

Unmasking the Nexus between Maladaptive Alcohol use and Dark Triad Personality Traits

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Abstract

As young adults enter college, many seem to increase their alcohol consumption. Whether this behavior change is solely due to environmental factors, such as peer pressure or lack of supervision, has not been fully separated from developing or emerging intrapersonal traits that might facilitate the behavior. This trend underscores the importance of investigating the relationship between excessive drinking habits and deviant personality traits. This study, aimed at investigating the relationship between "dark triad" personality traits and harmful alcohol behaviors, may provide valuable insights into the social cultures on college campuses that promote maladaptive drinking habits. Based on the trait theory of personality, we hypothesized that dark triad traits would be associated with negative alcohol behaviors. To test our hypothesis, we administered the Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire (YAACQ) and Short Dark Triad scale (SD3) to 800 participants. After cleaning the data, we analyzed 799 responses to study measures and demographic items. Our findings revealed that, of the dark personality traits, Machiavellianism and psychopathy had small positive associations with harmful alcohol consumption. Moreover, we found that both personality and Greek life participation were significant predictors of alcohol misuse. This study may serve as a stepping-stone for future research into the interplay between the behavioral tendencies and cultural settings in which alcohol abuse occurs among college students. Thus, provides additional insight into a complex problem plaguing college communities.

Keywords: alcohol abuse; deviance; personality; psychopathy; alcohol consumption; trait theory

Introduction

Alcohol use among college-aged individuals has historically been an issue of psychological and societal concern. In 2022, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) found that of full-time college students ages 18 to 22, 49% drank alcohol, and about 29% binged or excessively drank in the past month. Engaging in excessive drinking in college has long been considered by some a rite of passage, possibly without cause for deeper concern (Crawford & Novak, 2006; Foxcroft et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2021). Nonetheless, this "innocent" ritual may set the stage for more consequential and damaging behavior in the future. Approximately 15% of young adults meet the criteria for Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD) (NSDUH, 2022). It is unclear whether young adults engage in this conduct due to peer pressure and lack of supervision or because of developing intrapersonal traits that promote the behavior. Therefore, an examination of the association between harmful drinking habits and deviant personality traits may provide additional identification of and insight into a more complex issue.

Deviance is a term used to describe negative behaviors and actions that go against societal norms and values (Clinard & Meier, 2015; Salakhova et al., 2016). Deviance can stem from situational contexts but can also be related to specific individual characteristics, such as personality traits (Eze et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 2017). Research has shown that how someone perceives deviance can be influenced by their age and the social setting (Dvorak et al., 2015; Kendler et al., 2015). For example, a college student who regularly excessively drinks might not be considered as deviant as an older professional doing the same thing. The consequences of heavy alcohol consumption on college students' mental and physical health have long been shown to be primarily negative (Bachrach & Read, 2012; Bamberger et al., 2018; Kenney et al., 2018). Given that the social norms for alcohol usage differ on college campuses in comparison to other social environments, there has been discourse on when participation in college drinking culture is mainly a social concern or something fostered by more damaging intrapersonal traits. This study aimed to

explore the possible associations that may exist between participation in harmful drinking practices and deviant personality traits in college students.

Social Contexts Promoting Alcohol Abuse

The societal attitude towards alcohol consumption, also known as drinking culture, can have a significant impact on the behavior of young adults during their transition to university life (Derefinko et al., 2016; Savic et al., 2016). Drinking culture dominates many social and cultural spheres, making it one of the most notable factors that affect college students. Though some may have prior experience with drinking, the university setting can present multiple social contexts that may lead to the promotion of alcohol abuse (Ferrer et al., 2012; DiGuseppi et al., 2018; Ward & Guo, 2020). As a result, research has shown that college students tend to binge drink more frequently and are more likely to engage in alcohol-impaired driving than their non-college peers (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), 2024; Patrick et al., 2020). These contexts highlight the power of cultural environments on drinking behavior and include easy accessibility to alcohol, limited supervision from responsible adults, and unstructured free time.

It is evident that environmental factors play a prominent role in alcohol abuse, considering the significant differences in drinking-related behaviors between college-attending students and their non-college peers (Bravo et al., 2021). However, they may also be due to specific intrapersonal characteristics that encourage individuals to select specific social situations. Even so, the college social culture may contribute to alcohol abuse directly. For instance, students studying at schools with strong Greek systems or prominent athletic programs tend to drink more than students at other school types (Dazzio et al., 2021; Kim & Kuan, 2020; NIAAA, 2024). Furthermore, alcohol consumption is highest among students residing in Greek system fraternities and sororities, while it is lowest among those students who commute and live with their families. Thus, excessive drinking is a prevalent issue on college campuses, fueled by various settings that may encourage it.

