

Out-group peer involvement in youth alcohol consumption

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Abstract

Recent research consistently links in-group peer involvement with excessive drinking among university students. However, these studies have largely overlooked the peer involvement of the out-group (non-alcohol consuming students) on the in-group's decision to consume alcohol. Most of the previous studies have found that people tend to avoid products or behaviours that are linked with the out-group. On contrary, this exploratory study demonstrates conditions in which alcohol consumers appreciate the out-group and how the interaction with the out-group leads to different emotions and perceptions of their own alcohol consumption decision. This study uses Social Identity Theory as the theoretical lens to explain consumer interaction with the out-group and subsequent perceptual changes. We adopt a narrative approach suited to the aims and the nature of the study. Fourteen Indian postgraduates studying in the UK were interviewed to collect narratives which were then analysed using thematic analysis. Findings suggested three different types of in-groups namely covert admirers, open admirers and avoiders based on the views on out-groups. These three different groups demonstrated different perceptions and emotions regarding alcohol consumption behaviour which suggests important implications for strategies to reduce this consumption.

Key words: out-group, social identity, alcohol consumption

1. Introduction

Although, the role of the out-group in consumer behaviour has received relatively little attention in the literature (White and Dahl, 2006, 2007) it has a major impact on consumer decisions (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; White et al., 2014). In an attempt to redress this issue, this article probes the effects of out-group peer involvement on youth alcohol consumption among Indian students in the UK. This exploratory study uses the Social Identity Theory (SIT) as the theoretical lens since it posits that people define their self-concepts by their connections with social groups or organizations (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). SIT explains how people differentiate themselves from others and distinguish between in-groups and out-groups (Hogg and Abrams, 2001; Brown, 2000; Stets and Burke, 2000). Many youth alcohol studies have suggested that peer pressure is a major influential factor and in-group peer pressure is a well-established phenomenon (Heath, 2000; Piacentini and Banister, 2009; Borsari and Carey, 2001). Although White et al. (2014) recently suggested that out-groups could exert a positive influence on in-group decisions none of the previous studies have explored the involvement of the in-group with the out-group with relation to alcohol consumption. Hence, this study proposes to examine the overlooked area of how out-group peer involvement could affect the emotions and perceptions of in-group towards their alcohol consumption decision.

This study focuses on Indian students for a number of reasons. Heim et al. (2004) found that excessive and problematic drinking is increasing among South Asian students in the UK year on year. Among them Indians appear most likely to be regular drinkers and drink over and above the recommended levels (Cochrane and Bal, 1990). This may be due to the heavy drinking peaks during early adulthood that is common among 18 to 24 years (Borsari et al., 2007) and less parental control that provides more freedom and higher interaction with peers (Ham and Hope, 2003), having friends outside respondents' ethnic communities (Heim et al., 2004), role transition (Graham et al., 1991) and cultural change (Berry, 1997). These reasons suggest that Indian students are more vulnerable to alcohol in the UK when compared to native students.

This article begins with a brief review of the extant literature on youth alcohol consumption, peer group involvement with alcohol consumption and the theoretical framework used in the study i.e. SIT. Subsequently, it reports and critically reflects upon the findings obtained from narrative interviews conducted with Indian postgraduates in the UK before drawing conclusions and discussing implications.

2. Literature Review

The prevalence of excessive alcohol consumption is an issue within student populations globally, and particularly within the UK (Piacentini and Baniseter, 2009). A survey among UK university students revealed that only 11% are non-drinkers, whereas all the other students consume alcohol, of which 40% are binge drinkers (Webb et al., 1998). The terms binge drinking and excessive drinking are frequently used interchangeably by scholars (Szmigin et al., 2011; Borsari and Carey, 2001) but some suggests that excessive drinking is used to describe a single drinking session leading to intoxication (Szmigin et al., 2011). This study focuses on excessive alcohol consumption that leads to intoxication as it is a matter of current social, media and political concern in the UK (Hackley et al., 2013). Excessive drinking potentially brings a lot of harm to the young and has been linked to increases in morbidity and mortality (Sher and Rutledge, 2007), automobile crash injuries and death, suicide and depression, missed classes and decreased academic performance, loss of memory,

blackouts (Ham and Hope, 2003; Fletcher, 2012), fighting, property damage, peer criticism, broken friendships (Rinker and Neighbors, 2014), date rape, unprotected sexual intercourse where people are at risk for sexually transmitted diseases, HIV infection and unplanned pregnancy (Anderson et al., 2009; Pensuksan et al., 2010). Thus this is an issue of grave social concern.

