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BINGE DRINKING IN COLLEGE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Kristin Andrews

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BINGE DRINKING IN COLLEGE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The College of Education and Human Services

Department of Educational Studies, Leadership, and Counseling

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Abstract

This phenomenological research study examined the personal experiences, habits, and perceptions of post-secondary students who binge drink. This study was guided by three research questions, as well as pre-existing research into collegiate binge drinking. The experiences shared by participants showed that despite serious negative outcomes, students binge drink because they feel negatives are far outweighed by the positive social interactions and fun drinking creates. While all the participants in this study are considered binge drinkers who abuse alcohol, none of the participants considered their drinking to be problematic. The participants shared their intent to stop their current drinking patterns upon graduation, while sharing that these patterns are not sustainable outside of the collegiate environment. While the participants all acknowledged their university should or does have resources to support students who drink heavily, they were unable to describe any of these resources. The participant interviews exemplify how the desire to belong is a strong influence in student drinking behaviors.

Keywords: binge, alcohol use disorder, belong, social, outcomes, peers, alcohol, drinking, hangover, patterns

Chapter I: Introduction

Alcohol consumption has often been viewed as a rite of passage into adulthood in American society and around college campuses, even among those who are below the legal drinking age. The collegiate atmosphere can encourage drinking behaviors with over half of full-time college students aged 18-22 admitting to drinking alcohol in the previous month (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [NIAAA], 2022). While alcohol provides for a more laidback atmosphere and allows those who consume it to feel more relaxed, at ease, and even more fun, it has also proven to be dangerous and have negative outcomes (NIAAA, 2022). Excessive drinking patterns which bring blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to 0.08%, known as binge drinking (NIAAA, 2022), can be deadly, and adults in college are at an elevated risk to engage in this dangerous behavior (NIAAA, 2022; Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013).

Context

In the early 1990s, the Harvard School of Public Health first conducted a study on the drinking habits and alcohol use patterns of college students (Nelson & Wechsler, 2008). This study found that college students were at high-risk for dangerous drinking behaviors such as binge drinking. The study defined bingeing as five alcoholic beverages in a row for men and four alcoholic beverages in a row for women (Nelson & Wechsler, 2008). The study then followed the impacts and consequences of this high-risk binge drinking on the lives of students and those around them. Since that time, the problem of binge drinking among post-secondary students has not ceased but has remained stable (Nelson & Wechsler, 2008). The study found that while there were some positive outcomes from drinking among student populations, largely the outcomes were negative, having harmful consequences to those involved in bingeing patterns (Nelson & Wechsler, 2008).

The effects of excessive alcohol consumption are far reaching and affect more people than just the drinker. Excess consumption is responsible for more than 88,000 deaths annually and costs the United States hundreds of billions of dollars each year (Esser et al., 2014). Binge drinking has also been shown to have a profound effect on student life, with coeds expressing a connection between alcohol misuse and poor grades, missed classes and assignments, as well as other academic consequences (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008). These risky drinking patterns are not only responsible for negative academic outcomes but also can cause damage to a student's personal life and well-being (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008; Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, et al., 2002). Approximately one in ten college students meet the requirements for an alcohol abuse diagnosis, and one in 17 qualify for an alcohol dependence diagnosis (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008). Binge drinking is linked to sexual assaults, blackouts, physical injuries, property damage, legal troubles, and mental malaise (NIAAA, 2022)

Since the time of the first Harvard study, there has been significant research into the dynamic that alcohol and environment play on college campuses (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008). Higher education institutions have recognized the severity of the problems that binge drinking causes both on and off campus in the lives of their students. These studies have been used to guide campus policy reform and the implementation of support programs for students who may engage in high-risk drinking behaviors. Still, college campuses find binge drinking to be a serious problem that has yet to subside despite their efforts to quell the issue.

P-20 principles guide this study in their acknowledgement of education as a fluid process from childhood through adulthood. P-20 principles recognize that education is not one-size-fits-all (Mead, n.d.). Societal changes require educators and academic institutions to adapt to the needs of their students and, in many cases, meet people where they are (Mead, n.d.). These

fundamentals are important in creating student-life programs, campus policy, and resources that acknowledge the challenges that young adults will face in their post-secondary education, particularly with drinking (St. John et al., 2013). With the continued presence of alcohol on campus and in the lives of students, P-20 principles offer guiding insights for institutions navigating the difficulties that binge drinking creates.

Purpose of the Study

There have been several prominent studies on the effects of binge drinking in college (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008). There have also been numerous studies on the demographics and statistics of heavy episodic drinking on college campuses and in which populations this occurs most frequently (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008; Wechsler et al., 2009).

The purpose of this study is to discover the "why" behind binge drinking habits and patterns in college students despite the negative outcomes. This study further aims to examine the consequences, both positive and negative, of binge drinking on the lives of post-secondary students and those around them, as well as the impacts on their academic performance.

Theoretical Framework

In 1985, Skog published a study on his theory of collective drinking, in which the population of a group influences the rate at which alcohol is consumed:

Skog argued that there is a strong collective component to population drinking so that when the mean consumption changes, drinkers across the entire distribution will move in concert. The implication that there is a collective drinking culture has formed a cornerstone of the public health approach to alcohol problems, because it provides a link between per-capita consumption and rates of harm. His work has thus contributed to fundamentally reshaping both alcohol policy and alcohol research, shifting the focus from

dependent or heavy drinkers to more universal preventive efforts. (Livingston & Raninen, 2020, p. 1773)

Understanding how binge drinking occurs is important to understanding why students are at high risk of becoming involved. Since college campuses are collective spaces, individual behaviors can easily be influenced by group thought or actions. Additionally, this concept is a guiding factor in understanding the motives for continued binge drinking practices among young adults despite the known consequences and negative outcomes.

Peer pressure is a concept that goes in conjunction with Skog's theory of collectivity of drinking. College students are in an environment where pressure from their peer groups is particularly high. As parental supervision is lessened in college, students step into an adult role where their peers are their greatest source of influence. The pressure to socially drink and behave the same as those in their peer groups is a driving factor in the drinking patterns that can be observed on college campuses (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013).

Phenomenological theory is the guiding framework for this research study. "Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's lived experiences within the world" (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 90). Using phenomenology in this research study, it becomes possible to explore the experiences, feelings, and perceptions of post-secondary college students in relation to their drinking patterns. Through phenomenology the researcher can find patterns and commonalities in the data and create categories and subcategories to evaluate the research. Phenomenology gives insight into the meaning of lived events through the lens of those who experienced them firsthand. It also provides firsthand descriptions of events and experiences from participants (Norlyk & Harder, 2010).

Research Questions

The research questions that guided the study are as follows:

1. What are motivators for binge drinking among college students?
2. What are outcomes, both negative and positive, from binge drinking episodes?
3. What are the perceived campus resources available for students dealing with bingeing and high-risk drinking patterns?

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to the existing research on binge drinking consequences among college student populations. It will also advance the limited qualitative research on the driving factors for bingeing episodes among students. Over the last thirty years, since its recognition as a serious public health threat, bingeing and heavy episodic drinking in college have been a consistent problem across college campuses. The studies that were formed out of necessity to address this problem have been used to inform campus and community policies to limit dangerous drinking behaviors (Nelson & Wechsler, 2008).

