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Expectancy, Mood and Motive: An Exploration of Alcohol Consumption Motivations  
and Protective Drinking Strategies Used by College Students

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explores the prevailing motivations college students have for drinking and examines the consequences of those motivations. Strategies for safe, responsible drinking in college are considered. Data come from a sample of 100 open-ended questionnaires regarding students' personal alcohol use. They were completed by University of Minnesota Duluth students who took a mandatory class as a result of receiving a minor alcohol consumption ticket. Students say they are drinking for a variety of reasons, but mostly because it's a way to be social and meet new people. Alcohol is thought to provide confidence, making them funnier, more relaxed, and more outgoing. Typical problems like legal consequences and getting sick from drinking were downplayed and recorded as "not really" problems, but recorded nonetheless. Many students recorded the desire to alter their alcohol decisions in three main ways: Curbing the amount, frequency, and rate of consumption. Students are using safety strategies, but not as many as they know they should or as often as they would like. The most commonly mentioned strategies were using a designated driver and staying with a trustworthy friend. Avoiding the police was recorded as a safety issue, which merits further discussion. Further study of the degree to which social interaction, motivation, and anxiety contribute to college drinking also seems warranted. These data are quantitatively corroborated by data analysis on the 2004 National College Health Assessment on the same population of students.

## Expectancy, Mood and Motive: An Exploration of Alcohol Consumption Motivations and Protective Drinking Strategies Used by College Students

There is growing concern on campuses across America regarding the heavy consumption of alcohol. Why are college students drinking out of control? Why do they allow themselves to be in a situation where they can be negatively affected? Analysis of qualitative data concerning the above questions will provide the academic community with student perspectives. College drinking research is an area where health assessments and close-ended surveys provide much of the information, but it lacks the depth and originality of personal thoughts and feelings. Open-ended student responses are valuable not only because they provide insight into student drinking, but also because they may lead researchers to ask further questions in the future.

### Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore motivations college students have for drinking, and to examine the consequences of this behavior. Additionally, strategies to promote responsible college drinking will be investigated.

### Literature Review

What are alcohol expectancies? As defined by Baer in his review on student individual drinking factors, “Alcohol expectancies are specific beliefs about the behavioral, emotional and cognitive effects of alcohol” (Baer, 2002). Similarly, Goldstein et al. describe alcohol outcome expectancies (AOE’s) as “the cognitive, affective and behavioral outcomes individuals expect as a result of drinking” (2004).

Individuals learn to associate initial events and their direct or indirect consequent outcomes to reliably predict alcohol consumption patterns. The result of this research suggests that among undergraduates, a strong connection between positive affect and social situational enhancement memory is present. This is consistent with the idea that “college students tend to consume alcohol within the context of social activities” (Goldstein et al., 2004). Adversely it was atypical, yet prominent, that students drink to cope with negative affect, suggesting the popularity of social and situational enhancement.

Furthermore, a study by Perkins (1999) suggests that stress-motivated drinking, although present in college, is more prominent and problematic in the years after college. He mentions how gender role socialization plays a part in the way members of both sexes drink. Men tend to heavily drink out in the open because it is more widely accepted by American culture. Conversely, women may drink heavily in private contexts, or for reasons of personal anxiety under the assumption that it is less socially acceptable. This is mentioned because the study showed that consequences from drinking to reduce stress appeared earlier in women than in men. Hussong (2003) also found coping and stress-related drinking to predict heavy alcohol use. Both Hussong and Perkins acknowledge the need for more research in stress-coping styles.

What do drinking motivations look like? Baer’s review points out three categories of drinking that are commonly mentioned: Social camaraderie, mood enhancement, and tension reduction. In addition, Cooper’s Drinking Motives Questionnaire (1994) was used to identify “drink-to-cope” with negative affect, and “drink-to-enhance” positive affect. Goldstein et al. found social/situational enhancement

expectancies to be most highly accessible to those feeling positive moods, and relaxation/tension reduction expectancies most highly accessible to participants in a relatively neutral mood. Baer suggests students who considered themselves social drinkers expected social enhancement from alcohol, where “problem” drinkers expected tension reduction. Walker and Larimer similarly found that “Individuals who believe alcohol has positive effects and who evaluate alcohol effects favorably are more likely to engage in problematic drinking, especially in those individuals who are generally less self-determined” (2003).

Expectancies for drinking therefore play at least a significant part in drinking motivation. Using Social Learning Theory, Read, Wood and Capone studied the reciprocal effects of social influences and alcohol use over several waves of assessment on entering undergraduates. They describe how “Behavior is shaped by environmental and individual-level factors, which in turn shape subsequent behavior” (2005) using reciprocal determinism. Results showed some correlation between social modeling and alcohol use and problems. However, more support was found to be consistent with the selection effects; that is, undergraduates seek peers with a desired style of alcohol consumption or social interaction. The social learning theory of reciprocal determinism is generally supported, but the variation between individual drinking behaviors and social environment is great when trying to distinguish between alcohol use and problems. This information provides an insight into what decisions are made, and why students make decisions about using or abusing alcohol. It is important to use these identified relationships to assess prevention strategies used by students to avoid negative consequences, and to determine how those techniques might be improved.