There are a number of factors associated with excessive drinking which are frequently categorised as internal and external factors. Most of the external factors are related to the peer and family influences (Ham and Hope, 2003), marketing efforts such as advertising (Griffin et al., 2009) and cultural shifts (Measham and Brain, 2005). Researchers have suggested that factors such as the influence of peers and wider social norms also contribute to excessive alcohol consumption (Wechsler and Kuo, 2000). Most of the studies to date focus on specific ways that in-group peers can influence each other's alcohol consumption, using Social Learning Theory (SLT) (See Reed et al., 2007; Bot et al., 2005; Mooney and Corcoran, 1991; Rabow and Duncan-Schill, 1994). SLT is a theoretical lens that can explain how people learn from others through observation, imitation and modelling of their peers (Bandura, 1971 as cited by Borsari and Carey, 2001). This theory does not specifically explain how people behave with reference to in-groups and out-groups. Hence researchers adopted the SIT as it suggests how people define themselves with regard to in-groups and out-groups.

SIT posits that people define their self-concept by their connections with social groups or organizations. According to SIT, people tend to categorise themselves based on their perception of differences and similarities between themselves and groups, perceiving members of the similar category as their in-group and members of the different category as the out-group (Hogg and Abrams, 2001). Individuals respond more positively to their in-group, which is defined as a group of people to which a person feels he or she belongs, than their out-group, defined as a group of people to which a person does not feel he or she belongs (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Choi and Winterich, 2013). In this study the in and out groups are defined by alcohol consumption.

Notably, the majority of past consumer research has focused on in-group influence, identifying the role it can play in determining an individual's attitudes and behaviour (Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Childers and Rao, 1992; Park and Lessig, 1977). However, the importance of the impact of an out-group on consumer identity and decision making has been largely unexplored in the area of consumer research (White and Dahl, 2006, 2007; White et al., 2014). The few studies which have focused on out-groups suggested that consumers avoid, abandon or negatively evaluate products, brands or behaviours that are linked with the out-group (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; White and Dahl, 2006, 2007). These studies confirmed these behaviours particularly with publicly consumed symbolic products (White and Dahl, 2006) and when the in-group identity is important to consumers (White and Dahl, 2007). In contrast to these findings White et al. (2014) recently suggested that communicating comparatively positive actions of out-groups can lead consumers to be more inclined to copy out-group behaviour which demonstrated a novel and contradictory effect of the out-group. This study will explore this further and contribute to our understanding of out-group influence on students' perception of alcohol consumption at a transitional stage of their lives and education.

3. Methodology

Most of the previous research on youth alcohol consumption has adopted a positivist approach and established a positive causal relationship between in-group peer influence and alcohol consumption (See Reed et al., 2007; Bot et al., 2005; Mooney and Corcoran, 1991). However, the aim of this research is to understand how the interaction between in-group and out-group affects the subsequent perception and emotions towards alcohol consumption of in-group members. In order to capture participants' understanding of this interaction with the out-group during their life transition we adopted an interpretivist approach based on the narrative method. Many scholars have recommended a narrative approach as a suitable method to study life changes (Rojas & Bluemelhuber, 2010; Barrios et al. 2012; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008), since narratives unveil how individuals, at turning points, try to make sense of their current life, uniting their future and past narratives (Barrios et al. 2012). This method is widely used in the field of identity research (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008). Data collection was conducted through 14 face-to-face in-depth interviews with Indian postgraduate students aged 21 to 26, who consume alcohol. These students were all enrolled at one of two Universities in the Midlands and had wide variety of religious beliefs including Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Islam, Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism. 6 females and 8 males were interviewed for between 45 and 60 minutes, during which the researcher asked each participant about their circle of friends in the UK and alcohol consumption habits and stories. The interviews were transcribed *verbatim* from audio recordings, with pseudonyms used to maintain anonymity (Fry, 2010). A thematic analysis was conducted by selecting stories which provide common themes based on the underpinning theory (Riessman, 2008).

