Family or friends: what counts more for drinking behaviour of young adults? / Familia o amigos: ¿qué pesa más en los hábitos de consumo de alcohol de los jóvenes?

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Family or friends: what counts more for drinking behaviour of young adults?

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ABSTRACT

The scientific literature stresses the importance of culture and social environment in determining what people think about alcohol consumption and consequently do. Several researches proved the influence on young adults' alcohol use of proximal social contexts of the family and peers. The present study aimed at investigating the influence of family behaviours and norms compared to the peers influence in a context where the culture of alcohol is changing between the different generations. Data were collected by means of a self-report questionnaire on a sample of 598 young adults (average age 22.20 years). The variables investigated were socio-demographic characteristics, the alcohol consumption of parents and friends, and the parents and peers approval of alcohol consumption. The results confirmed the role of family and friends in influencing young adults' consumption of alcohol stressing a difference between perceived behaviours and norms. The perceived consumption of parents and friends influenced the participants' consumption. On the contrary, the effects of the approval of drinking was limited. Globally the friends had a stronger influence on alcohol consumption in comparison with family.

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the young adults in Europe and North America regularly consume alcohol. This behaviour causes several negative psychological, social, and physical health consequences: academic failures, social exclusion, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, accidents, and violence and injury (Gmel & Rehm, 2003; Schoenborn, Stommel, & Ward, 2014; Viner and Taylor, 2007). The general consumption is not always problematic but a dangerous tendency of adolescents and young adults is the so-called "binge drinking" (Fillmore & Jude, 2011; Hemström, Leifman, & Ramstedt, 2002). Binge drinking is drinking five or more drinks in a row (Wechsler & Nelson, 2001) and, increasing the risk of the above mentioned negative consequences, is considered a major health concern (Courtney & Polich, 2009; Hutter, Lawton, Pals, O'Connor, & McEachan, 2015).

Individual and social factors influence the consumption of alcohol among young adults (Ham & Hope, 2003; Vernig, & Orsillo, 2015). Concerning the individual factors, in literature there are two main theoretical frameworks: The Motivational Model (Cox & Klinger, 1988) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991). Both theories also included social influences. The Motivational Model maintains that the individuals drink to obtain positive outcomes or to avoid negative consequences and they may be motivated to drink by internal or external rewards. The external source of rewards for the young adults is mainly the peer group. The two externally generated drinking motives (i.e. Social and Conformity) are enjoying better the social gatherings and not to feel left out of the group. The TPB maintains that drinking alcohol is determined by individuals' attitude, their beliefs about what others do and what is expected of them (i.e. subjective norms), and the perceived behavioural control on drinking. Several studies explained the alcohol consumption among students using the TPB (Armitage, Conner, Loach, & Willets, 1999; Huchting, Lac, & La Brie, 2008; McMillan & Conner, 2003). The subjective norms are the individual's

opinions about what important others (i.e. parents and friends) do and think the individual should do. Both theoretical frameworks stress the importance of social environment in determining what people think about alcohol consumption and consequently do. The research literature proved the influence on adolescent alcohol use of proximal social contexts of the family and peers (Chartier, Hesselbrock, & Hesselbrock, 2010; Van Damme, Maes, Kuntsche, Crutzen, De Clercq, Van Lippevelde, & Hublet, 2015). The disapproval of alcohol use by parents and peers is a protective factor against drinking (Donovan, 2004; Mrug, & McCay, 2013; Nash, McQueen, & Bray, 2005). The family influences college students too. Males and females having a family history of alcohol abuse consume more drinks per week and have positive expectations about drinking (LaBrie, Migliuri, Kenney, & Lac, 2010). Nevertheless, for several students, the University is the occasion to get out of family home and this fact may reduce parental control and influence on drinking behaviours.