Benton et al. (2004) discuss the consequences of heavy alcohol use and students safety strategies. There is much evidence supporting the notion that alcohol use is the norm on college campuses today. Benton et al. state that roughly 80% of students have used alcohol in their lifetime and 70% report drinking within the past 30 days. This finding is also supported by Johnson (2005). Additionally, some 40% of those drinking do so excessively. Negative consequences of heavy episodic drinking include but are not limited to an increased likelihood of unplanned or unsafe sexual activity, physical or sexual assault, property damage, impaired academic performance, suicidal thoughts, impaired driving, and legal repercussions. Benton et al. found that students drinking six or more drinks in one sitting were less likely to experience commonly occurring consequences if they participated in self-protective strategies such as having a friend close by, drinking with food, or drinking only when a bartender is serving. Johnson also found that as protective strategies increase, negative consequences decrease (2005). Turner, Bauerle and Shu report high association between negative consequences and “each incremental increase in the eBAC (estimated blood alcohol concentration)” (2004). Benton et al. advise future researchers to explore protective strategies students utilize to control drinking and decrease problems related to alcohol.

## Methods

The University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) is part of the University of Minnesota system and is the second largest campus after the Twin Cities. UMD is a comprehensive regional university located in Duluth, Minnesota overlooking Lake Superior. In the fall of 2005, 10,497 students registered for classes. Approximately 37%

of the student body comes to UMD from the Twin Cities metro area, with 45% from greater Minnesota.

The project descriptively analyzed questionnaires distributed in a mandatory class for students who received minor alcohol consumption tickets. The data consist of 100 questionnaires from an alcohol awareness class conducted at University of Minnesota Duluth Health Services by a Chemical Health Educator. The three hour class was conducted biweekly throughout the 2004-2005 school year. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the class by the instructor and consisted of 7 open-ended questions about the student's personal alcohol use. The researcher obtained the data after the classes had concluded, having only interacted with the instructor to ask permission to use the existing data for research purposes. The Institutional Review Board approved this format.

The qualitative data analysis software program "Atlas 4.1" was used in the analysis of these data. This program enables the researcher to input qualitative data into the program for processing. Similar phrases or key words are named, coded and stored. This information is then organized into categories and sub-categories.

Quantitative data are present in the form of the National College Health Assessment (NCHA). UMD students were selected through a probability sample of classes offered during the spring semester of 2004. An analysis of the characteristics of consumption was conducted for both college females (Johnson, 2005) and males (Warness & Johnson 2006). Both reports will be used as a basis for comparison of the data.

It is important to note the potential of the reader and researcher to commit an ecological fallacy. The sample is only representative of UMD students who were caught drinking underage. Although students who drink frequently have a higher likelihood of getting caught, this does not mean all students caught are heavy drinkers. This situation should be considered when reviewing the findings of this study.

### *Research Questions*

The study seeks to understand, from students' perspectives, what is going on with alcohol behaviors and whether or not these opinions are consistent with quantitative data. Specifically in this study three questions are explored. What are the prevailing motivations and expectations for using alcohol as a college student? To what extent do students use protective strategies? What are these strategies?

### Motivation for use

There are many reasons why students choose to drink in college. Some drink to meet people, to relax from lots of studying, some like the taste of beer, while others drink to forget their problems. This section divides the related codes into three main categories: social, personal and physiological factors. There was a strong response rate relating social factors to motivation for use, while response rate strengths for physiological and personal factors were about equal.

### *Social factors*

Students responded strongest to social factors as at least one of the reasons why they like to drink, the most common reason being to meet new people. An overall sense that drinking enhances the quality of interaction when meeting new people is noticed: "Going out at night and meeting new people... drinking makes that easier."

Beliefs about how alcohol creates this enhancement include the notion of how drinking makes people:

“[Drinking] makes everything a little more entertaining.”

“Alcohol usually makes social situations more fun.”

“Friends seem and act funnier, atmosphere is usually happy.”

“Everybody is a lot more open and friendly after they have been drinking.”

These attributes contribute to making a person feel comfortable in unknown situations. If they feel funnier and they begin to think other people think they are funnier as well, then a reinforcement of the action and reaction occur. The data also demonstrate that alcohol can help disable anxiety about group interaction and alleviate the fear that they won't be liked or included:

“You're more likely to be comfortable around certain people.”

“I don't have as much fun when I'm the only sober person at a party.”

“I feel like I am part of the group.”

“The feeling of belonging and freedom.”