The normalization of the frequent use and abuse of alcohol in social contexts like college campuses can have significant consequences that affect many parts of a student's academic and personal life (Haktanir et al., 2021). Overdrinking increases mental health risks, such as depression and anxiety in college students (Kenney et al., 2018) and promotes declines in overall academic performance, which negatively impacts the prospects of graduation and employment (Kahler et al., 2005; White & Hingson, 2013). Students who tend to be the most vulnerable to these behaviors include younger students and students who are heavily involved in Greek life (Brown-Rice et al., 2015; Scott-Sheldon et al., 2008). Gaining a deeper understanding of the characteristics of social contexts and individual traits that are related to alcohol use in college students is essential to finding meaningful solutions. Armed with this knowledge, preventative measures can be developed that may effectively address future alcohol-related issues.

The Role of Personality in Alcohol Abuse

Trait personality theory is a psychological concept that argues that an individual's enduring internal temperament or characteristics significantly impact their external behavior (Costa & McCrae, 1998; Epstein, 1994; Lyons & Jonason, 2015). Subsequently, the intensity and strength of these traits can influence the selection of social situations and the actions and reactions in various social contexts. Research has shown that specific personality traits, such as impulsivity, sensation seeking, and neuroticism, are significantly associated with alcohol misuse in college students

(Martin et al., 2021; Savage et al., 2023). These three traits, especially neuroticism, are considered risk factors for both alcohol abuse and other mental health disturbances.

The "dark triad" of personality is a set of traits of particular interest in forensic and clinical psychology due to its connection to callous and manipulative behaviors often observed in individuals with socially aversive personalities (Furnham et al., 2013). The three traits that make up the dark triad, namely Machiavellianism (highly manipulative), narcissism (grandiose and self-centered), and psychopathy (lacking empathy and remorse for others), are believed to be associated with deviant criminal behavior (Furnham et al., 2013; Jones & Paulhus, 2011; Wright et al., 2017). Unlike other Big Five personality traits, the dark triad can be divided into clinical and subclinical manifestations, making it a useful tool for studying alcohol and substance use behaviors among college students (Nnam et al., 2023; Onyedire et al., 2021; Stenason & Vernon, 2016). This is particularly relevant when examining anti-social behaviors associated with excessive drinking, such as sexual assault, alcohol-impaired driving, and physical assaults (Hingson et al., 2017). While the social environment certainly has the power to influence reckless drinking behaviors, for some who continue to engage in irresponsible alcohol use despite awareness of the negative personal and social consequences, deeper intra-individual issues may also be at play.

Although previous research has demonstrated connections between some of the dark triad traits and alcohol use, continued exploration in this area is necessary (Gardiner & Lawson, 2023; Jauk & Dieterich, 2019). Given this information, our goal is to explore the connection between college social settings that promote alcohol use, dark triad personality traits, and harmful alcohol consumption and behavior. By recognizing and understanding the notable role that personality traits may play in alcohol misuse, we can take a significant step toward averting the damaging consequences of alcohol misuse among college students.

The Current Study

Attending college remains a significant milestone for many young adults nationally and internationally (Nnam et al., 2023). However, the prevalence of drinking culture, particularly for those who may participate in the fraternal Greek system on college campuses, can contribute to harmful alcohol use. Our research specifically focuses on alcohol abuse among college attendees, as this population is known to experience problematic drinking, with some meeting the criteria for alcohol use disorder (NSDUH, 2022). Furthermore, it is worth exploring how personality traits contribute to excessive drinking behaviors. The dark triad personality traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) provide a possible contextual framework for understanding the intrapersonal traits that may foster vulnerabilities for current alcohol abuse and possible future alcohol use disorder. Our study aims to contribute to existing research on the relationship between harmful alcohol consumption and deviant personality traits in college students by further examining both the personality correlates and situational contexts that may promote excessive drinking behaviors. By exploring both the personality factors and social settings, like Greek system participation, we can elucidate the mechanisms that may lead to problematic alcohol consumption and make more informed decisions regarding prevention and intervention strategies. The following hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1: Dark triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) will be significantly associated with harmful alcohol behaviors and consequences.

Hypothesis 2: Personality traits of the dark triad will significantly predict harmful alcohol behaviors even when controlling for college social contexts, like Greek system participation.