Concerning friends, intensified contacts with peers characterize the transition from adolescence to adulthood. These interactions often occur in sites where the alcohol consumption and the development of peer relations co-exist (i.e. Pubs, Nightclubs, and Parties) (Træen & Nordlund, 1993). For this reason, young people may assume alcoholic beverages to facilitate peer group integration (Maggs, Frome, Eccles, & Barber, 1997; Monaci, Scacchi, Posa, & Trentin, 2013) and the social relations can increase the alcohol consumption (Tartaglia, 2014).

The current study

European literature on alcohol consumption classically distinguish the Southern European countries, where alcohol is moderately consumed at mealtimes, from the Northern European countries, where people drink more for social reasons (Atwell, Abraham, & Duka, 2011; Room & Mäkelä, 2000). In Italy, the situation was changing in the last decades. In Italy, the consumption of alcoholic drinks is traditional and deeply rooted and Italy is one of the principal wine producers of the world. Forty years ago, Italians consumed more alcohol than the majority of the other citizens of

European Union but from then up to now the alcohol consumption in Italy has been decreasing constantly and now is lower than the average consumption of the European Union (European Community Health Indicators)[1]. This is due to the changing of the drinking habits. The daily traditional wine consumption reduced remarkably and this fact is responsible for the general reduction of alcohol consumption (Beccaria & Prina, 2010). Yet, at the same time, young people increased the consumption of beer and spirits and the frequency of binge drinking. Now in Italy the youths drink mainly beer and spirits at night in social gatherings whereas their parents belong to a generation that used to drink wine daily at mealtimes (ISTAT, 2014).

There have been numerous studies in recent decades of peers and parents influence on young adult alcohol consumption but the shifting trends in Italians' drinking make particular this context. Now in Italy for the young adults the peers are mainly social drinkers of beer and spirits whereas the parents daily wine consumers. For these reasons, it is interesting to investigate the influence of family behaviours and norms compared to the peers influence in a country where the culture of alcohol is changing between the different generations. The present study aimed at comparing the effects of various predictors on the consumption of different alcoholic beverages and on the frequency of binge drinking among Italian young adults.

We investigated the effects of four kinds of predictors: (a) socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age); (b) social environment (number of friends usually frequented, living outside parents' home); (c) alcohol consumption of parents and friends; (d) subjective norms (parents and peers approval of alcohol consumption). We tested the influence of all the predictors on the consumption of beer (preferred alcoholic drink of young Italians), wine (traditional Italian alcoholic beverage), Spirits (high alcohol content beverages), and on the frequency of binge drinking.

METHOD

[1] It is possible to consult the data on alcohol consumption in Europe using the Health in Europe Information and Data Interface (HEIDI) available on the website of the European Commission. http://ec.europa.eu/health-eu/my_lifestyle/alcohol/index_en.htm

Participants

The study involved 598 participants (60.5% male, 39.5 % female) recruited among undergraduate and graduate Italian students of Arts and Sciences schools of two Italian public universities. For their master's degree thesis, three graduate students in Psychology contacted other students attending courses of all the faculties of the two universities. We excluded from the analyses the voluntary abstainers (1.8% of the total) because their answers might introduce a bias in the results. The final sample included 589 participants (60.8% male, 39.2 % female) The average age of the sample was 22.20 years (SD = 2.58). 57.5% of the participants lived with their parents whereas 42.5% lived alone.

Measures

We gathered the data by means of a self-report questionnaire including different sets of indicators. The variables used in our analysis were:

- A set of alcohol consumption indicators. Three items investigating the frequency of consumption of beer, wine, and spirits on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=never; 5=everyday). We chose these measures because were used in a previous study on the same national context with similar population (Tartaglia, 2014). One item investigating the frequency of binge drinking ("In the last thirty days, how many times have you drunk five or more drinks in a row?"). Following the recent Italian literature (Beccaria, Petrilli, & Rolando, 2015) we operationalized the binge drinking as drinking five or more drinks on one occasion.
- A set of parents' alcohol consumption indicators. Three items investigating the frequency of consumption of beer, wine, and spirits on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=never; 5=everyday).
- One item investigating the frequency of friends' binge drinking on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=never; 5=every week).
- Two items investigating subjective norms, one concerning parents and the other friends (Dijkstra, Sweeney, & Gebhardt, 2001). Participants were asked to rate on a 7-point Likert-

type scale (1=completely disagree; 7=completely agree) the affirmations "My Parents/Friends approve of my drinking alcohol".