With the belief that alcohol enhances social situations, the likelihood of meeting more new people is increased exponentially. But why is there such an emphasis on meeting new people? One explanation could be, in part, because of the age group of 18-20 year olds. Most students are away from home for the first time. The level of comfort students felt in the past may be lacking now that they are on their own. Alcohol may simply provide an outlet for anxiety, as the following responses suggest:

“I like that I let my guard down and interact with people that I normally wouldn't if I was sober.”

“Being around new people and having no worries.”

“I love being social and a lot of times parties with alcohol gives you a license to talk to someone you might not have known.”

Other respondents express problems with shyness dissipating when they drink, or state how alcohol allows another part of their personality to come out:

“And it makes me more outgoing because I am normally really shy.”

“That you feel more relaxed and I am not as shy towards people, more talkative.”

“More willing to talk and socialize.”

Additionally, respondents record how this feeling is increased when “everyone” appears to act in the same way:

“It’s fun because everyone gets a little more outgoing.”

“Most everyone gets a little more social.”

“Want to drink if others are.”

### *Making Memories*

The making memories code shows how students put great emphasis on group inclusion. It appears that alcohol plays a role in creating situations where certain conditions are allowed to happen and contribute to group cohesion. One way this manifests is in the form of producing and sharing stories:

“Making memories good and bad.”

“Drinking beer and having many funny moments happen that would not happen if we were sober.”

“Making an ass of yourself for the stories and laughter.”

Alcohol is repeatedly the explanatory factor in providing a forum that creates the feeling of positive interaction:

“Belonging and freedom.”

“I feel like I’m part of the group.”

Similarly, the absence of alcohol can contribute to decreased group interaction, or the impression that not participating is harmful to social inclusion.

“But sometimes, not drinking socially is a problem. My friends spend weekends drinking together and socializing, and not drinking at all reduces our commonality for that night.”

### *Personal Factors*

More often than not, social and personal factors contributing to alcohol use were not mutually exclusive. That is, there was much overlapping of personal and social coding. In other words, there is a fluidity of interaction between personal and social motivation. The following examination helps to clarify the extent of how personal expectancies perpetuate social influences, and vice versa.

The code “enjoy small things more” is a prime example. Students are drinking to enhance both personal feelings, everyday events and to improve common social interactions that are normally mundane. Furthermore, the importance placed on fun is very high in most responses:

“Alcohol is a very fun drug. It makes reality better.”

“It passes the time faster, makes just hanging out with your friends more exciting.”

“I enjoy the small things a lot more, like walking down the street or even just watching a game or movie.”

For college students, this alleviation may be extended farther than society's social standards for legal drinkers. The code "excuses abnormal actions" demonstrates how alcohol is used intrapersonally as the means to a specific end, and actions within this scenario are in a "socially excused" vacuum. This vacuum appears to allow those in it to have no consequences for their actions. This notion is observed in the following responses:

"... To be able to be loose and be able to say what you want without consequences."

"Not caring about things you normally do."

"Not having to follow the rules I have for myself when I am sober."

The reality is that although actions may be postponed from reactions while intoxicated, the consequences of these actions must be addressed in some way when the effects of intoxication wear off. Emotional, physical and mental reactions will be addressed in the section on consequences later in the report.

Another example of social and personal interaction involves an increase in comfort level. This response was coded as personal motivation because it implies ownership of the feeling. Alcohol is described as having a direct influence on promoting this feeling:

"I know I feel more comfortable at parties, for example, when I am drinking."

"Alcohol makes me more comfortable with others and with myself in social situations."

"I feel like alcohol helps me to feel more comfortable when I am with other people who are drinking."

Note the ownership of the feeling of comfort and how this directly relates to interaction with other people. Relaxing is expressed in a similar manner with regard to social situations. Though this is not the case for all responses:

“Forget about the week and chill and talk with friends.”

“But everything feels better when you can just relax.”

“And relaxing with my friends.”

### *Problem Alleviation*

There are several codes that identify problem alleviation as a personal reason for drinking. However, these reasons are not owned as often as the positive reasons to drink described above. Drinking as an escape mechanism, a stress reliever, or as a means to forget about problems are loaded responses because they can be viewed in a variety of ways:

“And you can forget about any problems you have for a short time.”

“I am a lot less stressed out.”

“And you have almost no problems.”

A student could be using alcohol as relief from a specific event; for example, a failed exam. Another possible way of viewing this kind of use is as a form of unwinding in general. Depending on the context of the situation, the action may or may not be cause for concern. Both examples are contextually social, but one maintains a higher standard of agreement with social norms.