Method

Participants

The survey had a total of 800 responses, of which 799 were used for the final data analysis after cleaning. Most participants were female, constituting approximately 83% (n= 662) of the sample. 0.9% of the sample identified as non-binary or third gender (n= 7). On average, participants were 25.34 years old (SD = 6.98). 62% of the sample identified as Caucasian (n= 498), followed by 17% as Black (n= 139), 4% Asian (n= 35), 8% biracial or multiracial (n= 64), 0.8% American Indian/Native American (n= 6), 5% other (n=43) and 1.5% preferred not to say (n= 12). Two participants did not respond to the demographic question about race. Approximately 30% (n= 242) of the sample identified as Hispanic/Latino/a. Most participants identified as middle-class (44%, n= 355) and Christian (50%, n= 403). 12% (n= 95) of the sample participated in Greek life on their college campus.

Procedure

After obtaining approval from the institutional review board (IRB), we predominantly recruited participants from a large public university in the southern region of the United States. To qualify, participants had to be at least 21 years old and currently enrolled in university. Students were offered extra credit in their psychology courses for their participation. In addition, we recruited respondents through social media flyers. These participants did not receive any compensation. Most participants accessed the survey through the psychology participant pool. Upon clicking the survey link, participants were directed to the informed consent and explanation of the research page. Participants completed Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire (YAACQ) (Read et al., 2006), Short Dark Triad (SD3) Scale (Jones & Paulhus, 2014), and demographic questions about their age, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, and Greek life participation through Qualtrics. The survey was anonymous.

Materials

Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire. The Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire (YAACQ) is a scale designed to help individuals self-report any risky behaviors and harmful consequences they may have experienced as a result of alcohol consumption within the last 30 days (Read et al., 2006). Comprising of 48 items, each statement requires a "yes" or "no" answer, with a corresponding score of 1 or 0 respectively. Scores can range from 0 to 48. The total score of the YAACQ provides an overall count of maladaptive behaviors, with higher scores denoting a greater number of harmful alcohol-related behaviors or consequences. Additionally, responses can be segmented into eight specific domains of alcohol-related harm or behavior (Read et al., 2006). This research focused on participants' overall negative drinking behaviors. Therefore, only the total number of harmful alcohol behaviors was of interest. The Cronbach's alpha for the overall YAACQ scale was 0.96.

Short Dark Triad Scale. The Short Dark Triad (SD3) Scale evaluates the characteristics of Machiavellianism (9 items), narcissism (9 items), and psychopathy (9 items) using a 27-item assessment (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). This abbreviated version of the Dark Triad Personality Scale features a 5-point Likert-scale response format (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), with some items being reverse coded. This scale uses mean scores to represent trait behaviors on each subscale. The higher the subscale mean scores, the greater the levels of the corresponding dark trait. In these data, Cronbach's alpha for the Machiavellianism subscale was equal to .76, for the narcissism subscale, the Cronbach was .63, and the psychopathy subscale was .73. Overall, the Cronbach reliability coefficients for Machiavellianism and psychopathy were similar to those found by Jones and Paulhus (2014) which ranged from .68 to .74.

Data Analytic strategy

We checked the data for missing cases and normality. Prior to data cleaning, the total N was 800 participants. One participant was excluded due to missingness greater than 25%. Due to low internal reliability, the narcissism subscale of the SD3 was excluded from further analysis. Assumptions of univariate normality were met for skewness and kurtosis (skewness < 3, kurtosis < 10) for the YAACQ scale and the Machiavellianism and psychopathy subscales of the SD3 prior to hypothesis testing. Relationships between each demographic variable (age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status) and drinking behaviors were also examined to determine whether any covariates should be included in the regression models. Results indicated that none of the primary demographic variables were significantly associated with alcohol behaviors. A post hoc power analysis confirmed that the power achieved for the correlational analyses was greater than .90. SPSS software version 28 was used to complete the data analyses. A criterion alpha of $\alpha = .05$ was set for all analyses.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Descriptive statistics (including means and standard deviations) and correlations between the primary dependent variables were all assessed see **Table 1**. The mean alcohol behaviors score on the YAACQ was 12.50 (SD = 10.93), indicating that there were fairly low levels of maladaptive alcohol consumption within the sample overall. For the dark triad traits, Machiavellianism had a mean score of 2.04 (SD = 0.64), whereas psychopathy had a mean score of 3.11 (SD = 0.57). To examine engagement with fraternity/sorority life on the college campus, participants were asked if they were currently or had ever been a member of the Greek system. This response was coded as 1 for yes and 2 for no. Given the additional interest in Greek system participation in conjunction with personality, we completed a point-biserial correlation analysis between responses to the Greek life question and psychopathy and Machiavellianism mean trait scores. Point-biserial correlations can be used when examining associations between categorical variables with two levels and a continuous variable. There was no significant association between Greek life participation and psychopathy or Machiavellianism ($r(792) = -.04, p = .12$ and $r(792) = .01, p = .37$, respectively).