While there is hefty statistical information available on college drinking consequences and costs that have aided in the formation of campus policy, there is very little qualitative information available. This study will be used to further the existing statistical research, as well as improve the information available on the motives for binge drinking among students.

Understanding why students engage in binge drinking is equally as important as understanding the trends and patterns in their drinking behaviors, as well as the outcomes. Through qualitative interviews with post-secondary student populations, motives for drinking behaviors can be identified. Identification of bingeing rationales among student populations can aid in campus policy changes, as well as the implementation of support resources for students.

Examining the mentality and intentions of students who engage in binge drinking will assist institutions in providing in-depth education on the risks associated with this high-risk behavior, as well as tools and programs to help students deal with these issues.

Definitions

The following key terms are provided to create understanding and continuity throughout this study.

Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD): A disease in which an individual engages in drinking practices that result in harmful and dangerous behaviors and consequences. AUD is marked by the individual having strong cravings, inability to control consumption, and a negative emotional state (MedlinePlus, 2020).

Alcohol withdrawal (Withdrawal): Symptoms that may occur when a person who has been drinking too much alcohol on a regular basis suddenly stops drinking alcohol (MedlinePlus, Bethesda MD, 2020).

Binge: “An occasion when an activity is done in an extreme way, especially eating, drinking, or spending money” (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Binge Drinking: “A pattern of drinking alcohol that brings blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to 0.08% or 0.08 grams of alcohol per deciliter or higher. For a typical adult, this pattern of alcohol misuse corresponds to consuming four or more drinks (female), or five or more drinks (male) in about two hours” (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2021, p. 1).

Summary

Excessive alcohol consumption is responsible for tens of thousands of deaths annually and costs the United States hundreds of billions of dollars each year (Esser et al., 2014). Binge drinking in particular is responsible for more than half of these 95,000 alcohol related deaths and

over 77% of the economic costs (NIAAA, 2021). College students are at a particularly high risk for engaging in these risky drinking behaviors that lead to dangerous and sometimes permanent outcomes. Consequences for binge drinking can be serious including sexual assaults, unplanned pregnancies, STDs, legal troubles, addiction, poor academic performance, and even death; yet, students continue to engage in binge drinking (Esser et al., 2020; Wechsler et al., 2002).

Due to the cooperative nature and social aspects that occur on a college campus, students face the potential for engaging in collective drinking patterns, which is one of the causes of binge drinking. While binge drinking may occur in a group setting, it has the potential to carry on to an individual level, forming patterns of abuse that can lead to alcohol use disorder (Skog, 1985; Meda et al, 2017).

Across the United States, alcohol misuse on college campuses has been identified as a serious problem by universities, the public health department, and other government agencies. This has led to a call for more research on student drinking patterns and outcomes, as well as reform in college policies and campus resources (Nelson & Wechsler, 2008). Understanding both how and why binge drinking occurs is key to creating safe college campuses with adequate resources to support students who are at risk for alcohol misuse.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review will provide context for the study by examining previous studies relevant to the topic of binge drinking in college. The review will explore underlying theories and principles such as Weber-Fechner's Law and the "theory of collectivity of drinking cultures" and how this theory has guided previous studies and public health policy. It will examine scientific reports on the effects of alcohol on the brain, as well as mortality rates relative to drinking alcoholic beverages in excess. This review will further describe unfavorable outcomes related to alcohol consumption and the impact on both students and college campuses. Furthermore, solutions to binge-related issues presented by institutions of higher education will be explored.

Historical Context

In 1983, Skog presented his study on the collectivity of drinking cultures to the International Institute of the Prevention and Treatment of Alcoholism. His research was later published in 1985 in the British Journal of Addiction, in which he challenged a previously accepted theory on drinking. Prior to Skog's publication, Ledermann's theory of distribution of alcohol, a single-distribution theory, was the only distribution theory of its time regarding alcohol. While this was the case, Skog argued that Ledermann's model was largely flawed. Skog believed that while Ledermann was able to predict some occurrences relative to drinking patterns, he was unable to explain them using his model. While this model was sometimes accurate in predicting consumption in some populations, it was often skewed in others. Skog felt that Ledermann's model was largely inaccurate because it failed to examine the human behaviors that influenced drinking (Skog, 1985).

Ledermann's theory of distribution of alcohol consumption used mathematical calculations and was based upon two separate hypotheses:

Firstly Ledermann hypothesized that the annual intake of alcoholic beverages varies tremendously within populations, and that these variations can be described mathematically by a so-called lognormal distribution function. This implies that each population should be distributed according to the well-known gaussian normal distribution, if one uses a logarithmic consumption scale. On a linear consumption scale, the distribution would then be strongly skewed to the right. Secondly, Ledermann hypothesized that the two parameters of the lognormal distribution are closely related to each other. This implies that the variance of the distribution can be predicted from the mean. As a consequence of this, once the mean consumption is known, the variance can be estimated, and so can the number of drinkers at each consumption level. In particular, the number of heavy drinkers may be estimated from the average consumption in Ledermann's theory. (Skog, 1985, pp. 83-84)

Skog contends that Ledermann's theory incorrectly rationalizes a relationship between the mean and the variant:

In Ledermann's theory the relation between per capita consumption and prevalence of heavy use is created by assuming that the variance of the distribution is determined by the mean. And this relationship is created by assuming that the (theoretical) proportion of a population with a consumption exceeding one litre of pure alcohol daily is constant and the same in all populations. (Skog, 1985, p. 84)

Skog noted that over the last fifteen years, actual reported survey data does not inherently match forecasted values based on Ledermann's model. While there may be some correlation between

the actual and predicted values using Ledermann's theory, the data is greatly skewed. Skog determined that when compared to actual survey data from several different countries, predicted values do not have a mathematically definitive link to distribution. Instead, Skog believes that there are both psychological and biological factors that influence drinking behaviors. To a great degree, social factors influence human drinking behaviors far more than mathematical distribution theories (Skog, 1985).

Skog theorized that consumption would increase based on the principles of Weber-Fechner's Law or Weber's Law. "Weber's law expresses a general relationship between a quantity or intensity of something and how much more needs to be added for us to be able to tell that something has been added" (New York University, n.d.). Weber's law describes that detectable change often depends on the starting intensity of a stimuli. Skog uses this principle to explain that when something is increased by the same ratio or proportion as something else, the change is comparable, even if the starting intensities are different. For example, someone who consumes 20 liters of alcohol per year will interpret a five-liter increase similarly to that of someone who normally consumes four liters per year increasing their consumption by one liter. Although the starting thresholds are different, the increase was proportionally the same at 25% (Skog, 1985).

The second hypothesis guiding Skog (1985) is that social interactions influence drinking patterns. The drinking patterns of an individual are predominantly influenced by those in that individual's social or family network. Drinking is most commonly a group activity, and it has been found that members of a group affect one another's drinking patterns. The consumption patterns of an individual alone tend to mirror those exhibited in their group or social network. Those closest to an individual have a profound impact on the foundation of their drinking habits.

