

ALCOHOL USE AMID POLICY CHANGES

College Student Peer Perceptions of Alcohol Use Amid Alcohol Use Policy Changes

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Abstract

Many colleges, particularly religious-affiliated institutions, establish alcohol policies in order to protect students from the negative effects and consequences of alcohol use. Milligan University is a small CCCU* affiliated university in the Southern United States. In 2020, the school decided to change their student alcohol policy. The original policy ensured that Milligan students did not drink regardless of their age, while they were enrolled at Milligan. The new policy allowed students of legal drinking age to drink when they were off-campus. Using an anonymous survey of 207 students enrolled in Milligan's undergraduate or graduate programs, this study sought to answer the question, "Has this change in alcohol policy had an effect on the use of alcohol by Milligan students?" It was hypothesized that a more permissible alcohol policy would be correlated with an increased peer perception of alcohol use associated with increased drinking among Milligan students. While students did not perceive any increases in their own drinking or those of their peers at a significant level, the relationships between student drinking and peer (friend/roommate) drinking was found to be significant for the Milligan students.

Keywords: college students, alcohol use, alcohol policy change, alcohol policy effects, Milligan University, young adults, drinking, alcohol, survey

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Alcoholism is a disease that plagues many American homes, but even more college campuses. Research shows that up to 80% of the college student population uses alcohol on a routine basis (Abbott, et al., 2019; Cook, et al., 2010; Van Hal, et al., 2018). Nearly 45% of students are at risk for problematic consumption and over 20% report regular binge drinking (Van Hal, et al., 2018). Many colleges, particularly religious-affiliated institutions, often have established alcohol policies in order to protect students from the negative effects and consequences of alcohol use. In 2020, Milligan University, a CCCU* affiliated university, decided to change its student alcohol policy. The original policy ensured that Milligan was not only a dry campus, but that Milligan students did not drink during their time at Milligan-regardless of their age. The new policy allowed students of legal drinking age to drink off-campus without repercussions; however, Milligan still remains a dry campus. This study's aim was to identify the perceptions surrounding the change in alcohol policy and its effects on student drinking, as well, as how peer influence relates to drinking habits among Milligan students.

Review of the Literature

Theories

In Robertson, et al.'s (2018) study, researchers observed the perceptions and attitudes of college students toward drinking in terms of direct and indirect interactions with peers on social media. Bandura's theory of social influence and the media effects model reflect the patterns of alcohol use within this population of young adults. These models reflect social learning from observation, particularly in relation to peer influence and social media (Robertson et al., 2018). According to the findings of the study, Robertson et al. supports the idea that alcohol

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interventions should include “components to counter peer influences and alcohol marketing on social media” (2018).

In a 2010 study by Cook and Harris, college students were surveyed to determine the patterns in alcohol-use and their attitudes towards societal alcohol abuse. Many statistics on alcohol use among the student population show that drinking is still a growing problem among young adults, despite many attempts by media outlets to inform this population of the dangers of drinking. Despite many attempts to combat drinking, pro-drinking references are 30 times more prevalent than negative alcohol references when viewing television shows and movies. Cook and Harris (2010) explains the importance of modeling in understanding the use of alcohol among college students, especially when it comes to media outlets like television and social media. Their study emphasizes the importance of perception in studies concerning college students, as these perceptions influence their opinions and actions, particularly when it comes to engaging in addictive behaviors (Cook & Harris, 2010).

Factors

In a study conducted by Abbott et al. (2019), the protective factors of religiosity were surveyed in undergraduate students through an anonymous survey. The results of the study concluded that individual religiosity was not considered a significant predictor in this study, however, peer religiosity was significant in predicting substance use (Abbot, 2019). This study is important when it comes to interpreting the data of the current study. While some may assume that college students at Christian schools drink less than students at secular schools, studies are not supportive of this claim, showing that peer influence can be a more reliable predictor in alcohol use than religiosity (Abbot, 2019).