### *Physiological factors*

Responses coded as physiological concern bodily responses affecting a person. There are four categories of codes within this group: increased confidence, physiological

feeling (in general), euphoric feeling and loss of inhibition. Boosts in confidence contribute to decreased anxiety about any number of things. Confidence is an important factor in daily life, and a substance that can induce this feeling is viewed as a good thing. These students have lived in a time where great emphasis is placed on things that are bigger, better and faster. Normal people can achieve this status with the help of a pill, a diet, a supplement etc. Alcohol appears to take on this role as it is seen to help boost confidence in the following ways:

“I can talk to people, girls in particular, also not be intimidated by stronger guys.”

“More courage.”

“I get a feeling of confidence from alcohol. I also get a sense of adventure and a rush while the alcohol is hitting me. I like freestyle rapping and I am more confident doing this under the influence.”

These responses focus on how alcohol makes the respondents feel when they are drinking. Many responses associate being drunk with having fun, being relaxed and enjoying a buzz. Others enjoy being drunk or even “shit-faced”:

“When I am out I drink to maintain my buzzed feeling.”

“I like the way it makes me feel, I feel like I can really have fun when I drink.”

“I like the feeling of being drunk with friends.”

“Feels fun.”

A clear connection between feeling drunk or buzzed is associated with having fun, or in some cases feeling fun. Drinking and fun appear to be synonymous with one another. Feelings that had to do with being happy or feeling good were coded under

euphoric feelings. Students expressing these feelings predominately spoke of some heightened form of happiness:

“As well as the fun of acting wild.”

“Makes me feel like a million dollars.”

“Getting stupid fun, laughing, feeling good.”

Generally, students enjoyed the feeling the buzz gave them and it helped increase the amount of fun provided by the situation. Where happiness holds a strong presence, loss of inhibitions appears to follow. Loosening up opens the door for dramatic events, silly occurrences, and also allows for negative consequences:

“People loosen up when they are drinking and are more likely to say what they want and do what they want.”

“I run around naked.”

“Alcohol takes away your inhibitions.”

Other respondents describe how alcohol gives them a feeling of freedom. With inhibitions lowered, confidence increased, and the expectation of a “fun time” when alcohol is present, students respond to this freedom of expression. This can provide a forum allowing non-normative actions to occur, to be accepted, and to increase the bond between students as a result of sharing the experience. Personal motivations appear to be rooted in a desire for social participation, quantity of fun, and bonding between peers.

Anxiety emerges as a simple problem of self-consciousness alleviated by alcohol.

Respondents wanted to feel more confident, be part of a group and have fun.

## Consequences

Exploring the consequences students report identifies where most problems are concentrated, what problems are commonly perceived, and contributes to understanding the comprehensive analysis of safety. Consequences are divided into several categories: serious negative consequences, physical negative consequences, law-involved repercussions, control issues, job and school interference and psychological trouble.

### *Serious Negative Consequences*

There are many problems that are related directly or indirectly to alcohol. Responses dealing with concerns or experiences with serious problems focused mostly on drinking and driving, and some mentioned their own direct contact with this experience: “I witnessed one of my best friends’ death from a drunk driving accident only a few weeks before college started.”

“Three weeks ago two friends from high school died in a drunk driving accident and they were only seventeen.”

“I crashed my car.”

“I have a DWI and 2 minors.”

Other serious impacts students recorded appeared to influence them on a more personal level, perhaps because the actions had reactions not generally viewed as positive:

“Sometimes I find myself in situations where in the morning I didn’t know what I did, with some random guy, I see that as a problem.”

“Hitting on women and being charged for assault.”

“I got raped last fall at a UMD party. I was a senior in high school and got raped because I didn’t have anyone taking care of me.”

As discussed earlier, anxiety may play a part in creating seemingly good reasons to drink. Alcohol is mentioned as relieving worries, problems and stress. Doubts about physical health and well-being seem to play a part in some respondents’ decision-making processes:

“Being afraid of what will happen if I get too drunk.”

“My friend had an asthma attack while drunk she was panicking and I thought she was dying.”

“I’ve done a lot of stupid things where I don’t remember ever deciding to do, like walking three miles home without a jacket and ripping clothes and finding bruises.”

“I’ve seen many people that are close to me do very dumb things and are now living with the consequences, so I learned from them.”

### *Physical Consequences*

Hangovers are consequences that are more common and less intense. Results of drinking too much or too fast usually end up in vomiting, many students report:

“Alcohol related problems? I feel like I get sick a lot.”

“Puking up what I had eaten earlier.”

“I throw up sometimes which sucks.”

A fairly large proportion of students reply to the question “What problems have you had with alcohol?” with responses similar to these:

“None, I have puked a couple of times, a couple of bad hangovers.”

“None really, maybe had a little too much a few times and gotten sick.”

The first part of the above response directly contradicts the second part, which normally wouldn't make any sense. However, this sheds light on a different issue: What is normal for these students? Finding out what is normal may help to understand what is and isn't a problem to them. Although students mention physical consequences; they are disregarding the act as a problem by saying they don't consider vomiting (or the like) a major problem.