An individual from a family or friend group that exhibits heavy consumption patterns is more likely to also have heavy consumption patterns. Skog found that the consumption of alcoholic beverages is collective in that an individual is greatly influenced by other drinkers in their social network:

If certain structural requirements are fulfilled, nearly everybody will influence and be influenced by nearly everybody else, either directly or indirectly. In this case, the population will tend to behave as a collective. Therefore the population might be expected to move in concert up and down the consumption scale, thereby creating a close connection between the general level of consumption in the population and the prevalence of heavy use. (1985, p. 97)

Using Skog's principles of collectivity, it becomes apparent how heavy drinking patterns can occur in groups and form a baseline for heavy drinking in an individual. Binge drinking and heavy use patterns are collective, and those who are in close networks such as groups on college campuses are more at risk for these heavy-use patterns.

Harvard Study

In the early 1990's, binge drinking on college campuses was drawing national attention and was stated to be the number one public health problem plaguing college students. The consequences and problems that were arising from campus binge drinking called for a change in higher education institutions. In 1993, due to the climate of drinking patterns among college students, the Harvard School of Public Health was prompted to conduct a study on heavy alcohol use. Over the years the Harvard School of Public Health conducted the same survey a total of four times, first in 1993 and again in 1997, 1999, and 2001. These four studies became known as

the College Alcohol Studies, or CAS. During this time, the school surveyed more than 50,000 students from 120 colleges (Wechsler et al., 2002).

The results of the studies remained relatively the same throughout the eight years over which they were conducted. The latest study in 2001 found that two out of five college students, or 44.4%, were binge drinking at a rate almost indistinguishable from the previous three studies. In 1993, the proportion of binge drinkers was 44.1%, dropping to 42.7% in 1997, and, in 1999, that rate increased to 44.4%, which was identical to the rate of the last study in 2001. With virtually no change in the frequency and intensity of binge drinking, the efforts of college campuses to quell this problem had been predominantly ineffective (Wechsler et al., 2002).

According to the CAS, there was very little change in student behavior over the 8 years that the studies took place. In the most recent study, over 29% of students said they had missed a class due to drinking and over 21% had fallen behind in their coursework. Thirty-five percent of students reported doing something they regret, and over 26% do not remember what they did or where they were. Twenty-nine percent admitted to drinking and driving, and over 22% reported having an argument with friends. Sexually risky behaviors were also reported with over 10% of students having unprotected intercourse and more than 21% engaging in unplanned sexual activities. More than 20% of students reported having five or more different alcohol-related problems. While the results of this study remained similar over the four times it was administered, there was an increase in every single category of alcohol-related problems among binge drinkers when comparing the original 1993 results to that of the most recent results in 2001 (Wechsler et al., 2002).

The CAS found that there were not only direct consequences for those who binge drank but also secondary consequences for those who did not engage in bingeing. In 2001 among those

who did not binge drink, over 29% were insulted or humiliated by a binge drinker, 19% had a serious argument, over 8% had been physically assaulted, and more than 15% had their property damaged. Forty-seven percent of non-bingers reported that they had to take care of a drunk student, and 60% had their studying or sleep interrupted. More than 19% of these students experienced an unwanted sexual advance, and 1% had been the victim of a rape. More than half of all non-binging respondents reported having two or more of these secondhand problems (Wechsler et al., 2002).

Despite the known consequences for excess alcohol consumption, students continue to partake in this behavior. “Many college students reported willingness to tolerate adverse alcohol effects in order to experience the positive effects associated with high-intensity drinking” (Chung et al., p. 9). Since the negative outcomes associated with bingeing are not always a strong deterrent for high-risk drinking, universities face a challenging situation in reducing the dangers of binge drinking on campus.

Drinking in College

Drinking alcohol has almost become synonymous with the college experience. With many students establishing their drinking patterns before beginning their post-secondary education, college can be an experience that reinforces or escalates these habits. For some students, college is their induction to drinking alcohol, and the drinking patterns of those around them largely shape their habits. In the 2019 survey by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), over half of full-time college students ages 18-22 drank alcohol in the month prior, and of that 53%, 33% participated in binge drinking (The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2021).

While many students enjoy the social aspects of drinking, or the feeling of euphoria that accompanies alcohol consumption, there are dangerous and negative outcomes that come from this drinking. The NIAAA (2021), found that each year approximately 696,000 students aged 18-24 are assaulted by a fellow student that has been drinking. Sexual assaults related to alcohol are also an all too frequent outcome on college campuses. Research has shown that one out of every five women has been sexually assaulted while in college. It is estimated that this number is likely even higher as most sexual assaults go unreported.

Alcohol consumption has been shown to significantly affect student academic performance and class attendance. The NIAAA (2022) reports that one in every four students reported that they faced increased difficulties in their schooling due to alcohol, including missing classes and coursework. Binge drinking increases the negative impacts on academic performance beyond that of just drinking. Among those who binge, it is shown that they are six times more likely to do poorly on exams than students who drink but do not binge. This same group is also five times more likely to miss a class than their peers who do not engage in heavy consumption.

There are several factors that contribute to student drinking which make this group particularly at risk for dangerous drinking habits and negative outcomes. For many students, college is the first time they are away from home, their parents, and their parents' house rules. Experiencing true freedom for the first time gives students the ability to make their own choices. At the onset of this new freedom, many students engage in heavy alcohol use. With there being little and inconsistent enforcement of underage drinking laws, copious amounts of students who are under 21 engage in drinking. Students have more free and unstructured time than other age groups, and alcohol is easily available to them. This group tends to have limited interaction with adults and parental figures, leaving their peers to largely influence their day-to-day activities.

The campus environment also has a prodigious effect on drinking behaviors. Students who are involved in fraternities and sororities, otherwise known as "Greek life," are more likely to drink and drink more than students who are not. In fact, consumption is the highest among students living in fraternities and sororities. Schools that are known for their Greek life and athletic programs tend to have higher rates of consumption among students than other schools (NIAAA, 2022).

According to Wechsler and Nelson (2008), college campuses are the perfect storm for student drinking. Students transitioning from high school to college are stepping into the role of adulthood and separating from their parents. This new role comes with great freedom and lack of supervision that can lead to excessive drinking. There are several factors that influence drinking behaviors in college, such as where a student lives and the community in which students interact. Students who live at home with their parents or in substance-free student housing binge drink at far lower levels than those who live off campus away from their parents or in fraternity and sorority houses.

The community around campus also affects the rate at which students drink. "The price students pay for alcohol is an important factor in their drinking. Low price and very easy access to alcohol are strong correlates of binge drinking" (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008, p. 5). The venues around a college campus are also a factor in student drinking habits. Colleges near bars that target college students with student specials, low prices, and free drinks have greater rates of harm both to student drinkers and the members of the community (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008).

Effects of Binge Drinking

In the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, it was reported that 66 million people in the United States, or 24%, ages 12 and older engaged in binge drinking the previous

month. “The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines binge drinking as a pattern of drinking alcohol that brings blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to .08% or 0.08 grams of alcohol per deciliter or higher. For a typical adult, this pattern of alcohol misuse corresponds to consuming four or more drinks (female), or five or more drinks (male) in about two hours.” (NIAAA, 2021)

Binge drinking increases the risks of harm to the body and dangers related to drinking. Those who engage in heavy use patterns face the threat of blackouts, overdoses, and withdrawal symptoms. Mild withdrawal symptoms, often called a "hangover," include tremors, vomiting, diarrhea, sleep disturbances, sweating, increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, dizziness, and sensitivity to light and sound. The impairment that accompanies binge drinking also increases the likelihood of sexual assaults, risky sexual behaviors, arrests, car accidents, physical injuries, and other potentially deadly outcomes. Almost half of alcohol-related deaths are attributed to binge drinking behaviors. While alcohol misuse can lead to short-term issues in the body such as hangover symptoms, repeated bingeing can also have negative long-term effects on the liver, stomach, esophagus, and brain. Electroencephalography (EEG) brain scans found similar brain dysfunctions in both binge drinkers and alcohol addicts.