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The perceptions of peer approval and risky drinking behaviors in college students was observed in a study by Boyle et al (2018). This study sought to determine if there were associations between social media and alcohol use perception among peers. The study determined that perceptions of peer drinking and alcohol-related attitudes were strong predictors of each individuals' own behaviors. It also showed that "liking" posts can be considered a form of social reinforcement which can increase drinking behaviors (Boyle et al., 2018).

In another study that focused on social media cues and their associations with drinking behaviors, Moreno, et al. (2019) also assessed Facebook cues for their influences on drinking intentions, attitudes, and future behaviors. This study found a positive correlation between alcohol-related attitudes or standards to pro-alcohol Facebook cues. The study even showed the effects of the cues two years later. These studies highlight the influence of social media and pro-social cues to the use of alcohol and attitudes towards alcohol use (Moreno et al., 2019).

While Facebook cues and social media have been shown to cue alcohol use, Martin et al (2012) looked into some behavioral strategies that could be integrated while drinking in order to curb the effects in young adults. Martin et al. noted that college students are one of the heaviest drinking demographics among the general population (2012). Researchers in this study measured protective behavioral strategies (PBS) while drinking to show positive correlation with school performance than those who did not use PBS. From their study, they gather that interventions that increase the awareness PBS to the college population and how to integrate these approaches could be beneficial in increasing academic performance in this demographic (Martin et al., 2012).

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College Alcohol Policies

A pilot study was put into action by Frye et al. in 2010 to examine drinking behaviors and perspectives among athletes at Christian and non-affiliated universities. Milligan University was one of the four Christian-affiliated universities included in the sample. This study used the College Alcohol Survey developed by Harvard's School of Public Health to determine drinking habits of 195 undergraduate students. The findings suggested that athletes drank heavily more often than non-athletes, and they also perceived more drinking among peers ($p < 0.001$). According to this study, student athletes at religiously affiliated colleges drink at a level similar to those at secular universities, despite popular opinion (Frye et al., 2010).

Kypri et al., (2020) claim that the restriction of the availability of alcohol, along with reduction of the promotion alcohol contributes to reduced use and harms from related alcohol use. Their plan places an emphasis on the proximity of a college campus to businesses that sell alcohol as a means of increasing the availability of alcohol to college students. According to the article, policies correlated with decreases in intoxication prevalence, harms, and problems associated with alcohol use are more effective in the reduction of intoxication on college campuses (Kypri et al, 2020).

Trangesnstein, Wall, and Jernigan (2019) claim that college environments are associated with excessive alcohol use and violent harm. Their research is supported by multiple sources including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. They claim there is a gap between what research claims is effective in reducing alcohol consumption and what colleges are enacting. This study explores alcohol related harms among college students, concluding that between 59 and 84 percent of students report experiences with alcohol related harms whether they drink or not (Trangesnstein et al., 2019).

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Ziming, et al. states that “Excessive alcohol consumption is a leading cause of mortality, morbidity, social, and economic burden in the United States” (2015, p. 1). In their study, they wanted to determine associations between state alcohol policies and individual binge drinking, as well as the effects of the policies on specific population subgroups. The study concluded that policies that limited the availability and raised the price of alcohol had significantly stronger reverse associations with binge drinking than those that did not. The researchers insist that their research strongly supports evidence that the implementation of alcohol policies can reduce binge drinking significantly in the general population (Ziming et al., 2015).

Walter and Kowalczyk present five strategies for reducing heavy drinking through college alcohol policies in their study (2012). The study is also unique in that it observed wet and dry college campuses, comparing and contrasting the two. In their study, however, the type of alcohol policy at the university did have an effect on heavy drinking frequencies. This suggests that the mere implication of a policy of some type does have an effect, while the type of policy may not be an important factor (Walter & Kowalczyk, 2012).

The current study was conducted in order to determine what changes, if any, the adjusted alcohol policy at Milligan University has caused in perceptions of student drinking. Due to the effects of peer pressure and the perceptions of peer drinking, the researcher hypothesized that a perceived increase in peer drinking may lead to an increase in personal drinking. This study is based on student perceptions, so there is no way to conclude whether or not the trends observed are accurate or representative of the students at Milligan University.

