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Self-Esteem in Young Adulthood through the Lens of the Sociometer Theory

Tiffany Erin Gorsuch Bainter

Western Illinois University, 1 University Circle, Macomb, Illinois, 61455, Illinois, United States

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Corresponding Author: Tiffany Erin Gorsuch Bainter

Abstract

This study investigates the dynamic interplay between self-esteem and behaviors, focusing on young adults aged 18-24. Utilizing an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA), interviews with 17 college students illuminate a significant theme: Low self-esteem motivates binge drinking, driven by a conscious desire to enhance self-worth. Participants recognize the direct influence of self-esteem on their alcohol consumption, highlighting a crucial aspect of self-perception

and behavioral choices. These findings emphasize the importance of addressing self-esteem issues in interventions targeting problematic alcohol use among young adults. By understanding the conscious awareness of the self-esteem-behavior relationship, tailored programs can effectively mitigate harmful behaviors and promote healthier self-perceptions, contributing to the ongoing discourse on self-esteem dynamics in developmental contexts.

Keywords: Self-Esteem, Sociometer Theory, Adulthood, United States

Introduction

Self-esteem, defined as an individual's perception of their own value, holds significant importance for both physical and psychological well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2015; Gebauer *et al.*, 2015; Wagner *et al.*, 2013^[35]). Various perspectives exist regarding the function of self-esteem, with some emphasizing conformity to cultural norms, others focusing on interpersonal belongingness, and a third highlighting success within social hierarchies (Gebauer *et al.*, 2015; Mahadevan *et al.*, 2016). According to the first perspective, self-esteem serves to motivate individuals to adhere to societal or cultural standards (Dewa *et al.*, 2014; Gebauer *et al.*, 2015). The second perspective suggests that self-esteem alerts individuals to feelings of social exclusion and motivates efforts to repair social relationships (Gebauer *et al.*, 2015). Finally, the third perspective posits that self-esteem is rooted in motives of social dominance and affiliation, alerting individuals to changes in these domains (Gebauer *et al.*, 2015).

Throughout life, self-esteem continues to develop, with interpersonal relationships playing a significant role in this process (Kiviruusu *et al.*, 2016; Orth *et al.*, 2015^[25]; Orth *et al.*, 2012^[26]). Research indicates that self-esteem tends to increase from young adulthood to middle adulthood before peaking around ages 50 to 60 and then declining (Orth *et al.*, 2015; Orth *et al.*, 2012; Wagner *et al.*, 2013)^[25, 26, 35].

Adaptive levels of self-esteem are associated with positive outcomes in various domains such as relationships, work, and health (Orth *et al.*, 2015; Orth *et al.*, 2012)^[25, 26]. Individuals with adaptive self-esteem engage in behaviors that enhance relationships, leading to greater social support, satisfaction, and overall well-being (Orth *et al.*, 2015; Orth *et al.*, 2012)^[25, 26]. Stronger social bonds are linked to better physical health, adaptive coping strategies, and lower levels of stress (Orth *et al.*, 2012)^[26].

Low self-esteem is associated with behavioral and emotional problems, although the exact nature of this relationship remains unclear (Anderson *et al.*, 2015; Keane & Loades, 2015; Leary, 2005^[18]). Leary (2005)^[18] suggests that social rejection can lead to negative emotions and behaviors aimed at gaining social acceptance, which may manifest as maladaptive behaviors.

Interpersonal relationships and self-esteem share a reciprocal relationship, where each influences the other (Kiviruusu *et al.*, 2016; Orth *et al.*, 2015^[25]; Orth *et al.*, 2012^[26]; Wagner *et al.*, 2013^[35]). Research indicates that individuals experiencing conflict in their relationships tend to have lower self-esteem and a slower progression of self-esteem over time (Kiviruusu *et al.*, 2016).