Death is the most serious outcome related to alcohol misuse and binge drinking, and it is, unfortunately, a prevalent occurrence. In a four-year-long study by Esser et al. (2020), it was found that:

Excessive alcohol use was responsible for approximately 95,000 deaths and 2.8 million years of potential life lost or YPLL annually in the United States during 2011–2015. This means that an average of 261 Americans die from excessive drinking every day, shortening their lives by an average of 29 years. (p. 1429)

Identifying problematic drinking in college can be done by looking at several characteristics of drinkers. According to Berkowitz & Perkins (1986), there are eight makers that can help to distinguish problem drinking from normal consumption. Those characteristics are: heavy consumption, frequent intoxication, self-identified problem drinking, negative drinking motivators, negative consequences from drinking, problem-prone personalities, family and peer environment, and later-life problem drinking.

Those who engage in drinking practices that are dangerous and problematic tend to drink heavily and partake in bingeing. They also become intoxicated more frequently than non-problem drinkers. Problem drinkers are usually able to recognize that they have a drinking problem but are not always willing to admit it. Alcohol abusers tend to have negative driving factors to drink, such as trying to escape their problems, coping with depression and stress, or drinking to feel drunk. This group will have significant negative outcomes from their drinking, such as legal problems, injuries, poor grades, risky sexual behavior, volatile relationships, and remorse for actions committed while drinking. Individuals who engage in risky behaviors and are frequently in trouble tend to have issues with alcohol abuse. The peer and family groups with which an individual surrounds themselves can also have a profound effect on alcohol consumption. Those who are involved in social settings where heavy consumption and bingeing is considered normal are at risk of engaging in problem drinking. Problem drinkers may face continued issues later in life if they drink as a way to cope with difficult feelings and situations (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1986).

Underage/Adolescent Drinking

Underage drinking is a momentous issue plaguing college campuses across the United States. Students who follow a traditional pathway of attending a university upon high school

graduation and completing their post-secondary program within four years will fall into the age range of 17-23. While the legal drinking age in the U.S. is 21, students who are much younger are grouped with older, legal-aged students on college campuses, in classrooms, and in campus housing. This cooperative campus lifestyle makes access to alcohol considerably easy for minors, particularly when attending parties with older students.

Underage drinking is often combined with bingeing, with most minors consuming double the amount of alcohol as adults, making it increasingly dangerous. In a study on adolescent drinking, Chung et al. (2018) found that:

Compared with adults, adolescent drinkers tend to consume higher quantities of alcohol per occasion but drink less frequently. Thus, underage drinkers ages 12 to 20 typically consume four to five drinks per drinking episode, which is nearly double the average of the two to three drinks usually consumed by adults (older than age 25). Most of the alcohol consumption of underage drinkers occurs during “binge” episodes characterized by drinking high quantities. This binge pattern of consumption has been linked to serious alcohol-related harm, such as alcohol poisoning, as well as to sometimes fatal injuries and accidents resulting from acute intoxication. (p. 5)

Underage students face an increased risk of bingeing than that of their legal-aged peers. Post-secondary students, particularly males aged 17-20, are more likely to engage in impulsive, high stimulation, and risk-seeking behaviors such as binge drinking. The social pressures that face young adults in college are unbridled, particularly the pressure to drink at parties and social gatherings. Younger students, such as freshman and sophomores, lack the self-control and discernment of older adults and, therefore, are at a greater risk to be influenced by collective drinking behaviors (Morris et al., 2020).

Pressures to keep up with the drinking rate of their peers can be dangerous for students who are new to drinking and are not fully aware of the effect it has on their bodies. Skog's theory of collectivity of drinking, which describes how drinking rates increase in sync among peer groups, can be easily observed in groups of adolescent drinkers. This group of minors tend to consume alcohol at a rate relative to others in their social group. "Perceived peer pressure has been shown to increase engagement in risky drinking practices, such as drinking games. Alcohol consumption frequently occurs in contexts where social influence through others may operate and is embedded within many social rituals" (Morris et al., 2020, p. 2).

Peer pressure is a significant factor in underage drinking among college students. As underage students are away from their parents, their peer group becomes their main source of influence. Students look to belong and fit in within their social groups, and for underage students on a mixed-age campus, these peer groups can consist of older, legal-aged students. There are social norms which younger students may feel obligated to conform to, such as behaving like an adult or their older peers, which typically involves drinking alcohol. There are also alcohol-related gender norms that students may feel obliged to adhere to, such as men who drink are more masculine, and females who drink are more popular. Lack of parental supervision paired with the desire to belong heavily affect drinking practices among underage students (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013).

Drinking and Greek life

Fraternities and sororities were developed as a brother or sisterhood for students with notable character to succeed in academics and philanthropy and grow as individuals. Newton Baker (1967, as cited by Zacker et al., 1995) described a fraternity as the following:

A fraternity is an association of men, selected in their college days by democratic processes, because of their adherence to common ideals and aspirations. Out of their association arises a personal relation which makes them unselfishly seek to advance one another in the arts of life and to add, to the formal instruction of the college curriculum, the culture and character which men acquire by contact with great personalities, or when admitted to partnership in great traditions. (Baker, 1967, p. 6)

While the goals of fraternities and sororities (Greek life) are for their members to excel in academics and exhibit exemplary character, these groups have been found to exhibit the highest binge drinking rates among student populations.

Virtually every study of drinking in college shows fraternity members tend to drink more heavily and more frequently, and to have more alcohol-related problems than their fellow students. In fact, the single best predictor of binge drinking in college is fraternity membership. (Wechsler et al., 2009, p. 396)

In a 1993 study by Wechsler et al. (2009), college students who were non-members, members, and resident members (those living in fraternity or sorority houses) of Greek life were surveyed on their attitudes towards drinking. Twenty-five percent of fraternity members and 15% of sorority members expressed that drinking was important, while 41% of fraternity residents and 21% of sorority residents expressed this same opinion. Of the non-member students that were surveyed, only 13% of males and seven percent of females expressed drinking was important. When asked about the importance of partying, 54% of fraternity members, 69% of fraternity residents, 41% of sorority members, and 45% of sorority residents identified that partying was important. Only 27% of non-member males and 20% of non-member females found partying to be important (Wechsler et al., 2009).

When comparing drinking patterns of Greek-life members to non-members, it has been found that most all members drink and drink at a much higher rate than non-members. Eighty-six percent of fraternity residents and 76% of non-resident members binge drink compared to 45% of non-member student males. Greek-life members were also found to have significantly more alcohol related problems (Table 1) and were more likely to drive drunk (Wechsler et al., 2009).