- Social environment. One item asking the number of friends usually frequented and one item asking if the person live with their parents (or one of them) or on his own.
- A brief list of socio-demographic items.

To test the influence of the different groups of predictors on the alcohol consumption indicators we performed multiple regression analyses using SPSS 21 (Chicago, IL).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Concerning alcohol consumption (rated on a 5-point scale), participants consumed more frequently beer (Mean = 3.31; SD = 1.11) followed by wine (Mean = 3.05; SD = 1.09) whereas the lowest frequency is that of spirits (Mean = 2.84; SD = .92). They affirmed having drunk five or more drinks in a row, during the last month, on average 1.91 times but there is a great variability in the sample (SD = 2.84). 41.4% of the participants had never drunk five or more drinks in a row in the last month whereas 13.5% did it more than 4 times. Concerning their parents' consumption, the participants rated wine as the beverage most frequently drunk (Mean = 3.78; SD = 1.24) followed by beer (Mean = 2.86; SD = 1.11). The Spirits are rated as not so frequently drunk by their parents (Mean = 1.71; SD = .85). Moreover, participants were asked to rate the frequency of binge drinking of their friends on a 5-point scale. The sample had an average value of 2.90 (SD = 1.05). Finally, participants expressed on a 7-point scale their agreement with two items assessing the parents and friends approval of drinking. They thought their friends (Mean = 3.82; SD = 1.83) approve of their drinking more than their parents do (Mean = 3.10; SD = 1.89).

Regression analyses

To test the influences of the different predictors we performed four multiple regression analyses in which the consumption of beer, wine, spirits, and the frequency of binge drinking were regressed onto ten predictors. The independent variables were gender (0=female; 1=male), age, the number of friends usually frequented, living on his own (0=No; 1=Yes), the alcohol consumption of parents (frequency of drinking beer, wine, and spirits) and friends (frequency of binge drinking), and the subjective norms (parents and friends approval of drinking). In order to explore whether predictive relationships were the same in men and in women, in a second step we tested too the interaction between gender and the significant predictors.

The beer consumption (see Table 1) was positively influenced by being male (β=.21), age (β=.09), living on his own (β=.09), parental consumption of beer (β=.12) and wine (β=.11), frequency of friends' binge drinking (β=.18), and by friends' approval of drinking (β=.13). Exploring the interactions between gender and the other predictors we found the significant interaction gender X parent's beer consumptions (β= .32). The parent's beer consumption influenced the individual consumption of only the male participants. In this model there was no direct effect of gender. The explained variance of the model was R^2 = .15. The wine consumption (see Table 2) was positively influenced by age (β=.11), parental consumption of wine (β=.16) and spirits (β=.10), and frequency of friends' binge drinking (β=.23). No interaction with gender was significant. The model explained almost the same proportion of variance of the previous one (R^2 = .13). The spirits consumption (see Table 3) was positively influenced by age (β=.09), the number of friends usually frequented (β=.12), parental consumption of spirits (β=.22), frequency of friends' binge drinking (β=.24), and by friends' approval of drinking (β=.17). The parents' approval of drinking had a negative impact on spirits consumption (β= -.14). We found a significant negative influence of interaction gender X number of friends (β=-.27). In that second model being male influenced the spirits consumption (β=.21) but for females the effect of the number of friends was higher because of the interaction effect. The explained variance of the model was R^2 = .20. Finally, the frequency of binge drinking (see Table 4) was positively influenced by being male (β=.12), parental consumption of spirits

(β=.13), and frequency of friends binge drinking (β=.42). No interaction with gender was significant. The model explained a quarter of the variance of the frequency of binge drinking (R^2=.25).

