory event (St. Patrick's Day) expected same-campus peers would drink more during St. Pat's compared to other celebratory events (Mardi Gras, Spring Break)
- A campus with specific traditions regarding a celebratory event (St. Patrick's Day) reported more actual drinking during St. Pat's compared to campus without the same traditions
- Normative beliefs about specific events may play a powerful role in event-specific drinking

a.

b.

c.

Figure 1.

- a. Results from the 2 (Campus) X 3 (Event) mixed model ANCOVA interaction predicting participants' intended event-specific drinking
- b. Results from the 2 (Campus) X 3 (Event) mixed model ANCOVA interaction predicting participants' actual event-specific drinking
- c. Results from the 2 (Campus) X 3 (Event) mixed model ANCOVA interaction predicting event-specific drinking normative beliefs

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Students at Each Campus

	Campus 1	Campus 2	F or χ^2	p	d or Cramers phi
Six or more drinks ^a	1.51 (1.09)	1.17 (1.03)	3.26	.001	.32
Gender (% male)	67.55	16.72	152.63	<.001	.51
Drinking Frequency	1.81 (1.24)	1.94 (1.07)	10.56	.212	.36
AUDIT score	8.08 (5.51)	7.10 (4.98)	2.78	.056	.19
Greek	27.19	27.88	0.04	.852	.01
(% fraternity/sorority)					
Race (% Caucasian)	73.58	79.34	2.63	.105	.07
Age	20.14 (2.67)	20.44 (4.14)	0.54	.322	1.18

^a Self-reported frequency of alcohol use as measured by Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) item #3 in which a score of 1+ indicates past-year heavy drinking (i.e., drinking six or more drinks on one occasion).