Table 1

Alcohol-Related Problems by Greek-Life Status

	Non- members	MEN % Non- resident members	Resident members	Non- members	WOMEN % Non- resident members	Resident members
Reporting problem since the beginning of the school year, among students who had a drink in the past year	(n=4363)	(n=792) ^b	(n=302) ^{a,c}	(n=5568)	(n=1102) ^b	(n=244) ^{a,c}
Have a hangover	57	74	85	50	67	84
Do something you regret	30	45	54	27	40	44
Miss a class	25	44	56	21	37	44
Forget where you were or what you did	23	37	51	19	32	38
Get behind in school work	20	28	42	15	26	31
Argue with friends	20	28	39	16	24	21
Engage in unplanned sexual activity	20	31	39	14	22	21
Damage property	14	22	30	3	4	4
Not use protection when having sex	10	16	19	7	14	13
Get hurt or injured	9	16	22	7	10	12
Get into trouble with campus or local police	6	10	7	2	2	6
Require medical treatment of alcohol overdose	1	1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Have five or more alcohol-related problems since beginning of school year**	17	31	45	11	20	19
Driving behavior in a 30 day period	(n=5260)	(n=847)	(n=304)	(n=6776)	(n=1182)	(n=247)
Drove after having five or more drinks	14	21	20	5	8	11
Rode with a driver who was high or drunk	19	30	39	16	23	32

Note. Problem occurred not at all or one or more times. Sample sizes vary slightly for each problem because of missing values.

**Excludes hangover and includes driving after drinking as one of the problems. Driving percentages are based on all student. Driving behavior occurred one or more times in the past 30 days.

^aChi-square comparisons of resident fraternity members vs. non-fraternity men and each of the problems were significant at $p < .01$, except for trouble with campus/local police ($p = ns$) and alcohol overdose ($p = ns$). Chi-square comparisons of resident sorority members vs. non-sorority women were significant at $p < .01$, except for hurt or injured ($p = .011$), argue with friends ($p = .025$), damage property ($p = ns$) and alcohol overdose ($p = ns$).

^bChi-square comparisons of non-resident fraternity members vs. non-fraternity men and each of the problems were significant at $p < .01$, except for alcohol overdose ($p = ns$). Chi-square comparisons of non-resident sorority members vs. non-sorority women were significant at $p < .01$, except for damage property ($p = ns$), trouble with campus or local police ($p = ns$), and alcohol overdose ($p = ns$).

^cChi-square comparisons of non-resident fraternity members vs. resident fraternity members and each of the problems were significant at $p < .01$, except for do something you regret ($p = .010$), unplanned sex ($p = .014$), hurt or injured ($p = .014$), not use protection when having sex ($p = ns$), trouble with campus/local police ($p = ns$), alcohol overdose ($p = ns$), and driving after five or more drinks ($p = ns$). Chi-square comparisons of non-resident sorority members vs. resident sorority members were not significant, except for hangover ($p < .01$), trouble with campus/local police ($p < .01$), miss a class ($p = .043$), and riding with a driver who was high or drunk ($p < .01$).

Note. Reprinted from “Fraternities, Sororities and Binge Drinking: Results from a National Study of American Colleges”, by Wechsler et al., 2009, *NASPA Journal*, 46(3) pp. 404-405.

Drinking among Greek-life members has been well-documented and studied at universities across the country, but there is very little that is done by administrators to address it. Largely, universities turn a blind eye to the illicit activities of fraternities and sororities, doing little more than shutting down parties that get out of hand. The lack of repercussions for heavy and dangerous campus drinking among members provides no incentive to cut down on their drinking. The lack of intervention from universities is believed to be due to the sponsorship received from wealthy Greek-life alumni. Threats of ceasing financial support for the university if their group is sanctioned is a driving factor in allowing dangerous drinking practices and parties to continue (Wechsler et al., 2009).

Drinking patterns observed in fraternities and sororities are believed to be related to the way Greek life operates, particularly during rush week. Rush week is where students, mainly freshman, "try out" for a Greek group within the first few weeks of the semester. During this week, Greek-life hopefuls, referred to as pledges, go through a series of "tests" to prove their worthiness of membership, and during this time, pledges are not allowed to consume alcohol (Wechsler et al., 2009). The collective lifestyle that those involved in Greek life lead also is a contributor to binge drinking patterns. As researched by Skog in 1985, the theory of collectivity of drinking is easily observed in collegiate social groups such as fraternity and sorority organizations. Skog's research found that there was a strong collective factor related to drinking,

and as the average rate of alcohol consumption changes, drinkers across the entire distribution will move in unison (Livingston & Raninen, 2020).

Once this week is over, pledges who are accepted into Greek life are inducted into their prospective groups and the dry week of no alcohol is over. Generally, this induction is when pledges drink very heavily within their membership groups to celebrate their acceptance. Upon this induction, the standard for heavy drinking expectations and habits within the Greek organizations are set, and from an early point in their education, members conform to these patterns. While suggestions to delay rush week until later in the year have proved to be a possible solution to some of the drinking crisis within Greek life, most universities are not willing to lose the financial funding they receive throughout the year from these Greek organizations by delaying activities (Wechsler et al., 2009).

Alcohol and Brain Development

Alcohol has been proven to have negative and debilitating effects on the brain. According to Claire McCarthy, MD (2021), the effects are most dangerous during three stages of life: in utero, adolescence, and after the age of 65. These three stages are pivotal in brain development and function. Engaging in alcohol use during these phases of life can have serious and lasting effects on cognitive abilities and brain development.

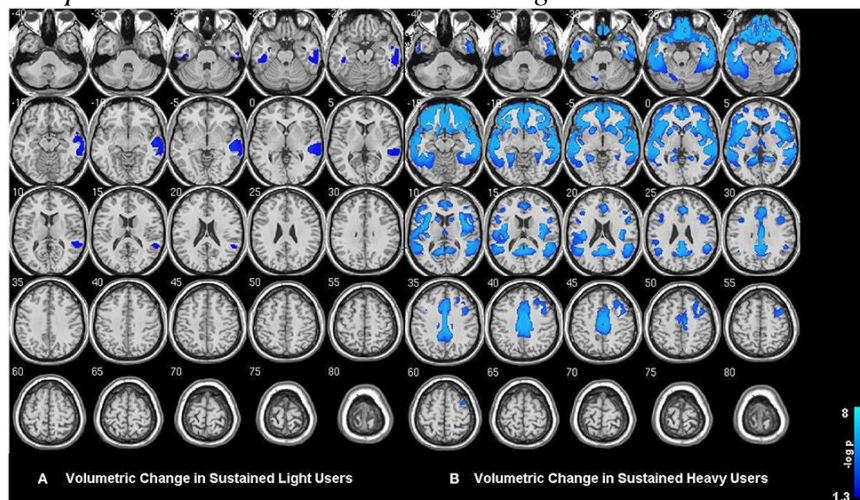
McCarthy (2021) states that by the age of 25, the central nervous system is fully developed, and the brain ceases to grow or develop any further. College-aged students are in the final phases of this neuromaturation and thus are at a higher risk for experiencing negative effects from alcohol on their brain development. Those who engage in binge drinking face even greater risks to the brain, with potentially permanent side effects. Binge drinking and alcohol use disorders in young adults are at their peak from ages 18 to 25, which poses serious and long-term

threats to the individual's overall health. In the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) done by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), it was reported that 39% of 18 to 25-year-olds had engaged in binge drinking the previous month (Meda et al., 2017).