Scale	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. YAACQ	12.50	10.92	---			
2. Machiavellianism	2.04	.64	.10*	---		
3. Psychopathy	3.11	.57	.26**	.50**	----	
4. Greek Life	---	---	-.14**	.01	-.04	---

Note. Significant correlations are highlighted.

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix Between the Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire (YAACQ), Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, and Greek System Participation

Hypothesis Testing

To test the first hypothesis, bivariate correlations between SD3 subscale mean trait scores and alcohol behavior scores on the YAACQ were computed. As anticipated, psychopathy and Machiavellianism were both significantly correlated with risky drinking behaviors and harmful alcohol consequences on the YAACQ ($r(782) = .26, p < .001$ and $r(783) = .10, p = .002$, respectively). These findings confirmed the first hypothesis and indicated that increases in mean trait psychopathy and Machiavellianism scores were associated with more self-reported harmful alcohol behaviors.

Before testing the second hypothesis, we examined the association between Greek life participation and harmful alcohol behaviors using a point-biserial correlation. Greek life participation was significantly associated with maladaptive alcohol behavior scores on the YAACQ ($r(784) = -.14, p < .001$). The relationship suggested that those who participated in Greek life (coded as 1) had somewhat higher alcohol scores than those who did not participate (coded as 2). However, the magnitude of the association was small.

In order to explore the second hypothesis, that personality remains a contributing factor in harmful alcohol behavior, when controlling for social contexts, like participation in college fraternities/sororities, the Greek life item was dummy coded and entered into the hierarchical regression analyses. Greek life participation was controlled for at the first step, and mean trait scores for Machiavellianism and psychopathy were entered as predictors of YAACQ at step two. Regression analysis for model 1, which used Greek life participation as a predictor of YAACQ scores, was significant and explained approximately 1.9% of the variance, see **Table 2** for the regression coefficients. More importantly, the regression analysis for model 2, which included Machiavellianism and psychopathy, was also significant. This model explained 8.3% of the variance in YAACQ scores ($R^2 = .083, F(3, 778) = 23.58, p < .001$). The regression further showed psychopathy and Greek life participation to be significant predictors for YAACQ scores, whereas Machiavellianism was not significant with the other predictors in the model. The variance inflation factors for both models were less than or equal to one, suggesting no collinearity issues.

Predictor Variable	B	β	t	R ²	F	df	p
	Criterion:						
	YAACQ			.02	14.99	1, 780	< .001
Greek Life	-4.62	-0.14	-3.87				< .001
	Criterion:						
	YAACQ			.08	23.58	3, 778	< .001
Greek Life	-4.24	-0.13	-3.66				< .001
Machiavellianism	-0.57	-0.03	-0.83				.41
Psychopathy	5.18	0.27	6.77				.001

Note. YAACQ = Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire

Table 2: Regression Coefficients for Hierarchical Regression Model of Greek System Participation, Machiavellianism and, Psychopathy predicting Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire (YAACQ)

Discussion

Despite a notable decrease in college enrollment in the United States over the past decade, higher education remains a crucial and significant milestone for a substantial proportion of young adults (Hanson, 2024). Unfortunately, for many, this transition is denoted by increases in

maladaptive drinking habits that can be the foundation for negative social and personal consequences which may lead to future alcohol use disorders (NIAAA, 2024). Although it is evident that contextual factors within the college setting, such as membership in fraternities or sororities, play a

significant role in alcohol misuse, it is equally important to recognize that intrapersonal traits, exemplified by the dark triad, also exhibit a robust association with substance and alcohol abuse (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019; Nnam et al., 2023). As anticipated, results in the current study showed that increases in psychopathy and Machiavellianism were related to more self-reported harmful alcohol behaviors and consequences. Moreover, even when controlling for known environmental factors, such as involvement in fraternity/sorority Greek life, both participation in the Greek system and trait psychopathy significantly predicted maladaptive drinking habits. Thus, having socially aversive personality traits was more impactful than the situational context when it comes to understanding alcohol misuse among college attendees in this sample.