### *Legal Repercussions*

The trend in downplaying the consequences of drinking appears in legal problems. This sample of students have all had legal consequences from drinking underage, which is what got them to the class in the first place. It appears as though the seriousness of getting caught by the police is forgotten:

"I have not had many major problems other than this minor and the cops."

"Not any real problems, just getting in trouble with the police."

"I have this silly consumption. Big fines!"

Students mention economic problems connected to legal repercussions of getting caught drinking underage:

"Lots of stress!! Lots of bills and court."

"Only problem is the money it costs."

"Fines cost a lot, as does the alcohol."

For students who choose to drink, there is the constant presence of police that aggravate and anger students for a plethora of reasons. There are two main categories of responses concerning police. The first is police problems while the second is police avoidance, a protective strategy discussed later. Students addressed the issue of police

both as a problem and safety issue. The following responses concern problems with the authorities:

“I don’t want to change anything except I wish the jerk ass cops wouldn’t be able to get people who were drinking responsibly.”

“Stand up for my civil rights when a cop confronts me.”

“In court or to the police, we never get a chance.”

Although many respondents recorded problems with the police, most were not hostile. However, the vast majority of issues concerning police had to do with avoiding them. Because many answers were in response to the question “What will you do differently to be safe?” their focus is on avoiding the police as a safety precaution. Especially when students are using alcohol, this is a cause for concern. It is difficult for a person who has been drinking to use sound judgment when weighing his or her consequences. Even though it doesn’t happen very often, a student’s death is a great loss and one that is not taken lightly. If a death occurs because a student hesitated to call the police for fear of punishment, it is a big problem:

“What will you do differently to be safe? Go sit in a car and drink, or be off campus by 9:30 so I can’t get busted.”

“Nothing really, I was unlucky getting caught but I don’t feel I need to change anything other than taking extra precautions not to get caught again.”

“I understand I can’t afford to get in trouble again. Financially, or with parents and school. Mostly parents and school.”

The above responses show the strong emphasis on not getting caught by the police or the attempt to avoid police creating a riskier situation altogether. They suggest

the possibility of not contacting the police because they don't want to get caught again. This is also another way students may downplay a consequence.

The problem of controlling alcohol

Many students report having problems controlling how much and how often they drink. Some respondents express not being able to stop once they have started, but still desire to drink anyway:

"It never seems like I just do it to have a few. It's like an all or nothing kind of thing.

Once I start drinking I don't have much control over stopping."

"Having it get out of hand, drinking every day."

"Often I drink way more than I should, or even want to."

Generally, students reported drinking too much as a problem like "getting out of control and loud." One student remarks that this is the norm:

"I think that I drink a lot, but at college that's pretty much all everyone does."

Still, others say that they have control of their drinking and that it's not an issue:

"Very slim occasions I drink too much."

Other students go further and recognize their alcohol use as a potential problem:

"If I get into any more trouble, it will be a problem."

"I tend to say things I wouldn't normally say and get with girls I wouldn't normally get with, also driving."

"It could be, but probably not."

Poorly controlling alcohol negatively affects job and school performance, which is consistent with the quantitative study examined in conjunction with this qualitative

study. Respondents discuss the problem of poor job and school performance as a result of over consumption:

“Bad days at work.”

“I’ve been fired.”

“Missing classes, not doing as well in school.”

There are also problems with parents and loved ones:

“I told my best friend I was going to hit him in the head with a bottle because I was drunk.”

“Fights with boyfriend, fights with parents.”

“Parental repercussions.”

Emotional stress is also a problem:

“Telling lies.”

“Sometimes get mood swings.”

“... Rowdy, mean.”

“... and I do things I regret, like kissing guys I’m not interested in.”

Although many responses are short and poorly worded, there are some responses that show a certain degree of insight concerning how drinking affects others:

“Many people are blind to the impact alcohol has on you as a person because they begin to stop caring.”

“... But more so, people are drinking because they don’t have confidence and don’t like who they are.”

Both of these responses display how alcohol can negatively affect your person. However, notice that the responses do not own the feeling being discussed. One cannot

make an assumption as to whether the respondent feels that way about themselves, their friends, or people in general. Nonetheless, compare the insights above to the following responses:

“I’ve ruined one friendship by fooling around with his girlfriend, which I wouldn’t do sober.”

“Done things I regret doing.”

“Saying regretful things.”

“Alcohol related problems? Getting in trouble, telling lies, hurting people emotionally.”

These responses are consistent with the observation of delayed consequences. It is not that these individuals did not care at all; they just didn’t care at the time. Regret comes in hindsight, and the regret over the above problems is commonly expressed as a consequence of drinking too much.