Young Adulthood

Young adulthood marks a period characterized by significant biological, social, and cognitive changes, coupled with the pivotal developmental task of forging relationships (Nikitin *et al.*, 2014; Wagner *et al.*, 2013) ^[24, 35]. Research indicates that self-esteem levels begin to gradually rise at a heightened pace during this phase (Luciano & Orth, 2017; Orth *et al.*, 2012 ^[26]; Wagner *et al.*, 2013 ^[35]). As young adults navigate new social roles, undergo various developmental transitions, and make life-altering decisions, relationships emerge as influential factors shaping their self-esteem trajectory (Luciano & Orth, 2017; Wagner *et al.*, 2013 ^[35]).

While understanding of the factors influencing self-esteem development in young adulthood is still evolving, recent studies underscore the pivotal role of relationships. Positive relationship experiences and challenges significantly impact self-esteem progression (Luciano & Orth, 2017; Wagner *et al.*, 2013 ^[35]). Notably, transitions in romantic relationships hold particular sway over self-esteem levels, with high-quality, long-term relationships boosting self-esteem, while relationship dissolution correlates with temporary decreases (Luciano & Orth, 2017). Young adults often align with their ideal future selves at the onset of new romantic relationships, bolstering self-esteem, whereas relationship breakdowns lead to diminished self-esteem (Luciano & Orth, 2017). Coping with social stressors, some young adults resort to unhealthy levels of alcohol consumption (Dehart, 2014).

The young adult demographic constitutes a significant portion of binge drinkers, posing public health concerns due to associated negative outcomes such as injury, legal issues, and sexual assault (CDC, 2013; SAMHSA, 2013; Stern *et al.*, 2017). Evidence suggests that social rejection or ego-taxing social experiences increase the likelihood of excessive alcohol consumption among young adults (Dehart, 2014). Problematic alcohol use in young adulthood, as well as later in life, may stem from using alcohol as a coping mechanism for negative affect (Bacon *et al.*, 2015).

Although the relationship between self-esteem and behavior remains somewhat elusive, limited evidence suggests a link between self-esteem and specific behaviors like binge drinking (Strandell, 2016) ^[31]. Thus, the current study aims to deepen understanding by exploring the lived experiences of young adults concerning behaviors aimed at boosting self-esteem, particularly focusing on binge drinking. This qualitative investigation seeks to elucidate how young adults perceive their self-esteem's relation to their efforts to enhance their relational value through behavior.

Methods

Participants: Participants in the study were required to be between the ages of 18 and 24 and proficient in English. Eligibility was determined based on responses to four initial questions assessing thwarted belongingness, self-perceived low relational value, alcohol consumption conformity, and experience with binge drinking. Only participants meeting the criteria for these factors proceeded to the next stage of the study. Exclusion criteria included individuals under 18 or over 24 years old, non-English speakers, and those known to the researcher.

Sample Description: The sample comprised 17 college students aged 18-24 ($M=19.5$), with 64.7% Caucasian, 11.8% African American, and 23.5% Latinx participants.

Most participants (88.2%) were single, while 5.9% were in long-term relationships. Data collection involved electronic administration of interview questions on social experience, self-esteem, relational value, and behavioral function.

Procedure: The study consisted of two sections: An initial questionnaire and subsequent semi-structured interviews. Participants completed four agree/disagree questions online, with responses determining eligibility for the interview phase. Ineligible participants were directed to the survey's end and provided with a debriefing. Eligible participants responded to open-ended prompts exploring self-esteem, relational value, affect related to binge drinking, and reflections on binge drinking behavior's function. Both survey sections were administered via Qualtrics. Completion of the entire study took approximately one hour.

An Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) was employed to explore participants' lived experiences and sense-making processes. A purposive sample of five participants was selected based on eligibility criteria established through a researcher-developed screening measure. Interview questions were electronically presented in written format to participants, covering topics such as social experience, self-esteem, relational value, and behavioral function.

Results

The results presented here explore participants' reflections on their self-esteem, relational value, and behavior concerning binge drinking, as derived from an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). Through in-depth qualitative analysis, several key themes emerged, elucidating how young adults perceive and interpret the relationship between their self-esteem, social experiences, and engagement in binge drinking.