Alcohol and Brain Function

In 2017, Meda et al. (2017) conducted a study on college students who engaged in drinking. The purpose of the study was to measure the gray matter in the brains of students who drank over a two-year period. Gray matter is the part of the brain that is responsible for cognitive control, emotional regulation, and memory. Loss of gray matter can be responsible for memory loss, emotional outbursts, inability to control motor skills, and trembling similar to that of Parkinson's disease. During their study, Meda et al. found that there was excessive gray matter loss in those who had sustained heavy drinking patterns (see Figure 1). It was also found that those who engaged in heavy substance abuse are more vulnerable to future and ongoing substance dependence. In addition to gray matter loss, excessive drinking can negatively affect the white matter of the brain and cause brain shrinkage. Brain shrinkage and white matter damage can be reversible after periods of alcohol abstinence (Clive, 1998).

Figure 2

Comparison Between Brain Volume in Light Alcohol Users vs. Heavy Alcohol Users

Note. Reprinted from “Heavy Drinking in College Students Is Associated with Accelerated Gray Matter Volumetric Decline over a 2 Year Period”, by Meda et al., 2017, *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, 11, p.176.

Alcohol Use Disorder

There is a very fine line between binge drinking and alcohol use disorder. Both AUD and binge drinking are accompanied by a set of negative consequences related to excessive drinking and are characterized by heavy and frequent use. There are two main factors that separate AUD from binge drinking: tolerance and withdrawal. Those with AUD have a set tolerance level in which more drinks are required to become intoxicated, and they will experience withdrawal symptoms when they cease alcohol consumption and their blood alcohol (BAC) level drops (Sher, 2004).

As found in the study from Meda et al. (2017), those who engage in substance abuse, such as binge drinking, are more at risk for continued substance dependence and disorders.

Alcohol use disorder, or AUD, is a dangerous pattern of alcohol use paired with significant impairment or distress. Someone who suffers from alcohol use disorder feels an inability to control their cravings for and consumption of alcohol. Alcohol use disorder is a significant contributor to the over 88,000 alcohol-related deaths in the United States every year. (Kranzler & Soyka, 2018).

In order to reach a diagnosis for alcohol use disorder, assessments are required that evaluate the warning signs for alcohol dependence, such as tolerance, withdrawal, impaired control, and unsuccessful attempts to cut down. While not all binge drinkers meet these requirements, they are at a higher risk for developing AUD. This distinction is important for implementing separate and targeted treatments and policies to address addiction as well as binge drinking. Only 1.3% of those who are identified as alcohol dependent do not engage in binge drinking, therefore, binge drinking is a significant factor in alcohol dependence. There is a positive correlation between alcohol dependence and binge drinking frequency (Esser et al. 2014).

Esser et al. (2014) examined the prevalence of alcohol dependent individuals among those who identified as binge drinkers or excessive users. It was found that about 10% of all those studied met the qualifications for alcohol dependence. Results of binge drinking were isolated by factors such as income, sex, race, and education level. It was found that the prevalence of binge drinking was significantly higher among those with some college education (Esser et al., 2014).

Alcohol and Mental Health

Alcohol use and mental health are two issues that go hand in hand, usually one having a direct effect on the other. “Comorbidity between Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD; abuse or dependence) represents one of the most prevalent and disabling psychiatric combinations in adolescence and adulthood” (Brière et al., 2014, p. 2).

Heavy alcohol use is often used as a negative coping method for those with underlying depressive disorders and other mental health issues to help numb their feelings of worthlessness. Conversely, those who abuse alcohol may find that they begin to experience depressive episodes and develop mental health issues, such as anxiety. According to the National Comorbidity Survey (NCS), those who suffer from depression are at a markedly higher risk for developing alcohol dependence than those who are not depressed. The survey also found that those who suffer from alcohol dependence are two times more likely to develop depression. Studies further show that those who experience comorbid depression and alcohol use disorder are more at risk for the development of other mental health disorders such as paranoia, anxiety, and schizophrenia. These individuals also had higher scores for aggression, suicidal ideations, and self-harm (Sher, 2004).

Depression is pervasive on college campuses, with over 30% of students expressing their depression was so severe that it made it difficult for them to participate in everyday life. Students who engage in heavy alcohol use often feel they do not have a sense of meaning or purpose in life and drink to cope with these feelings. Students struggling with meaning tend to drink more heavily and frequently than other students and are more likely to face negative consequences associated with their alcohol misuse. Depression has been found to impede attempts at alcohol resistance and abstinence in those who are alcohol dependent. Comorbid- occurring depression and alcohol use can be rooted in environmental factors like those that take place on college campuses. They also have a relationship in which one disorder may cause the other to occur. Studies have shown that those who previously felt depressed and were abusing alcohol reported improvement in their mental health after 6 months of alcohol abstinence, showing the direct relationship between the two (Schnitzer et al., 2012; Kuria et al., 2012).

Addressing College Drinking

College drinking has been going on as long as universities and higher education institutions have existed. Changing pressures, lifestyles, and times have influenced the rate and severity at which this drinking is occurring. Continued research is key to addressing underage drinking and heavy usage that prove to be costly and dangerous to students and their institutions. It has been found that the most successful strides in addressing alcohol misuse have come through a mix of addressing individual students, entire campuses, and the college community nationwide.

According to the NIAAA (2021), individual interventions can be used to target high-risk groups, such as those involved in Greek life, athletic programs, and first year, or freshman, students. These individual interventions can include education and awareness programs, cognitive-behavioral skills-based approaches, motivational and feedback-related approaches, and behavioral health interventions from healthcare professionals.

The NIAAA (2021) has found that addressing the college campus as a whole has also proven to be an effective method of controlling student alcohol usage. Including the surrounding community in the efforts to reduce student alcohol misuse is key to changing the environment on campus. Reducing the availability and abundance of alcohol on and around campuses has been shown to decrease consumption as well as negative and dangerous consequences both on campus and in the surrounding areas. According to the NIAAA's College Alcohol Intervention Matrix, or CollegeAIM, the most effective interventions are those that involve the sale and availability of alcoholic beverages. While this is the most effective method,

Research suggests that creating a safer campus and reducing harmful and underage student drinking will likely come from a combination of individual- and environmental-

level interventions that work together to maximize positive effects. Strong leadership from a concerned college president in combination with engaged parents, an involved campus community, and a comprehensive program of evidence-based strategies can help address harmful student drinking. (NIAAA, 2021, p. 4)

Controlling alcohol-related problems goes beyond the scope of policy on university property. While educating students on alcohol misuse is necessary, this step alone is not sufficient in reducing alcohol-related issues. Gebhardt et al. (2000) found that off-campus drinking activities were responsible for a large number of problems among college students and negatively affected the community. Similar to the NIAAA CollegeAIM, these authors found that involving the community in alcohol misuse prevention measures was key to successfully limiting dangerous behaviors among college students.

According to Gebhardt et al., reducing alcohol-related problems off campus involves responsible sales of alcohol, such as not selling to minors or overserving patrons. It also involves reducing the availability of alcohol in close proximity to campus; making it more difficult to purchase alcohol has proven successful in reduction of harm. Further, de-glamorizing binge behaviors in advertisements at establishments near campus and increased police enforcement of penalties for underage drinking, driving under the influence, and overserving are key in reducing harm. While the traditional means of alcohol education such as fliers, safety days, meetings, and guest speakers on campus are important, these methods must be accompanied by a community effort to prevent alcohol misuse among students.