### Strategies for safety

Finding a balance between fun and safety is difficult for many students. When students expressed a lack of control there was usually a follow up comment that stated how there was a desire to improve in this area. Respondents answered the questions “What would you do if you weren’t drinking this weekend?” and “What will you do to increase your protective factors?” Some students described how they were already safe and did not need to do anything different, while many others had at least a general idea of how they could be a safer person and how they could better control their situation.

### *Designated drivers*

Although responses varied, the desire for a sober cab or designated driver was a clear safety request:

“Always use a designated driver or cab.”

“I will keep doing what I usually do with finding a sober driver or taking a taxi.”

“Make sure to always have a designated driver or someone watching over us.”

Others recognize the need for improvement:

“I don’t want to get in the car with someone who has been drinking, even if it has been just one beer.”

“Use a designated driver more than I do.”

“I think I would like to stop drinking and driving.”

### *Trustworthy friends*

Many college drinkers are in their first year of school and are in the process of forming new relationships. It makes sense then, that the second most requested safety strategy is the need for a better buddy system when it comes to drinking:

“Always go home with a friend I trust.”

“Go with a group of friends that will look out for each other, I will continue to do this.”

“The best thing is to be with at least one or two people that you are friends with when you party to keep safe.”

Many students recorded how they want to take care of not only themselves, but also their friends. They want to keep them safe and look out for them:

“Try to be responsible and look out for my friends...”

“And make sure to watch out for my friends.”

“I am pretty protective of myself and others now; I have changed for the better with all the protective issues.”

*Be aware of surroundings*

When alcohol is involved in a situation it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a safe level of awareness of one’s surroundings. By setting up a plan before consuming alcohol, fun can be had while being safe at the same time. Students express how they will create a better situation for themselves when drinking, although most are not very specific:

“Never putting myself in a bad position.”

“Be more cautious of who and where.”

“Be careful when I walk down stairs.”

*Watch drink/keep track of how many drinks*

An important safety factor for students is staying close to their drink in order to prevent someone from putting drugs in it. This strategy can also help respondents to keep track of the number of drinks they’ve had:

“I will start watching my drinks, and my friends drinks too.”

“I will only drink my own drinks.”

“Use a shot glass instead of taking pulls.”

“Count how much I’ve had to drink.”

*Know limits*

Most students did not go into great depth as to what their limits were, just that they should know them. Some, however, tried describing what limits are:

“Not get so drunk to where I can’t remember most of the night.”

“Do not go past the buzz stage. I don’t need to be puking or passing out.”

“Pace myself.”

The last response is important because drinking over time allows the body to adjust to drinking. A person who drinks an equal amount, only slower, will be more capable of administering protective strategies. Pacing in itself is a protective strategy allowing more control as some respondents wished they had:

“Control the amount I drink.”

“Take it slow.”

“Watch how fast I drink.”

Additionally, it is important to students that their friends are okay too. Some students express their concern for others’ limits:

“I will try to look out for my friends, and pay attention to problem signs.”

“Keep a look out for my friends that might drink to much.”

“Check passed out peoples breathing before breaking out the sharpies.”

### *Drink water and eat food*

Learning preemptive strategies for a positive drinking experience is important for students, especially when willpower is not always strong when consuming alcohol. By drinking with a meal, eating before a party or drinking water, problems controlling the amount or rate of consumption are moderated more by the body’s systems and less by the willpower of an 18 year old on a Saturday night:

“Eat before I drink.”

“I usually eat before I drink. I also drink water before I go to bed, and leave a bottle of water next to my bed for the morning.”

“Drink plenty of water and eat.”

Curbing consumption: amount, frequency, and rate

In response to the questions “What do you want to change about your drinking?” and “What will you do to improve your protective factors?” students’ answers congregated around three kinds of alcohol control: decreasing the frequency, amount and rate of consumption. Some students mentioned peer pressure as a factor in their inability to control their drinking, as if the influence of others was too hard to resist:

“I want to be able to not drink when everyone else is if I don’t want to and still have a good time.”

“When my friends ask me to go out to a party, I almost always agree, and it gets me behind on sleep.”

“I want to be able to go out and not have to drink.”

*Amount*

Others mentioned wanting to relax and drink responsibly, suggesting that they are drinking too much but want to change and adjust their drinking to within moderation:

“I want to be more responsible and drink in moderation.”

“Watch the amount of alcohol I ingest more carefully.”

“I wish that I didn’t drink so much.”

Many students simply stated they need to drink less, but others gave reasons why. Many said they need to study more and drink less. Still, others expressed decreasing the quantity and increasing the quality of alcohol being consumed, as well as decreasing drinking and increasing social activities.

### *Frequency*

Students and faculty alike joke that the weekend keeps getting longer, with some students partying Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. It makes sense that students realize this is a little excessive. The desire to drink less often is expressed in the following ways:

“Don’t drink during the week at all. I don’t need to drink on weekends.”

