



# Social influence on temptation: Perceived descriptive norms, temptation and restraint, and problem drinking among college students



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Temptation is associated with problematic drinking among college students.
- Perceived norms moderate the association between temptation and problem drinking.
- College students may give in to temptation if they believe drinking is prevalent.

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## ABSTRACT

Temptation and restraint have long been associated with problematic drinking. Among college students, social norms are one of the strongest predictors of problematic drinking. To date, no studies have examined the association between temptation and restraint and perceived descriptive norms on drinking and alcohol-related problems among college students. The purpose of this study was to examine whether perceived descriptive norms moderated the relationship between temptation and restraint and drinking outcomes among college students. Participants were 1095 college students from a large, public, culturally-diverse, southern university who completed an online survey about drinking behaviors and related attitudes. Drinks per week and alcohol-related problems were examined as a function of perceived descriptive norms, Cognitive Emotional Preoccupation (CEP) (temptation), and Cognitive Behavioral Control (CBC) (restraint). Additionally, drinking outcomes were examined as a function of the two-way interactions between CEP and perceived descriptive norms and CBC and perceived descriptive norms. Results indicated that CEP and perceived descriptive norms were associated with drinking outcomes. CBC was not associated with drinking outcomes. Additionally, perceived descriptive norms moderated the association between CEP and drinks per week and CEP and alcohol-related problems. There was a positive association between CEP and drinks per week and CEP and alcohol-related problems, especially for those higher on perceived descriptive norms. College students who are very tempted to drink may drink more heavily and experience alcohol-related problems more frequently if they have greater perceptions than the typical student at their university/college drinks a lot.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. College drinking

College drinking continues to be prevalent and problematic. The 2010 *Monitoring the Future* report (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2011) indicates that 65% of full-time college students reported drinking in the previous 30 days. Additionally, the report indicates that approximately one in eight full-time college students (13%) reported having 10 or more drinks in a row at least once in the prior two weeks, and one in twenty (5%) reported 15 or more drinks in a row in the previous two weeks. Heavy drinking among college

students has been associated with a number of problems, including morbidity and mortality (Hingson, Zha, & Weitzman, 2009), the development of an alcohol use disorders (Knight et al., 2002), academic problems (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000), legal problems (Hingson, Heeren, Zakocs, Kopstein, & Wechsler, 2002; Wechsler et al., 2002), risky sexual behavior and sexual assault (Goldstein, Barnett, Pedlow, & Murphy, 2007; Hingson et al., 2009), drinking and driving (Hingson et al., 2009), and unintentional, non-traffic injuries and physical assaults (Hingson et al., 2009). Although personalized normative feedback interventions have been found to be effective in reducing heavy drinking and alcohol-related problems among college students (Cronce & Larimer, 2011), problematic drinking continues to be prevalent. As such, it is imperative that we continue to examine the various factors related to intra- and inter-personal determinants of drinking (Marlatt & Donovan, 2005). Two such intrapersonal determinants of drinking

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behavior that have received relatively little attention with regard to college drinking are temptation and restraint.

### 1.2. Temptation and restraint

Temptation and restraint have long been associated with problematic drinking. Temptation refers to a preoccupation with controlling alcohol use, whereas restraint refers to behaviors or self-imposed rules designed to avoid or reduce alcohol consumption (Collins, 1993; Collins & Lapp, 1991). Bensley (1989) characterized temptation and restraint as involving cycles of both control of alcohol consumption and lapses in controlled drinking, leading to heavy episodes of drinking. These extremes create a response conflict and disrupt the balance between temptations to drink and restrained drinking. Collins, Parks, and Marlatt (1985) and Marlatt (1985) discussed this in terms of the abstinence violation effect and the limit violation effect, which suggest that when an individual either chooses to abstain from or limit their intake of alcohol, but experiences a lapse, they blame themselves and experience negative affect related to this. In order to ameliorate their negative affect, they drink more. As a result, temptation and restraint are associated with heavier alcohol use and related problems. Indeed, a number of studies have found a significant, positive associations between temptation and restraint, drinking behaviors, and drinking-related problems in community, outpatient, and college samples (Bensley, Kuna, & Steele, 1990; Collins, 1993; Collins, Gollnisch, & Izzo, 1996; Collins, Koutsky, & Izzo, 2000; Collins, Koutsky, Morsheimer, & MacLean, 2001; Collins et al., 1985; Connor, Gudgeon, Young, & Saunders, 2004; Curry, Southwick, & Steele, 1987; Jones, Cole, Goudie, & Field, 2012; Lyvers, Hasking, Hani, Rhodes, & Trew, 2010; MacKillop, Lisman, & Weinstein, 2006; Muraven, Collins, Morsheimer, Shiffman, & Paty, 2005a, 2005b; Muraven, Collins, & Nienhaus, 2002; Stewart & Chambers, 2000; Williams & Ricciardelli, 1999).