The Harvard School of Public Health studies on binge drinking, known as the college alcohol studies, or CAS, were comprised of more than 50,000 students from 120 four-year universities over a 14-year span. What these studies found, according to directors Henry

Weschler and Toben Nelson, was that there is not one single "right" solution to fix the drinking problems that plague universities, particularly underage drinking. They did find, however, that there was a pattern among schools that showed success in their efforts. Schools that had less alcohol-related problems partnered with the surrounding community to reduce alcohol abuse. Among these schools, there was strict enforcement from police for minimum drinking-age laws and compliance among sellers to adhere to these laws. Legislation controlling high-volume sales was implemented, such as preventing the sale of large format alcoholic beverages and irresponsible advertisements for excessive drinking. There were also fewer venues available to purchase alcohol (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2014).

After the results of the CAS were published, a study was done to survey campus administrators on what measures they were taking to address student alcohol abuse. Several schools focused on specific campus policies to limit access to alcohol, some of which are still in place today. These policies included prohibiting delivery of kegs to campus dorms and fraternities, precluding the sale of alcohol at home sports games, and limiting tailgates. They restricted alcohol advertising on campus, and provided alcohol-free dorms, as well as alcohol-use education and prevention. (Wechsler et al., 2000).

Wechsler believes that changing the environment in which students are involved is the key factor to controlling excessive alcohol consumption. While students may come and go, the campus environment can remain the same. Wechsler suggested that instead of punishing the individual student, the purveyors should be held to strict standards. He even suggested that small changes like giving exams on Fridays would reduce the ability of students to drink (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2014).

Collegiate Recovery Programs

Collegiate recovery programs, or CRPs, are an on-campus service for students who are struggling with mental health issues, alcohol or drug use, and dependency disorders and behaviors, such as binge drinking. These issues are usually co-occurring with one influencing the other. These recovery programs first began in the late 1970s at Brown University, but today, there are over 138 active programs on college campuses throughout the United States. Collegiate recovery programs are generally peer-run recovery groups that have a focus similar to that of a 12-step alcohol recovery program. The groups offer sober living options for students, as well as mental and emotional support for individuals dealing with alcohol abuse and dependence. The programs offer "sober" outings and events for group members that do not involve the use of alcohol, unlike most other student-run college activities, where alcohol is at the center. CRPs aid students in both their education and personal lives, offering study groups and sometimes even offering financial support (Jason et al., 2021; Brière et al., 2014).

Students who participate in collegiate recovery groups have access to tools and resources, such as recovery coaches on campus to help them deal with alcohol abuse. The goal of the CRPs is to provide a safe social environment for students while providing them with the educational support needed to graduate and develop professionally. These campus recovery groups have been shown to positively impact the lives of students and promote degree completion. In a study by Brown et al. (2019), 88 campus recovery group alumni from various universities across the country were surveyed. In the survey it was found that:

The majority of respondents felt that participation in their respective CRPs helped them in several ways. A majority of participants (68.2%) felt that the CRP directly prepared them for the professional environment; whereas slightly more participants (80.7%) felt

the program directly prepared them for post-graduation recovery. Additionally, most participants (89.8%) felt that program membership was helpful academically. (p. 10)

While the overwhelming majority of students felt that the CRPs were beneficial to them, there was a portion who reported a negative outcome from their participation. Thirty-seven percent of CRP alumni felt that there was a stigma, or sense of disgrace, regarding their participation in the program while they were enrolled in courses (Brown et al., 2019).

Collegiate recovery groups coupled with the prevention methods found in the College Alcohol Intervention Matrix are valuable tools to facilitate safe drinking practices on campuses around the country. Prevention methods mixed with intervention offer universities the opportunity to meet students where they are in their social, educational, and mental health journeys while dealing with the pressures they face in college.

Chapter III: Methodology

Overview: Methodological Framework

This research study will focus on the experiences and perceptions of post-secondary students who meet the criteria to be considered binge drinkers. Through the process of interviews, the researcher gained insight into the motivations, thought processes, and experiences of coed binge drinkers. Phenomenological theory will be used as the framework for this research study. “Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual’s lived experiences within the world” (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 90). Using phenomenology, it becomes possible to conduct research based on intangible experiences and feelings and translate them into usable data. According to Neubauer et al. (2019), phenomenology can be described as the following:

An approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it. The goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of this experience—both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced. (p. 91)

In phenomenological research, the researcher can explore several different avenues of lived experiences. The researcher is able to study the meaning of a phenomenon, as well as the descriptions of these experiences (Norlyk & Harder, 2010). In phenomenological research, results can be expressed through describing themes or commonalities in the research, such as several respondents revealing similar feelings or experiences. The frequency with which these themes occur can also be expressed in the findings (Norlyk & Harder, 2010).

Research Design

This research study will be conducted using a phenomenological framework. The researcher will use a qualitative method, using the tool of interviews to gather data. Although it is sometimes difficult to describe exactly what qualitative research is, Aspers and Corte (2019) formed a suitable definition through the research and examination of literature on the topic. Through a culmination of different sources, they found that qualitative research could be defined best as the following:

Qualitative research is about interpretation, involving the collection and use of a variety of empirical materials and approaches. It focuses not only on the objective nature of behavior but also on its subjective meanings: individuals' own accounts of their attitudes, motivations, behavior, events and situations, what people say and do in specific places and institutions in social and temporal contexts. For this reason, following it can be described as an interpretative science. (p. 147)

Qualitative research studies are not measured by strict numerical data, rather they are intangible in their nature. Qualitative studies have the ability to focus on the feeling, experience, thought, and emotion that are not expressed in quantitative data.

Researcher Subjectivity

In conducting this study, the researcher made sure to remove all personal biases from this research study. The researcher carefully followed the literature and research and remained objective in interviews with subjects. The results and analysis represent an objective presentation of the data that was collected. The researcher has no subjectivity to declare.

Purpose of the Study

Binge drinking has been a problem on college campuses since the start of university organizations, however, it did not gain much attention until the 1990s. In the early 1990s binge drinking on college campuses gained national media attention, calling for universities to intervene and address the problems that were resulting from heavy episodic drinking (Wechsler et al., 2002). At this time, Harvard created the CAS and began to research the frequency of bingeing on college campuses and the dangers associated with these drinking patterns. They then used the results of this research to formulate plans and policies to address drinking problems on campus.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to continue the research first started in the 1990s at Harvard and to gain a modern-day insight into the current state of binge drinking in college. While previous studies were quantitative, using numerical data to gain insight into bingeing, the researcher hopes to use qualitative research methods through the means of semi-structured interviews to discover the "why" behind binge-drinking habits and patterns in college students. The researcher seeks to understand if there is in fact a collective component to binge drinking as Skog's theory states and if this contributes to bingeing among students. This study further aims to examine the consequences, both positive and negative, of binge drinking on the lives of post-secondary students and those around them, as well as the impacts on their academic performance.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the motivators for binge drinking among college students?
2. What are the outcomes, both negative and positive, from binge drinking episodes?