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Methods

Participants

The current study used an anonymous Qualtrics survey to collect data on the student population of Milligan University. Two-hundred and forty students participated in the study, ranging from 18 years old and older (about 68% of the participants reported being under the age of 21). Of the 240 students, 133 of the participants were female, 104 were males, and 3 participants chose not to disclose their gender identity. International students only made up 13 out of the 240 participants. Those that identified as athletes made up most of our sample (117), while the rest identified with other extracurriculars like theatre, art, or student government. Students were asked questions about how much they drink, how often they drink, and why they do (or do not) choose to drink.

We invited all Milligan students to participate through a campus wide email, resulting in a convenience sample. There was no compensation offered by the researchers to the participants for taking part in the study. In order to participate in the study, the participant was first to agree to the consent form at the beginning of the study which informed the participant that their participation was voluntary and that they were allowed to discontinue at any time.

Measures

The anonymous survey included 19 questions; however, the participants received questions based on how they answered previously asked questions about their international status and whether or not they drink alcohol. The students who reported drinking were asked why they choose to drink and given various responses such as: “I like the physical effects of drinking” or “to better socialize with friends who are drinking”. Students were also asked how often they drink and how much they usually drink in one sitting; their options ranged from 1-4+ drinks per

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sitting. This measurement allowed us to look at binge drinking for women (4+), however, it did not give us solid evidence to determine male binge drinking (5+) (Cook & Harris, 2010).

Results

Regarding the question “Has this change in alcohol policy had an effect on the use of alcohol by Milligan students?”, participants were asked whether or not they perceived a change in their personal drinking habits or those of their peers as a response to the alcohol policy change. The responses regarding each individual’s perceived effects of the policy change on campus-wide drinking are depicted in Figure 1. The perceived effects on personal drinking are shown in Figure 2. Overall, most students did not perceive that there was an increase or a decrease of personal or on-campus drinking. It is important, however, to note that these responses are based on self-report, rather than actual data of drinking before and after the policy change. This was the most feasible and accurate mode of collection for the researcher since this mode of collection is anonymous and most of the participants are under the legal drinking age in Tennessee.

For the question: “Does peer use have an effect on an individual’s drinking habits?”, the data showed strong correlation when it came to correlating how often the individual drinks with how often their friends drink ($r = .588, p = .001$) and how often their roommate drinks ($r = .565, p = .001$). The strong positive correlations between the variables suggests a strong relationship between peer and personal drinking among the students in the sample.

Discussion

While the results show that there may not be a decrease associated with more lenient alcohol policies and more perceived drinking on campus, the study did support the social effects model proposed by Bandura. Overall, the correlation between peer and personal drinking habits

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was strongly positively correlated. In short, while we cannot say why this association occurs, the study presented data that supports that peer drinking habits are a strong predictor of individual drinking habits. This may be because students are affected by the habits of their peers, however, it may also be because these students are seeking out friends who match their own habits and preferences.

The students reported a range of responses when asked about why they chose to drink or not to drink (shown in Figures 3 & 4). The participants were able to report multiple responses for these questions. The most frequently selected reasons for drinking included: to better socialize with others, the physical effects of alcohol, and the taste of alcohol. When the participants who reported that they do not drink were asked why, the most common responses were in regard to being underage and for religious reasons.

Unlike Frye et al. (2010) who found that athletes in their study drank more often than non-athletic associated students, our study found that athletes drank on a similar level to non-athletes. While most of our findings regarding athletes were not consistent with the other Milligan study, both studies found that peer effects were significant in determining personal alcohol use and that athletes appeared to binge drink more often than non-athletes (Frye et al., 2010).

Walter and Kowalczyk's study showed that a college's type of alcohol policy may not have as much weight as one may assume (2012). This finding is consistent with our study, with the assumption that the students' perceptions reflect the actuality of the drinking on campus. The vast majority of the students (65%-campus wide, 92%-personal drinking) did not perceive a change in student drinking habits.

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The current study emphasizes the importance of social influences and modeling behaviors in college settings due to their strong effects on addictive behaviors and perceptions. The study also suggests that college alcohol policies may not have as large of an effect as we had previously thought when it comes to the personal consumption of individuals. Perception is important when it comes to personal behaviors, as is shown in the data gathered from this study.