Self-Esteem and Social Acceptance: Participants reported that self-esteem was closely linked to perceptions of social acceptance and relational value within peer networks. Many expressed that their self-esteem fluctuated based on their perceived alignment with group norms, especially in social contexts involving alcohol. For instance, one participant noted, "When I'm with friends and everyone's drinking, I feel like I fit in more, and that makes me feel better about myself." This theme underscores the idea that social inclusion acts as a reinforcing mechanism for self-esteem, particularly within the context of young adult peer relationships.

Relational Value and Social Hierarchies: A recurring theme was the significance of relational value, or one's sense of worth within social relationships, in motivating binge drinking behaviors. Participants articulated that their binge drinking often served to maintain or enhance their status within social hierarchies. One participant commented, "Drinking like everyone else makes me feel like I'm part of the group...like I belong." This response supports the notion that binge drinking is not solely about alcohol consumption but is embedded within broader efforts to secure social belonging and navigate peer dynamics. Furthermore, those who viewed themselves as having lower relational value reported engaging more frequently in binge drinking as a way to bridge perceived social gaps.

Binge Drinking as a Coping Mechanism for Negative Affect: Participants indicated that binge drinking served as a coping strategy for negative emotions tied to low self-esteem or perceived social rejection. This theme was

particularly prominent among those who described themselves as experiencing low relational value or thwarted belongingness. For example, one participant shared, "When I'm feeling left out, drinking makes me forget about it for a while." Such responses reflect the emotional regulation function of binge drinking, particularly in situations where individuals experience self-esteem threats related to social exclusion or low relational value.

The Paradox of Self-Esteem Enhancement and Risky Behavior: Interestingly, participants noted a paradox in which efforts to enhance self-esteem through binge drinking often led to temporary boosts in confidence, followed by regret or lowered self-esteem. One participant explained, "Drinking makes me feel good about myself at the moment, but the next day, I regret it and feel worse." This theme reveals a cyclical pattern in which binge drinking temporarily enhances self-esteem through social conformity and perceived relational value but ultimately reinforces negative self-perceptions. Such experiences highlight the complex relationship between self-esteem, binge drinking, and long-term self-perception in young adulthood.

Long-Term Relationship Dynamics and Self-Esteem Stability: While most participants were single, a minority who reported being in long-term relationships described a stabilizing effect of these relationships on self-esteem. One participant observed, "Being in a committed relationship makes me feel valued, and I don't feel like I need to drink as much to fit in." This theme suggests that stable, supportive relationships may reduce the need for binge drinking as a self-esteem-enhancement strategy, aligning with prior research linking secure relationships with higher self-esteem stability.

The findings underscore the multifaceted relationship between self-esteem, social belonging, and binge drinking among young adults. While binge drinking often serves as a tool for navigating social hierarchies and enhancing perceived relational value, it also emerges as a coping mechanism for self-esteem threats associated with social exclusion. This dual role of binge drinking reflects both adaptive and maladaptive attempts to regulate self-esteem, illuminating its complex function within young adult peer dynamics.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore young adults' perceptions of the interplay between self-esteem, relational value, and binge drinking. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA), we identified themes highlighting how self-esteem, social belonging, and binge drinking behaviors are interwoven in the experiences of young adults. Our findings reveal that binge drinking often serves both as a means of bolstering self-esteem in social contexts and as a coping mechanism for low relational value, illuminating its role in navigating complex social dynamics and self-perceptions during this developmental stage.

Self-Esteem as a Socially Conditioned Construct: The results support existing research indicating that self-esteem is highly contingent on social interactions and perceptions of acceptance (Orth *et al.*, 2012; Wagner *et al.*, 2013)^[26, 35]. Participants frequently linked their self-esteem to their alignment with group norms and acceptance within peer contexts, particularly those involving alcohol use. This finding aligns with theories suggesting self-esteem serves as

an internal gauge for social belonging and alignment with cultural norms (Dewa *et al.*, 2014; Gebauer *et al.*, 2015). The reliance on peer approval as a foundation for self-esteem may explain the pronounced influence of social situations, such as drinking events, in shaping self-worth among young adults.