4. Findings and Discussion

Our findings suggest that participants form different perceptions of and emotions about their alcohol consumption based on their level of interaction with the out-group and their own family background. Based on their self-reported descriptions, the family background of participants was categorised as liberal and conservative.

Juhi a 22 year female postgraduate from Maharashtra explained her family background as follows:

*I am a Sikh. So my family is like a **conservative** proper Punjabi Sikh family Our religion is totally against alcohol. My family is really strict regarding this (alcohol) because my Dad has read it (holy book) all.... I don't think any girl of my family background gets drunk and goes home because she would be kicked out of her house.*

Juhi's narrative illustrates that the conservative families in India tend to be more religious with a high level of control exercised by the senior members of the family over the young. Other respondents from similar type of backgrounds confirmed the same view and further revealed that these parents expect unquestioned obedience not just for themselves but also for the elders of their extended family.

Other participants come from more liberal families where they are free to make their own decisions. For example, Shahruck a 22 year Male from Pune, coming from a rich, upper-class, Hindu family, described his family background as:

My parents introduced me to alcohol after I turned 18. So, I never had to sneak out of the house to get drunk with friends and not tell parents so that was never a question for me.... My family is not a very religious family. We follow all the religious activities because of my grandparents.

In general other respondents from liberal families corroborated the view that their parents are not strict in religious beliefs and these individuals were free to make their own decisions.

The level of involvement with the alcohol abstaining group, i.e the out-group, is the degree to which consumers interact with the out-group colleagues. Comparatively, some consumers interact with the out-group more frequently than others. Based on the family background of the in-group and the interaction with the out-group data suggested three different consumer groups; covert admirers, open admirers and avoiders. These three groups have different views on their out-groups which seem to affect both their perceptions of and emotions about their alcohol consumption.

Covert Admirers

The first group comprises consumers from conservative family backgrounds who have a high level of interaction with the out-group. As alcohol is a symbol of pleasure (Measham, 2004), fun, friendship and togetherness (Szmigin et al., 2008) many respondents in this study revealed that alcohol is a key determinant in joining an exciting in-group. Despite this they struggle internally when interacting with the out-group as the out-groups abstinence causes them cognitive dissonance and guilt. As Juhi explains:

*I like them (Non-consumers). They **enjoy and control** themselves both.Truly there were days I feel that they (non-consumers) are much better than me. But I never say it to them directly... Some of them know my family and I don't want them to stay above me. You know what I mean. But when I remind on my dads' face sometimes I feel **guilty**.*

While being part of their alcohol consumers' in-group they secretly admire the alcohol abstaining out-group. Juhi perceives this out-group as superior to her in-group. This is in contrast with one of the main assumptions of SIT which suggests that the in-group is always considered superior to the out-group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Despite their initial self-categorisation where self-esteem is expected through membership of an in-group, the data revealed "unsatisfactory identities" (Brown, 2000) because they consider out-group members as "better" than them. Similarly some respondents from conservative families expressed their negative views of the in-group and some even secretly wanted to join the out-group. They appreciated them for having more self-control, enjoying different hobbies and for spending time on interesting activities. This confirms White et al.'s (2014) recent argument on positive actions of dissociative out-groups that can make the in-group more likely to change their behaviour. Further, Terry et al. (1999) argues that there is a continuum between personal and social identities and movement along this continuum determines the extent to which group-related or personal characteristics influence a person's feelings and actions. In the UK drinking is part of an exciting life style which is in the dominant consumption culture (Measham and Brain, 2005; Szmigin et al., 2011). Hence, regardless of the appreciation of the dominant consumption culture, the underpinning cultural values of the conservative Indian students which influence their self-identity have become significant which leads to internal psychological struggles. Other respondents corroborate that this struggle causes negative emotional outcomes such as guilt, anxiety, doubt and discomfort.