“I would like to be able to control my drinking more. To be able to stop myself whenever I wanted to. I would also try not to drink as often as I do.”

“I don’t get too drunk but I get drunk a lot. About 4 times a week. I would like to cut back a little on that.”

### *Rate*

Pacing as a safety precaution appears to be a difficult skill to learn, but quite beneficial for many students. Some students realized that pacing their drinking is controlling their drinking:

“What do you want to change about your use? Don’t drink so much so fast.”

“Slow down how fast I drink and how often.”

“I can knock them back way too fast sometimes.”

There is clear recognition of lack of control over how fast, often and amount respondents are drinking. The majority of students have at least some kind of problem controlling their drinking, but they are beginning to recognize what protective strategies they use. By receiving information on gaining safety skills, students are given the power to decide how safe they want to be, how they define fun, and where to find the balance between the two.

## Quantitative Support

As a supplemental portion of this study, the 2004 National College Health Assessment (NCHA) was referenced for consistencies across quantitative and qualitative data. Johnson (2005) and Warness & Johnson (2005) analyzed a variety of characteristics from the NCHA including drug and alcohol use, health, sex, weight and academic performance impediments as compared to three levels of alcohol consumption. The general trends were the same for both sexes when looking at level of consumption, but the amounts were higher for males than for females, with the male mean number of drinks consumed during the last drinking episode being 10.12 and females with 6.02. These means exclude non-drinkers.

## *Academics*

An obvious connection between the qualitative and quantitative data is the notion that drinking is an academic strain. Many students, in response to the question “What would you change about your drinking?” Or “What would you do if you didn’t drink this weekend?” answered they would study more:

“I would do homework.”

“Work harder at school.”

“Catch up on studies.”

The results of the NCHA reports showed a clear inverse relationship between drinking and GPA. The less a person drank, the better their grades were. Heavy drinkers had the highest percentage of C grades and the lowest percent of A grades, while non-drinkers had the highest percentage of A grades. This further supports the fact that

students who drink irresponsibly perform less well than their more restrained counterparts. See the table below.

#### Male GPA's

| GPA Range | % Non-drinkers | % Below mean | % At/above mean |
|-----------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| A         | 31             | 20           | 12              |
| B         | 61.5           | 50.5         | 54              |
| C         | 8              | 26           | 32              |

#### Female GPA's

| GPA Range | % Non-drinkers | % Below mean | % At/above mean |
|-----------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|
| A         | 38.9           | 29.1         | 15.6            |
| B         | 48.1           | 55.5         | 63.3            |
| C         | 13             | 15.5         | 21.1            |

#### *Safety*

As stated in the literature review, Benton et al (2004), Turner, Bauerle and Shu (2004), and Johnson (2005) support the notion that students have less negative consequences when safety strategies are implemented. When examining the NCHA data, those students who drank heavily (10 or more drinks last drinking occasion for Males, 6 or more drinks in last party occasion for females) consistently used safety measures less frequently than those students who drank 9 and 5 or less drinks, respectively, in the last

drinking occasion. The most frequently used safety measures were using a designated driver, eating before drinking, and keeping track of the number of drinks. Below are selected data demonstrating the lack of use of safety measure by each group of drinkers.

Males having “rarely or never” used safe drinking measures

Type of safety measure            % Below mean                            % At/Above mean

|   |      |     |
|---|------|-----|
| Alternate alcoholic and non alcoholic drinks        | 53.5 | 81  |
| Determined in advance not to exceed set # of drinks | 47.5 | 75  |
| Use designated driver                               | 5    | 4.5 |
| Keeping track of # of drinks                        | 26   | 38  |
| Eat before/during drinking                          | 1    | 7   |
| Avoid drinking games                                | 39   | 76  |

Females having “rarely or never” used safe drinking measures

Type of safety measure            % Below mean                            % At/Above mean

|   |      |      |
|---|------|------|
| Alternate alcoholic and non alcoholic drinks        | 35.8 | 67   |
| Determined in advance not to exceed set # of drinks | 30.9 | 61.2 |
| Use designated driver                               | 0.9  | 1.7  |
| Keeping track of # of drinks                        | 7.3  | 32.2 |

|                            |      |      |
|----------------------------|------|------|
| Eat before/during drinking | 0.9  | 5.2  |
| Avoid drinking games       | 42.1 | 80.2 |

Qualitative data respondents most commonly described having a designated driver or sober cab and a trustworthy friend as the safety measure they use, followed by eating and drinking water before and after drinking. While the qualitative data does not distinguish between levels of alcohol consumption, there is clear consistency of the preferred methods of safety practiced, and the implication that they are effective when used. Within the NCHA data there was no option for having a trustworthy friend as a safety measure, but given the commonality of this response in the qualitative findings, it should be considered as an addition to future NCHA instrument questions.