Relational Value and Binge Drinking as a Means to Social Inclusion: One prominent theme was the role of binge drinking in enhancing perceived relational value, with participants viewing alcohol consumption as a pathway to social inclusion and acceptance. This finding echoes the self-esteem theory suggesting individuals may adopt culturally valued behaviors to enhance their relational value and secure social acceptance (Anderson *et al.*, 2015; Gebauer *et al.*, 2015). Our results also extend these theories by indicating that young adults might prioritize behaviors that promote short-term social gains—such as binge drinking—over long-term self-esteem stability. This could explain why binge drinking is prevalent in young adult peer settings, despite the potential for adverse health and psychological outcomes (SAMHSA, 2013; Stern *et al.*, 2017).

Binge Drinking as an Emotional Coping Mechanism: The study further highlights the dual role of binge drinking as a coping mechanism for self-esteem threats associated with perceived social rejection and thwarted belongingness. Participants described binge drinking as a temporary escape from feelings of social exclusion or low relational value, supporting literature suggesting that young adults use alcohol to alleviate negative affect (Bacon *et al.*, 2015; Dehart, 2014). This finding underscores the need for mental health and public health interventions targeting emotional regulation and coping strategies, as binge drinking behaviors may mask underlying self-esteem issues and exacerbate feelings of isolation in the long run.

The Self-Esteem Paradox in Risky Behavior: Our results reveal a paradoxical relationship in which young adults perceive binge drinking as a behavior that momentarily enhances self-esteem through social conformity, yet ultimately results in regret or lower self-worth. This pattern suggests that while binge drinking can boost self-esteem in the short term by fostering social inclusion, it may detract from longer-term self-esteem stability. This finding is consistent with research indicating that self-esteem boosts derived from social dominance or group conformity are often transient (Gebauer *et al.*, 2015; Strandell, 2016)^[31]. Addressing this paradox could involve educating young adults on the importance of cultivating self-worth independently from group behaviors that may lead to negative self-perceptions.

Implications for Relationships and Self-Esteem Development

While most participants were single, those in long-term relationships reported experiencing a stabilizing effect on their self-esteem, which reduced the need for binge drinking to gain social acceptance. This aligns with findings that long-term, supportive relationships provide a foundation for self-esteem growth, even as it fluctuates through life stages (Luciano & Orth, 2017). This theme suggests that stable relationships may offer protective factors against behaviors like binge drinking, as they help young adults navigate social pressures while fostering a more secure sense of self.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study provides valuable insights but has limitations. The small sample size and reliance on self-reported data may limit the generalizability of our findings. Additionally, given that the sample comprised college students within a narrow age range, future studies could expand the demographic scope to examine variations across diverse backgrounds, including non-college populations and older adults.

Future research might also explore how interventions focused on alternative coping mechanisms, such as emotional regulation and mindfulness practices, could reduce binge drinking by providing young adults with more adaptive tools for managing self-esteem threats. Moreover, longitudinal research could provide a deeper understanding of how self-esteem, relational value, and binge drinking interact over time, especially in relation to relationship changes and shifts in social networks.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex interplay between self-esteem, relational value, and binge drinking among young adults. The findings suggest that binge drinking is not merely a substance-use behavior but a multifaceted tool used to navigate social belonging, alleviate self-esteem threats, and reinforce relational value. As such, interventions aiming to reduce binge drinking should consider the social and psychological functions it serves, focusing on fostering stable self-esteem that does not rely on peer conformity. By addressing the root causes of binge drinking behavior and promoting healthier means of enhancing self-worth, we can support young adults in making decisions that contribute to both their social well-being and overall mental health.

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