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# Social Anxiety, Alcohol Consumption, and College Students

Rachel Countryman

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## Abstract

This study examined relationships among social anxiety and motives for alcohol consumption in a sample of 175 college students ranging from ages 18 to 22 from two small liberal arts schools in the Midwest. A Social Anxiety Inventory Scale, Drinking Motivation Questionnaire-Revised, and Recommended Alcohol Questions were administered via survey to participants. Results indicated there were some significance relationships among social anxiety and particular motives for alcohol consumption. Significant positive correlations were found among social anxiety and coping and enhancement motives for alcohol consumption.

## Introduction

The transition from high school into college presents many changes; the new environment, people, and experiences are both exciting and anxiety provoking. Although many successfully make this transition to college, others experience long-term emotional maladjustment and depression (Gall, Evans, & Bellerose, 2000; Hammen 1980; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (2020), it is a common to experience anxiety from time to time in life; in fact, nearly 40 million people (about 18%) of people in the United States experience anxiety in a given year. College is also a time where individuals gain a newfound independence, and there might be opportunities to experiment with substances such as alcohol. Close to 60% of college students between the ages 18-22 admitted to consuming alcohol in the past month (Galbicsek, 2020). It is plausible that there is a potential correlation between social anxiety and motivations for alcohol consumption in college students (Labrie et. al., 2008). This study examines these potential relationships.

## Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: Women will report drinking more frequently compared to men for coping motives.
- Hypothesis 2: Men will report drinking more frequently than women for enhancement motives.
- Hypothesis 3: Upper-class students will report drinking more frequently for social motives.
- Hypothesis 4: Underclass students would drink more frequently compared to upperclassmen for conformity motives (drinking to fit in) when social anxiety may be present.
- Hypothesis 5: There will be a positive correlation between social anxiety and three types of drinking motivations (coping, conformity, and enhancement). There will be a negative correlation between social anxiety and social motivations for drinking.
- Hypothesis 6: Gender and social anxiety will predict coping motivation for drinking. More specifically, people who identify as women and experience social anxiety will be more likely to report coping motivations for drinking compared to men.

## Method

### Participants

- The sample included undergraduate students from two small, private, Midwestern, Catholic, liberal arts colleges was recruited to participate in an online survey. After data cleaning, the total sample ( $N = 175$ ) included students ranging from approximately 18 to 22 years of age.
- Participants identified as men ( $N = 38$ ), women ( $N = 127$ ), and non-binary or genderqueer ( $N = 9$ ) students. In terms of race and ethnicity of the participants, the sample included 4.6% Hispanic/Latino ( $N = 8$ ), 0.6% Black or African American, Non-Hispanic ( $N = 1$ ), 85.7% White, Non-Hispanic ( $N = 150$ ), 0.6% American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic ( $N = 1$ ), 3.4% Asian, Non-Hispanic ( $N = 6$ ), 2.3% whose racial identity was not listed, and 2.9% who chose not to answer ( $N = 5$ )
- These participants were recruited from Introductory Psychology and upper division psychology classes and received course credit for participating.

### Materials

- **Drinking Motives Questionnaire:** A 20-item questionnaire that assesses motivation to consume alcohol (Cooper, 2009). There are four primary subscales including social, coping, enhancement, and conformity.
- **Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS):** A 20-item survey that assesses anxiety when interacting with others socially (Mattick, Clark, 1998).
- **Recommended Alcohol Questions:** A 3-item survey that assesses patterns of their alcohol use (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2003).
- **Demographics Questionnaire:** A questionnaire that assessed participant age, gender, year in school, and racial identity.

### Procedure

After receiving IRB approval, participants were recruited to participate in the online survey. Through the program PRIA, students were asked to participate. The survey included an informed consent form, Drinking Motives Questionnaire, Social Interaction Anxiety Scale, Recommended Alcohol Questions, as well as the Demographic Questionnaire. The results of the survey were anonymously sent to the researcher for statistical analysis.

## Results

Independent samples t-tests were performed for hypotheses 1, 2, 3, and 4 to Examine gender and class-year differences in student motivations to consume alcohol. No significant results were found. The results of Pearson correlation analyses only partially supported hypothesis 5. The total SAIS score was significantly and positively associated with the total score on the DMQR Coping subscale,  $r(162) = .349, p < .01$ . In addition, a significant positive relationship was found between social anxiety and the DMQR Enhancement subscale,  $r(162) = .165, p < .05$ .

A regression was performed to determine whether gender and social anxiety predict coping motivation for drinking. Results showed anxiety as a significant predictor of drinking to cope,  $\beta = .096, t(161) = 4.326, p < .001$ . However, gender was not a significant predictor of drinking to cope. The model explained a significant proportion of variance in coping motives,  $R^2 = .14, F(2,163) = 13.23, p < .001$ , indicating that it accounts for 14% of the variation in scores of coping motives for alcohol consumption. This partially supports hypothesis 6, that social anxiety, but not gender, is a significant predictor of drinking to cope.

### Pearson Correlation $r$ values

	SIAS
DMQR Subscale Coping	.349**
DMQR Subscale Conformity	.065
DMQR Subscale Enhancement	.165*
DMQR Subscale Social	.132

\*significant at  $p < .05$

\*\* significant at  $p < .01$

## Discussion

The results of this study supports previous literature in that it revealed a small, significant, positive association among social anxiety and enhancement motives for alcohol consumption, as well as a moderate, significant, positive association among social anxiety and coping motives. Social anxiety was also a significant predictor of coping motives for drinking. This is important because colleges and universities often attempt to decrease binge drinking among their students and addressing social anxiety could possibly help further this goal. This way, when social anxiety may be present, students will not feel a need to resort to drinking to cope with this anxiety, they can find other tools to help with coping and/or decrease anxiety. Also, this can be helpful for students so that when anxiety may be present, they do not feel the need to resort to drinking to enhance their social experience. Possible limitations to this study are that it was survey based and included a small sample. Future researchers should further explore linkages among social anxiety, motives for alcohol consumption, and possible interventions to reduce problem drinking.

## References

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