Open Admirers

The second group comprises participants from liberal families and these participants have high levels of interaction with the out-group. This group openly admires the out-group in situations and challenges the widely accepted view of consumers who don't consume alcohol as "unfashionable" (Cherrier and Gurrieri, 2013). Maduri who is a 23 year old female postgraduate, from Pune coming from a liberal business family mentions that:

*My parents are very social and they consume alcohol.....I can have any type of a conversation with a non-drinker. There are some days that I don't feel like drinking. So I want someone sober to talk with me. At that point I feel non-drinkers are **ideal**... They must be putting the time that we waste on binge drinking for something **worthwhile**. I think I should learn from them.*

Maduri praised the out-group for their sobriety and for not wasting time on binge drinking or being so drunk that they cannot hold a meaningful conversation. Here Maduri points out the superiority of the out-group with regard to their productive use of time and ability to discuss cogently whereas SIT would suggest that the out-group be considered as inferior and to be rejected (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). However, the contradictory views on these narratives may be due to different identity activations in different situations. Social identity theorists originally used the term *Saliency* to indicate the activation of an identity in a particular situation (Stets and Burke, 2000). Saliency is the probability that an identity will be activated in a situation and generates feelings that lead to different behaviours in different situations. Hence, participants' emotions are situational and context specific so in some situations they feel the in-group is superior and act according to their group norms where in a different situation they would prefer the out-group.

Avoiders

Members of the third group come from conservative family backgrounds and they have less interaction with the out-group; they try to avoid the out-group completely believing them to be unfashionable. Sonakshi a 25 year female postgraduate from New Delhi coming from a conservative family says:

*But my parents are religious where they engage with their day to day pujas (religious rituals) and stuff... Yes it is that when you have freedom you should try out many things as possible other than drugs. You have a short life to be **regretted** and stick inside rules... Also none of us (in-group) don't think that we should not have fun because of studies. Basically my group does both. So I like to be with this group... Alcohol helps me to **relax** and I feel **happy**.*

This narrative clearly shows that they see the out-group as a dissociative group, and demonstrate the negative associations held about them, as well as participants' avoidance behaviours (McFerran et al., 2010; White and Dahl, 2006). Sonakshi believes that she wants to be with her in-group and enjoy her life to the fullest. Many respondents in this group, like Sonakshi, reject the out-group obeying rules and their "unexciting", "humdrum" and "predictable" nature of their lives. In contrast, Sonakshi is a member of the in-group who enjoy a stimulating life facilitated by alcohol consumption. The assumptions of SIT lead group members to think that their own group and their acts are superior to that of other groups (i.e. in-group favouritism) (Brown, 2000; Terry et al., 1999). Therefore, during the social comparison process the in-group is viewed positively. Thus a relatively positive social

identity is created compared to the out-group. They revealed that they try to associate with alcohol consumers in order to gain a balanced life style. This group clearly categorise themselves as in-group and adhere with group norms. They describe the in-group as “superior”, “more balanced”, “funnier “and “cooler” to be with.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, three different groups emerged from the data as covert admirers, open admirers and avoiders with regard to members’ response to and perspectives of the out-group. These three groups have different perceptions and emotions related to alcohol consumption behaviour. This study, provides some additional insights into reference group theory concerning our understanding of out-group involvement as the role of dissociative reference groups in consumer behaviour has been largely overlooked in the literature (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; White and Dahl, 2006, 2007; White et al., 2014). Further, this study challenges previous studies and assumptions of SIT which demonstrated avoidance responses to the out-group, and provides a counterintuitive argument; that under certain situations the out-group can have a positive influence on the perceptions and emotions of the in-group. Equally, this understanding can have important practical implications. The knowledge of different typologies of in-groups can be used to better target each of them with different strategies to reduce alcohol consumption especially among students in transition and other vulnerable groups. Social Marketers can communicate the positive behaviour of an out-group that reflects their lifestyles and hobbies, while encouraging both the open and covert admirers to experience cognitive dissonance with their current behaviour. As avoiders want to isolate themselves from the out-groups, strategies could be use to encourage more interaction with the out-group and allow them to experience the positive aspects of their out-group behaviour.

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