*Consequences*

In the NCHA data, negative consequences as a result of drinking occur in much greater frequency for heavy drinkers than for moderate drinkers. The most common negative consequence reported for heavy drinkers was regret, closely followed by forgetting what happened or where he or she was.

Males experiencing consequences as a result of drinking

| Type of Consequence      | % Below mean | % At/Above mean |
|--------------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Injury to self           | 19           | 48              |
| Injury to another person | 3            | 26              |
| Fighting                 | 9            | 27              |

|   |      |    |
|---|------|----|
| Did something but later regretted it                          | 45.5 | 72 |
| Forgot where you were or what you did                         | 31   | 72 |
| Had someone use threat of force or force to have sex with you | --   | 2  |
| Had unprotected sex   | 15   | 28 |

Females experiencing consequences as a result of drinking

Type of Consequence                      % Below mean                      % At/Above mean

|   |      |      |
|---|------|------|
| Injury to self  | 16.1 | 50   |
| Injury to another person                                      | 1.8  | 6.9  |
| Fighting  | 2.7  | 12.1 |
| Did something but later regretted it                          | 33.9 | 70.7 |
| Forgot where you were or what you did                         | 31.3 | 66.4 |
| Had someone use threat of force or force to have sex with you | 3.6  | 6.9  |
| Had unprotected sex   | 12.5 | 28.4 |

Within the qualitative data, the most common answers tended to focus on physical consequences like vomiting, hangovers, and injury. Problems from drinking too much and not being able to control actions were often mentioned, including emotional, relationship, and regret as consequences from drinking. Student responses from the qualitative data were consistent with the quantitative data.

#### Future research and limitations

Gender-specific analysis was not possible with the qualitative data because of the anonymity of the survey, but would be suggested in additional research studies. Individual interviews and observation sessions should also be considered as alternative methods of data collection. Also, investigating personal motivations to drink resulting from pre-interaction social anxiety could shed light on the extent it influences the drinking patterns of college freshmen, especially among females. Lastly, examining the merit behind the punishment (and its aversion by students) when there is an emergency is recommended.

#### Discussion

Students' perspectives are deep with meaning from thoughts, feelings, and past experiences. Exploring these feelings is only the beginning in understanding what motivates students to drink, especially when they know the benefits are not exceedingly prevalent. When this insight is combined with measurable data, a clearer picture is created for professionals and researchers to use.

What are the prevailing motivations and expectations for using alcohol as a college student? The data examined in this study suggest that for the majority of students, drinking is a social act. Many students consider drinking a fun way to meet new people and make friends. Respondent's answers also seem to highlight the fragility of young adulthood. In 18-20 year olds, most on their own for the first time, making new friends is very important. They now have the freedom to do this in anyway they choose, which can be overwhelming at times. It is generally assumed that drinking to relieve anxiety or stress is associated with negative personal motivations, but after analyzing these responses it appears that feeling the need to interact socially (and in many situations constantly due to dormitory living) seems to create a motive for "drinking before drinking" due to anxiety concerning social interaction. This is not to say that many students are suffering from social anxiety disorders, just that there may be more personal explanations for motivation and expectancy.

Many students claim alcohol helps increase comfort level, confidence, relaxation and allows for good times. This helps to form and strengthen bonds between people. As dramatic events occur, stories are told about crazy acts which reinforce these bonds. Alcohol is culturally accepted and easy to come by, so reasons to drink become more than simply social, morphing into the widely accepted method for college students to have fun, celebrate, commiserate, relax, energize, and experiment with when there is nothing else to do.

To what extent do students use protective strategies? The act of avoiding police for fear of a second violation was often stated as a safety precaution. The strong aversion to police has the potential to backfire in the event of an emergency. A student may not

call the police for fear of retribution, while someone who needs medical attention may not get it. Given the age group and a drunken person's decreased reasoning skills, this is a likely and grave situation.

Most students reported that they use some kind of protective strategy, but could improve the consistency of it in addition to using other strategies. Problems concerning the law and getting sick from drinking were downplayed and not considered major problems. Because these are common consequences from drinking, they are viewed as normal. However, controlling the intake of alcohol was continually expressed as a change that students wanted to make to increase their safety and decrease negative consequences. Although there are many strategies students either already employ or learned as a result of the alcohol awareness class, the atmosphere in which students drink will continue to play a part in students' ability to mediate over-consumption.

When asked what safety strategies students could increase, many reported wanting to be more vigilant in using a designated driver. This suggests they use designated drivers, but not as much as they should. Also mentioned was the desire to use a completely sober driver and not just the least drunk person in the group. Sticking with a buddy or going out with trustworthy friends were also common response for improving safety.

Distinguishing the unique structure of perhaps UMD students' most popular social activity is just a single step in the continual effort to improve the quality of life on campus. The hope is that it will promote the creation of a better forum for striking a balance between safety and fun for students and community members alike.

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