Recent research suggests that temptation to drink may be more consistently associated with alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems than the regulation and control of alcohol (i.e., restraint). Collins and Lapp (1992) developed the Temptation and Restraint Inventory as a way to more comprehensively assess for both the cognitive and behavioral factors. Among a community sample, the authors found two higher-order factors, the Cognitive Emotional Preoccupation (CEP) subscale, which measures temptation to drink, and the Cognitive Behavioral Control (CBC) subscale, which measures alcohol regulation (i.e., restraint). The two subscales were found to be moderately positively correlated with one another. Additionally, the authors found that CEP was positively associated with typical weekly drinking and alcohol-related problems, and that CBC was negatively associated with typical weekly drinking only. These results were replicated in a more recent study examining the utility and validity of the TRI in a community sample of moderate to heavy drinkers (Collins et al., 2000). However, a recent study examining the psychometric properties of the TRI in the college population found that both the CEP and CBC positively predicted scores on the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test (AUDIT) (MacKillop et al., 2006). Lyvers et al. (2010) also found that although there was a positive association between CEP and total AUDIT scores in a community sample of young adults, there was not an association between CBC and total AUDIT scores. However, when looking at the subscales of the AUDIT, CBC was positively associated only with the alcohol-related problems subscale. These conflicting findings may be a function of the AUDIT, in that it measures both alcohol use and alcohol-related consequences. Finally, studies that have examined the effect of temptation and restraint on drinking outcomes in an alcohol dependent sample (Connor et al., 2004), a community sample of moderate to heavy drinkers (Collins et al., 1996), and a community sample of high school students (Williams & Ricciardelli, 1999) all concluded that while CEP was associated with drinking outcomes, CBC was not. Taken together, these results indicate that CEP, or

temptation, may be more consistent in determining alcohol outcomes than CBC, or behavioral regulation (i.e., restraint).

It is unclear under what conditions temptation and restraint would affect drinking and alcohol-related problems among college students. Research suggests that social norms are among the strongest influences on college drinking (Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007). Foremost among these factors are perceptions that drinking is prevalent among one's peers, also known as perceived descriptive norms.

### 1.3. Perceived descriptive norms

Perceived descriptive norms refer to the perception of how others' engage in a particular behavior (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). With regard to alcohol consumption, perceived descriptive norms refer to the perception of how much or how frequently others' drink. Considerable research indicates that college students tend to overestimate the drinking quantity and frequency of other college students, which is associated with heavy drinking and alcohol-related problems (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Larimer, Turner, Mallett, & Geisner, 2004; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004).

Research suggests that the degree of overestimation varies by the specificity of the normative referent, such that perceived descriptive norms for more specific referent groups, based on gender, being a student at that particular university, ethnicity, and fraternity/sorority status have been found to be associated with drinking behaviors and alcohol-related problems (Larimer et al., 2009, 2011; Lewis & Neighbors, 2007; Lewis & Neighbors, 2004; Lewis, Neighbors, Oster-Aaland, Kirkeby, & Larimer, 2007; Neighbors et al., 2010).

### 1.4. The current research

The present research was designed to extend previous research examining temptation and restraint. Given that temptation and restraint are strongly associated with drinking and alcohol-related problems, and given that social norms are one of the strongest predictors of drinking in college students, examining the association among these constructs may be fruitful. We expected that temptation and restraint would both be positively associated with drinking and alcohol-related problems. We further expected that these associations would be moderated by perceived descriptive norms, such that they would be more strongly associated with drinking outcomes among those who perceived drinking to be more prevalent among typical students attending the same university.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Ten thousand students at a large, public, culturally diverse, southern university were invited to complete an online survey to document current drinking norms and drinking related attitudes. Of those invited to participate, 1095 students completed the online survey. Half of this sample was randomized to answer items related to temptation and restraint, of which 519 students completed these items. The mean age was 21, and slightly more than half the sample was composed of females (56.3%). The racial/ethnic breakdown was 33.2% Caucasian, 31.3% Asian, 23.7% Hispanic, 10% Black/African-American, 0.8% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.5% Native American, 6.4% multi-ethnic, and 8.1% self-identified as "Other". The majority of students were full-time (81.4%) and not members of a fraternity or sorority (86.1%).

### 2.2. Procedures

In the Spring semester of 2012, participants were invited to complete an online survey to document current drinking norms and drinking related attitudes. The survey took approximately 50 min to

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