When a college is thinking about changing its alcohol policy, it may be beneficial to do a study that asks about alcohol consumption before and after the policy change to give more current and reliable self-reported results. If the researcher were able to conduct this study before the policy change and had foreknowledge of its happening, this would have been a very beneficial tactic towards the current study. In replication of this study, it may be beneficial to adjust the drinking reports to 4 drinks and 5+ drinks, in order to measure binge drinking in males as well as females (Cook & Harris, 2010).

Future research may also look into college drinking through a longitudinal study observing students over the course of their four years in college. This may help researchers to determine how peer influences may be affecting their drinking habits starting in their first few weeks of college to their last semester. This type of study would help to clarify any questions of directionality. Another outlet for further research could be through random assignment of roommates that drink or do not drink. If peer influence is a major determinate of drinking behaviors, these randomly assigned roommates should influence the participants' drinking overtime.

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Conclusion

In a changing age, social media, television, and movie content depicting drinking or alcohol-use related activities have all been correlated with increased drinking and positive attitudes towards drinking; however, peer influence still seems to be among one of the top determinants for individual drinking habits (Cook & Harris, 2010; Moreno et al., 2019; Boyle et al., 2018; Frye et al., 2010). The current study observed the trends between peer drinking and individual drinking habits, as well as the perceptions towards an alcohol policy change and Milligan University and how it has affected drinking on campus. While this study does involve perceptions and is based on self-reported accounts, these personal impressions are often one of the main factors fueling behaviors and feelings towards alcohol use, as is supported in this study (Figure 4).

College is a time of bond formation, exploration, and growth, but it is also a time where peers are the most influential in one's life (Robertson et al., 2018). Drinking, specifically binge drinking, is linked to many adverse behaviors and young adult incidents (Abbott, et al., 2019; Cook, et al., 2010; Van Hal, et al., 2018). While college alcohol policies aim to protect students, inform students, and reform students, the data from this study suggests that alcohol policies may not have a wide effect on alcohol use among students. Studies such as this one show the importance of peer use and perceptions, begging the question of whether transparency about the drinking trends of other students and why students choose not to drink may be a better alternative in helping students make reformed decisions about whether or not to drink alcohol.

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Figure 1:

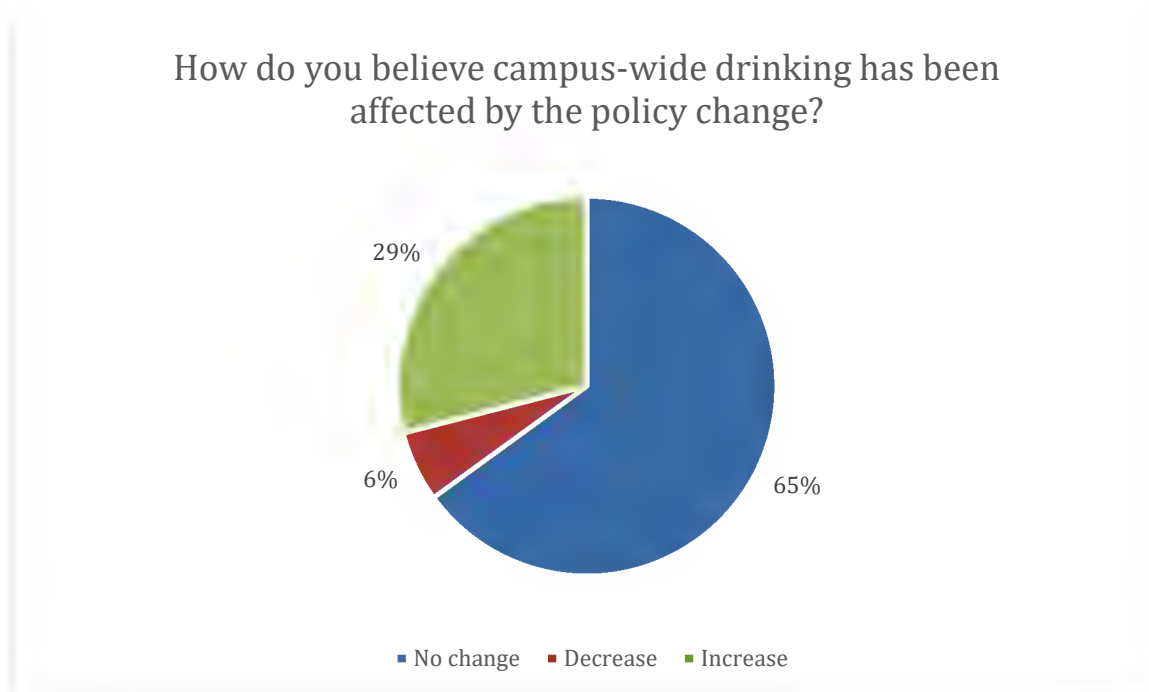
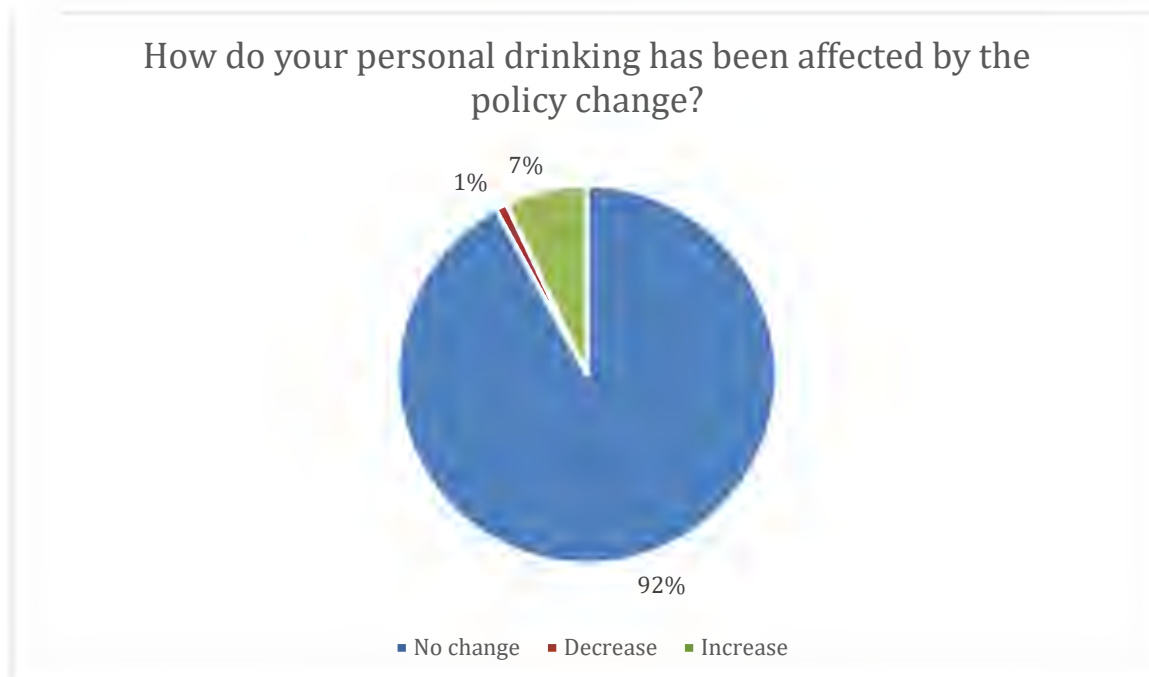


Figure 2:



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Figure 3:

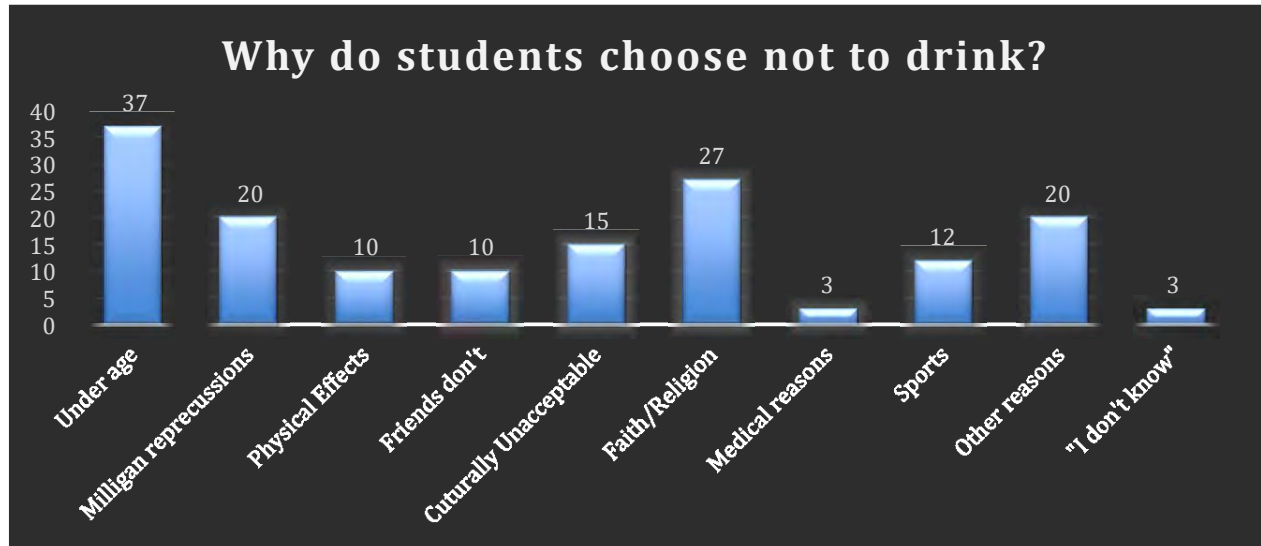
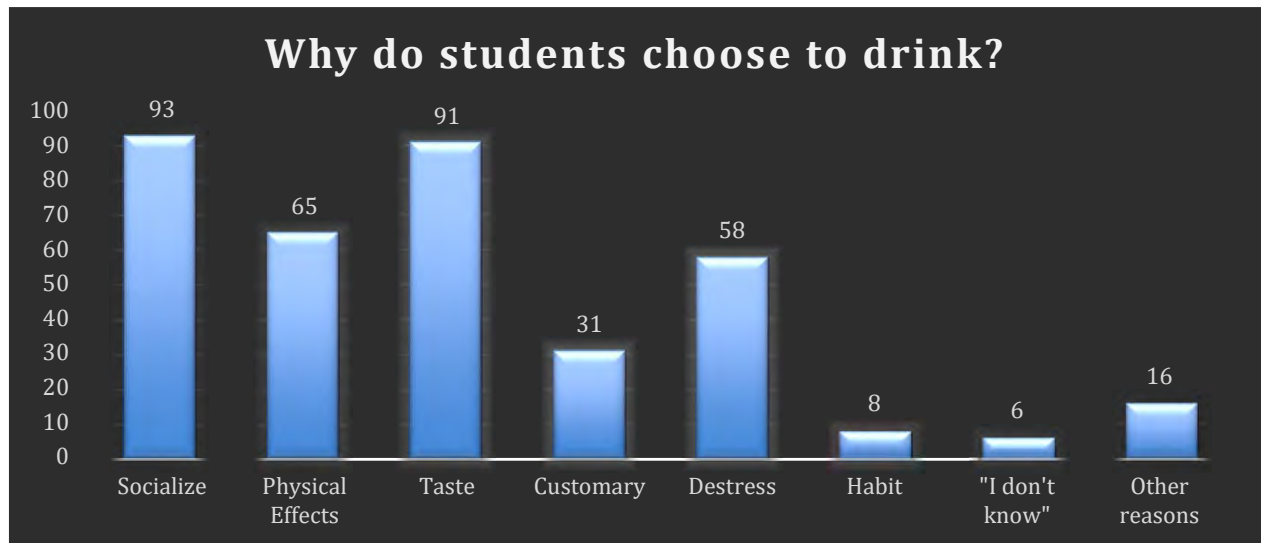


Figure 4:



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