The current findings are consistent with past research, which connects college social settings, such as Greek organization affiliation, to risky behaviors, including alcohol-induced blackouts, aggressive or disruptive behaviors, physical injuries, and increased risk of sexual assault (Dazzio et al., 2021; DiGuseppi et al., 2018; Hingson et al., 2017). Even though most of our sample did not participate in fraternities or sororities, the results of this study show that Greek affiliation is an indicator of problematic alcohol-related behaviors for those who were involved. Previous research has shed light on potential explanations for this association, such as self-selection (where individuals who already have higher levels of alcohol consumption are more likely to join Greek organizations) and socialization (where Greek organizations have established harmful drinking cultures) (Capone et al., 2007; Park et al., 2009). These findings suggest that further protective measures and interventions are necessary for individuals involved in Greek culture on college campuses. Additional steps to mitigate the risks associated with participation in such organizations are required to ensure the safety and well-being of all college community members.

Social situations hold a prominent role in fostering the environments necessary for maladaptive alcohol behaviors to thrive. Nonetheless, it is apparent that individual differences, like dark triad personality traits, can also be an essential factor. The finding from these data that trait psychopathy predicts maladaptive drinking behaviors, independent of situational factors, is consistent with past research on the impact of callous and manipulative behaviors on hazardous drinking (Nnam et al., 2023). Moreover, these findings may further contextualize the connections between clinical and sub-clinical comorbidities related to socially aversive personality traits and substance use disorders. Dimensional models of the dark triad personality suggest that these traits are present in the population at varying levels but only reach clinical relevance at the upper ends (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019). However, our data suggests that even at low to moderate levels at which psychopathy was indicated in this sample, there was a small but significant effect on alcohol use, which skewed toward harmful behaviors and increased experience of negative alcohol-related consequences. This suggests that even at low, sub-clinical levels, psychopathy can have a disastrous impact on an individual's overall well-being.

Notably, Machiavellianism did not maintain its predictive association with alcohol use once the influence of psychopathy and Greek affiliation was statistically controlled. This finding aligns with prior research, which suggests that this personality trait exhibits either no association or inconsistent associations with substance use and addictive disorders (Chung et al., 2019; Stenason & Vernon, 2016). Machiavellianism, characterized by interpersonal antagonism and a disregard for societal norms and morals, may conceptually have weaker links to addictive responses (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Previous studies have found a

significant overlap between Machiavellianism and psychopathy, but the degree of overlap depends on the method of measurement used (Jauk & Dieterich, 2019). As a result, it is possible that the correlation initially attributed to the relationship between Machiavellianism and alcohol behaviors in this sample, was mainly due to Machiavellianism's association with psychopathy. Therefore, additional research is necessary to fully understand these intricate connections.

Limitations

The present study offers valuable insights into the social and intrapersonal factors that contribute to maladaptive drinking and alcohol-related consequences among college students. Nevertheless, the study has some noteworthy limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the data was self-reported and cross-sectional in nature, which may have led to reporting bias or inaccuracies. As such, the results should be interpreted with caution. Secondly, the cross-sectional design precludes the examination of long-term outcomes related to drinking behaviors. Additionally, the dark triad scale lacked internal consistency in measuring narcissism and, therefore, could not explore its impact on the findings. It is possible that the results could have been different if narcissism had been included in the analysis. Furthermore, it must be noted that, on average, the sample consisted of participants in their mid- rather than early twenties, which may have influenced the findings. The sample's relatively low levels of dark triad traits and alcohol-related consequences could be attributed to the unique characteristics of the participants, including being mostly female. Lastly, it should be noted that the effect sizes for significant results were relatively small. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the broader implications of the study's findings.

Conclusion

The ramifications of excessive alcohol consumption pose a significant public health concern (Patrick et al., 2020). This encompasses the burden experienced by both treatment-seeking and non-treatment-seeking individuals grappling with substance use disorders. Situational contexts and individual temperament may influence the etiology of alcohol use disorders. The present study contributes to the existing literature by affirming the link between harmful alcohol consumption and deviant personality traits among college students while also highlighting the role of social contexts in promoting excessive drinking and its adverse outcomes. Psychopathy, whether at clinical or subclinical levels, is associated with sensation-seeking and impulsivity (Stenason & Vernon, 2016). Our findings suggest that even subtle manifestations of this trait may render individuals vulnerable to risky behaviors and substance abuse. Researchers in clinical and social sciences should scrutinize behavioral patterns exhibited by students across diverse social contexts, assessing how individual differences impact alcohol use. Such insights are key for understanding the etiology of maladaptive drinking and developing effective interventions. Given the multifaceted nature of this issue, a comprehensive approach that combines social and clinical interventions may be essential for addressing the interplay of personal and cultural factors in alcohol misuse among college students.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. There was no funding support for this research.

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