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the effects of four kinds of predictors on the consumption of alcoholic beverages using a large sample of Italian young adults. The results confirmed the influence of social contexts of the family and the peers. Anyway, the impact of the predictors on the different alcoholic consumptions (i.e. beer, wine, spirits, and binge drinking) is variable. As suggested by literature (LaBrie, et al., 2010), the parental consumption of alcohol increased the consumption of the young adults. The results showed that the parental consumption of wine influenced the wine consumption, and the parental consumption of spirits influenced spirits consumption. The parental consumption of beer influenced the beer consumption only for male participants. In addition, the parental consumption of wine influenced beer consumption too and the parental consumption of spirits the wine consumption. We may interpret these influences as an effect of the mirroring of parents' drinking behaviour (Lundahl, Davis, Adesso, & Lukas, 1997). In fact, the family history of alcohol consumption may create positive expectations about drinking that in turn are associated with alcohol consumption (Morean, Corbin, Sinha, & O'Malley, 2009). Friends' behaviour also influences the alcohol consumption of young adults. The frequency of friends' binge drinking is a predictor of all the dependent variables.

TPB affirmed the influence of subjective norms on drinking behaviour and several studies showed that the disapproval of alcohol use by parents and peers is a protective factor against drinking (Donovan, 2004; Mrug, & McCay, 2013; Nash et. Al., 2005). We confirmed these relations only partially for friends. The lower is the friends' approval of drinking, the lower is the beer and spirits consumption whereas wine consumption and frequency of binge drinking are not affected by the subjective norm. On the contrary, the parental approval did not have any effect on three dependent

variables and had a surprising negative influence on spirits consumption. The more the family approve of spirits consumption, the less participants drink that kind of beverage. The sample size (N=589) supports the statistical solidity of the result, and we need further research for the interpretation of this relation.

Consistently with literature (O'Malley & Johnston, 2002; Tartaglia, 2014), gender influenced the consumption of beer and the frequency of binge drinking, both higher among males. Age increased the consumption of all the alcoholic beverages but had no influence on the frequency of binge drinking. These results are consistent with the national data of the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) showing that in Italy the consumption of alcohol increases from adolescence up to over thirty years of age, but the higher risk of binge drinking occurs between 18 and 24 years old, after the frequency of this behaviour decreases (ISTAT, 2014). Actually, the majority of the participants were aged between 18 and 24 years old.

The number of friends influenced the consumption of spirits. This kind of alcohol consumption usually occurs in nightclubs and pubs during social meetings (Træen & Nordlund, 1993). It is possible that the young adults with larger social networks attend more often to social gatherings taking place where spirits consumption is higher.

We expected that participants living outside the family home, feeling a reduced parental control, drank more than the others. We verified this relation only for the consumption of beer, the beverage with lowest alcohol content. We may interpret this fact thinking that in Italy the alcohol consumption is shifting from the classical Southern European modality (i.e. at home during mealtimes) to the Northern European one, where people drink more for social reasons (Room & Mäkelä, 2000; Atwell et. al., 2011). This kind of consumption often occurs outside of parental control even for young people still living in their family home.

The present study has some limitations. Given the correlational nature of the study, the influence of parents and peers behaviour on students may be partly effect of a "projection" phenomenon, in which students' own drinking levels colour their perceptions of others' drinking. Furthermore, social

desirability may affect the self-report measures of alcohol consumption. Non-correlational studies and different measures may be indicated in future research for strengthen the present results. We recruited participants among students attending classes of the different courses of the two University. Anyway, the sample was not statistically representative of the entire population of students. Moreover, even if several studies on alcohol and young adults (i.e. Atwell et al., 2011; Borsari & Carey, 2003) were carried out on students' samples, without replications on non-students' samples of the same age the ecological validity of the results is poor. Another limit is the use of single-item measures rather than validated alcohol questionnaires. Furthermore, we investigated the frequency of alcohol consumption and binge drinking but not the quantity of alcohol consumed. For this reason, we cannot distinguish between social drinkers and alcohol-dependent individuals. Anyway, epidemiological data suggest that alcohol-dependent individuals are very scarce among the population studied. These limitations are the starting points for further researches.

