



Actual vs. Perceived Substance Use Among College Students

By: Jordan Ragland, Faculty Advisor: Dr. Randolph Lee, Dept of Psychology

An Investigation on college students motivations towards substance use



Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

Introduction

Why Substance Use? The abuse of substances can lead to substance use disorder which can develop later in life if not treated. It can be caused by the over use or misuse of alcohol, nicotine, marijuana and hard drugs.

Background

- Alcohol and illicit substance use has been recognized as a widespread public health concern across college campuses in the United States (Shepard et al. 2017).
- There have been many educational efforts that have become reevaluated due to their limited success as reducing young adult substance use rates. So, it is imperative to seek further reasoning on how and why college student substance use rates are on the rise if educational programs are not the answer.
- Prior research has suggested that perceived norms are among one of the strongest predictors of college student substance use (Ecker et al. 2017).
- Researchers have also found that college students typically overestimate the amount their students or peers consume which relates to one's own drinking and substance use behavior (Lewis et al. 2011).



Research Questions

- Do college students underestimate, correctly estimate or overestimate their peer's substance use?
- What indirect influences motivate college student substance use?

Objectives

- The present study sought to understand college student indirect motivations for substance use (alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, and hard drugs).
- The present study also sought to Investigate if there is a relationship between students apart of defined groups (i.e. Greek life and Athletes) and higher personal substance use rates.
- Finally, this study sought to understand if close friends have an affect on personal substance use rates.

Method



Project Design

- 32 question survey
- 4 Sections

1

Demographic Questions

2

Self motivations behind Substance use

3

Beliefs about peer's substance use

4

Friend influence on personal substance use

Variables	Social Norms	Group Norms	Friend Influence
Hypotheses	H1: The participant's self-reported data will be lower than their prediction for their peers	H2: Male and female athletes and Greek life participants will report higher personal substance use than participants not in a group	H3: Participants are more likely to partake in substance use if their friends approve of this behavior
Example Questions	What percentage of students do you believe have ingested hard drugs in the past 30 days? I. 0-25% II. 25-50% III. 50-75% IV. 75-100%	Do you participate in Greek life at Trinity College? I. Yes II. No III. I was at one point but I am not anymore	Whether or not you use drugs and regardless of amount, do your friends support your decision about alcohol consumption in the past 30 days? I. Yes II. No III. They do not have a preference

Interpretations

Social Norms

- Marijuana was the most overestimated and least used by the participants because it has the biggest reputation and more males consume this drug than females.
- The low acknowledgment of hard drug use may be due to its stronger social stigma.
- Alcohol and nicotine were the more commonly used substances and had the least amount of overestimation, perhaps because there is little to no stigma associated with the use of these substances.

Group Norms

- Athletes**
 - None of the findings were significant because athletes have a stricter schedule and perhaps not be able to be social as frequently as they want.
- Greek life**
 - Alcohol was the only significant finding perhaps because it is the most socially acceptable substance to use.

Friend Influence

- If close friends approve of substance use, participants are more likely to feel justified using that particular substance and be more incline to use that substance.

Results

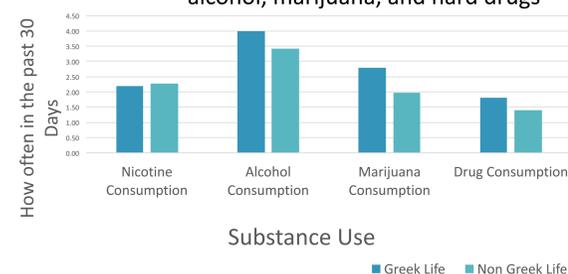
Social Norms:

Personal substance use compared to the percent of Trinity College students perceived to partake in that specific substance (alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, and hard drugs)

Actual Participants 'Substance Consumption in the Past 30 Days				Estimated Perceived Peer Consumption				
Alcohol	Nicotine	Marijuana	Hard Drug	Alcohol	Nicotine	Marijuana	Hard Drug	
96.08%	54.90%	41.18%	33.33%	<i>Underestimated</i>	35.29%	33.33%	11.76%	19.61%
				<i>Correctly Estimated</i>	64.71%	39.22%	39.22%	43.14%
				<i>Overestimated</i>	0.00%	27.45%	49.02%	37.25%

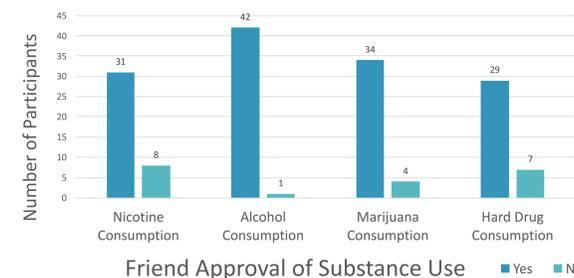
Group Norms:

How often in the past 30 days athletes versus non-varsity athletes consumed nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, and hard drugs



Friend Influence:

Influence on Participants Friends on their personal Substance use



Future Research

- Testing this same hypotheses with a greater sample size.
- Broadening the research to larger schools rather than a small liberal arts college.
- Researchers can test this social norms idea with sexual tendencies, social media.

Limitations

- Very small sample size.
- Survey can hinder participants full honesty.
- The participant personal consumption used a difference comparing scale than their estimation of peers – could not fully compare.

Acknowledgments

- I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Randolph Lee for guiding me through this entire study.
- I would like to also give a special thank you to Professor Amie Senland for helping me analyze my results.
- I also want to thank Jack Foley for helping me compare the descriptive statistics.

References

Available upon request from researcher