To sum up, the present study confirmed the role of family and friends in influencing young adults' consumption of alcohol stressing a difference between perceived behaviours and norms. The perceived consumption of parents and friends influenced all the dependent variables. On the contrary, the effects of the approval of drinking was limited and in the case of the parental approval had a surprising negative effect. North American literature emphasized the role of normative influences on students' alcohol consumption (Borsari & Carey, 2001, 2003) but a recent British study did not find significant influences of the normative beliefs and the authors affirmed, "subjective (approval) and descriptive (action) norms have distinctive roles in influencing alcohol consumption behaviour and, subjective norms may not be as useful as assumed." (Atwell et al., 2011, p. 258). We may think that cultural factors affect the relation between norms and alcohol consumption justifying the different results in samples from U.S.A., U.K., and Italy. Anyway, this point requires further investigations and a future line of research may be the cross-cultural study of the effects of normative beliefs on alcohol consumption.

Globally the friends had a stronger influence on alcohol consumption in comparison with family. In Italy, this may be explained partly because today the youths and their parents have different drinking habits. This result is consistent with previous researches suggesting that alcohol consumption may be a relevant part of young adults' social life mainly centred on the peers (Maggs et al., 1997; Tartaglia, 2014; Træen & Nordlund, 1993). Therefore, the prevention of young adults' alcohol abuse should focus primary on the peers' level trying to weaken the widespread and dangerous association between sociality and alcohol consumption.

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TABLES

Table 1. Regression analysis on frequency of Beer Consumption.

Predictors	**Step 1**	**Step2**
Gender (1= Male)	.21**	-.07
Age	.09*	.09*
Number of friends usually frequented	-.05	-.04
Living on his own (1=Yes)	.10*	.09*
Frequency of parents' alcohol consumption		
Beer	.12*	-.01
Wine	.11*	.11*
Spirits	.06	.06
Frequency of friends' binge drinking	.18**	.18**
Parents' approval of drinking	-.08	-.08
Friends' approval of drinking	.13**	.13**
Gender X Frequency of parent's Beer consumption		.32**
R^2 (corrected)	.14	.15

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 2. Regression analysis on frequency of Wine Consumption.

Predictors	
Gender (1= Male)	.01
Age	.11**
Number of friends usually frequented	-.03
Living on his own (1=Yes)	.06
Frequency of parents' alcohol consumption	
Beer	.04
Wine	.16**
Spirits	.10*
Frequency of friends' binge drinking	.23**
Parents' approval of drinking	.08
Friends' approval of drinking	-.01
R^2 (corrected)	.13

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 3. Regression analysis on frequency of Spirits Consumption.

Predictors	**Step 1**	**Step2**
Gender (1= Male)	.07	.21**
Age	.09*	.09*
Number of friends usually frequented	.12**	.32**
Living on his own (1=Yes)	.04	.04
Frequency of parents' alcohol consumption		
Beer	.07	.06
Wine	-.03	-.02
Spirits	.22**	.22**
Frequency of friends' binge drinking	.24**	.24**
Parents' approval of drinking	-.14**	-.14**
Friends' approval of drinking	.17**	.17**
Gender X Number of friends usually frequented		-.27*
R^2 (corrected)	.19	.20

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 4. Regression analysis on frequency of Binge Drinking in the last month.

Predictors	
Gender (1= Male)	.12**
Age	-.01
Number of friends usually frequented	.05
Living on his own (1=Yes)	.06
Frequency of parents' alcohol consumption	
Beer	-.02
Wine	.06
Spirits	.13**
Frequency of friends' binge drinking	.42**
Parents' approval of drinking	-.06
Friends' approval of drinking	.07
R^2 (corrected)	.25

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$