3. What are the perceived campus resources available for students dealing with bingeing and high-risk drinking patterns?

Participant Selection Procedure

Participant selection is a key factor in creating an accurate and effective research study. There were two means of selection used in this research study that are particularly beneficial in qualitative research: purposeful and snowball. “Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in depth on relatively small samples, even single cases ($n = 1$), selected purposefully” (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

Patton (1990), describes selection in qualitative research as the following:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling. (p. 169)

The second method of sampling the researcher used was snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a referral-based sampling method and was best described by Raina (2015) when she stated:

Snowball sampling (or chain sampling, chain-referral sampling, referral sampling) is a non-probability sampling technique where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. Therefore, the sample group appears to grow like a rolling snowball. As the sample builds up, enough data are gathered to be useful for research. (p. 127)

Sample Population

For the purpose of this study, participants were selected based on their status as post-secondary students enrolled in courses at a university in Tampa, Florida. Participants attend

courses by means of both traditional in-person classes and online courses, part-time or full-time. Participants also meet the qualifications to be characterized as binge drinkers. The researcher selected and interviewed five participants. In this study, the researcher first used purposeful sampling of a known contact in Tampa who fit the criteria of a post-secondary student who was also a binge drinker. The researcher then used snowball sampling, or referrals, from the known contacts for the remaining participants who fit those same criteria. The participants were all over 21 years of age, male, living in off-campus student housing, and involved in Greek life at their university.

Description of Research Instruments

Post-secondary college students who fit the clinical requirements to be considered binge drinkers were interviewed for this study. The participants were located in Tampa, Florida and self-identified as binge drinkers. Interviews were held in person at a predetermined public location. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in which the researcher had a set of questions to ask the participants to guide the interview. The researcher also left room for the participants' answers and personal experiences to guide new, unscripted dialogue and follow-up questions. After the interviews, participants were compensated \$50 for their time.

The semi-structured interview questions were as follows:

1. What does a night out look like for you?
2. Do you think those around you affect your drinking patterns?
3. Has your drinking caused any negative outcomes?
4. Why do you like to or choose to drink?
5. Do you feel that the school offers resources for people who drink heavily?

The researcher audio-recorded the interviews, as well as took field notes to describe each subject's body language, reactions, and expressions that could not be documented in the audio recordings. The researcher then transcribed the audio recordings, including field notes. The transcribed interviews were then sent to the participants to verify and check for accuracy. The participants verified the interview transcriptions, and transcriptions were analyzed line by line.

When doing qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are one of the best options to obtain data and information. According to Kallio et al. (2016), "the semi-structured interview method has been found to be successful in enabling reciprocity between the interviewer and participant, enabling the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions based on participants' responses and allowing space for participants' individual verbal expressions" (p. 2960).

Using principles from Miles and Gilbert's 2005 book, *A Handbook of Research Methods for Clinical and Health Psychology*, an interview guide was developed. According to Miles and Gilbert, the first step to creating a semi-structured interview guide is to review relevant literature on what the researcher will be interviewing participants about. The second step is to identify the population that the researcher wishes to study. Upon completion of these steps, the interview schedule can be drafted. The schedule is a list of questions that the interviewer plans to ask the participants (Miles & Gilbert, 2005, pp. 67-68).

When planning the interview schedule, there are five areas the researcher should focus on. First is the schedule itself; it should be kept brief, containing only about five broad questions. Second, in these questions, the researcher should look to gain insight into the cognition, emotion, and action of the participant. In other words, how did the subject think, feel, and act in the situation (Miles & Gilbert, 2005, p. 68) Third, the researcher should make sure that the questions flow and are in an order that makes sense for the interview so as not to have the discussion

jumping around from idea to idea. Fourth, the interviewer should prepare a few prompts. These prompts should only be used if the participant is struggling to answer a question or cannot move on. The prompts should be structured in a way that helps open the floor for discussion and topic exploration, without guiding the answer. Finally, the interviewer should know the interview schedule inside and out. The interviewer should not have to constantly check their schedule to see which topics have already been discussed or are missing. The interview should feel like a conversation, and this is not possible if the researcher is more engaged in checking the schedule than interacting with the participant. During the interview, it is important that the interviewer leads the interview and does not guide it. This is imperative for getting truthful and impartial answers and data (Miles & Gilbert, 2005, pp. 68-69).

Procedures for Data Collection

After IRB approval was received, the researcher contacted potential participants that met the required criteria of being college students in Tampa who were also binge drinkers. The students were contacted via text message and were sent the consent forms, study invitation letter, and research questions by email. After participants confirmed participation, times for in-person interviews were scheduled based on participant availability. Interviews were conducted in person in Tampa at a mutually agreed upon, predetermined, and public location. Upon meeting the participants at the interview location, the researcher provided hard copies of the study invitation letter, the research questions, and the informed consent form. The researcher read the consent form aloud to the participants and answered any questions the participants had. After the students verbally agreed to participate in the study, they signed the consent form. The researcher interviewed all the subjects separately and at different times, but at the same location. The researcher used the set of scripted questions to guide the interviews, while allowing for dialogue

to veer off from the script to capture personal experiences and in-depth data. The researcher also posed unscripted follow-up questions based on information provided by the participants. The interviews were audio recorded in order to accurately transcribe and report data, and field notes were taken to document any significant body language and expression. The participants were compensated \$50 for their time at the conclusion of their interviews.

Procedures for Data Analysis

After interviews were conducted, responses were transcribed and sent to the participants for verification. This was done to ensure the integrity of the interview data and interpretations of documented field notes and body language. Upon receipt of participant verification, the transcriptions were evaluated and sorted. The researcher utilized open coding and axial coding methods to evaluate the research. “In the process of Open Coding, the concepts emerge from the raw data and [are] later grouped into conceptual categories. The goal is to build a descriptive, multi-dimensional preliminary framework for later analysis” (Khandkar, 2009, p. 8). Interviews were open coded line by line to identify categories and similarities for the interview responses.

In order to further evaluate responses into more usable data, the researcher used axial coding. According to Scott and Medaugh (2017):

Axial coding provides a coding framework or template from which to synthesize and organize data into more coherent, hierarchically structured categories and subcategories that add nuance and dimension to emergent concepts and their potential relationship to other framework elements. The purpose of this analytic phase is to consider and develop relationships between working categories and subcategories, in order to capture both general properties of a phenomenon and dimensional variation. (p. 1)

The researcher used these coding methods to evaluate the raw data and find trends among the interviews. The researcher sorted the data into major themes and overarching categories. The researcher then subcategorized data into sections of similarities, while noting outlier responses.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the interviews, transcripts, and evaluation of data, the researcher triangulated data in two ways. First, the researcher sent the completed interview transcriptions to the participants. The participants then verified the interview transcriptions for accuracy and sent their approval to the researcher. Upon receipt of the interview, the researcher began to code the interviews line by line using open coding and axial coding to develop themes and categories. To triangulate this coding, the researcher sent a sample of their transcriptions and coding analysis to a writing and evaluation service that uses a verified research professor to review the coding samples and analysis.

Data Security

All digital data from participants was treated confidentially and stored on a password protected laptop. Audio recordings were kept in a locked safe and were deleted/destroyed after they were transcribed, and the transcriptions were reviewed by a researcher for validity. Signed consent forms and other documents are kept for three years as required by Federal regulations. These documents are being kept in a locked safe in the researcher's home, that only the researcher has a key to. After this three-year time period, hard copies of the documents will be shredded and electronic data will be erased. The researcher is the only person with access to the laptop and safe, both of which will be kept at the researcher's security enabled residence. Participant identities were known only to the researcher, and pseudonyms were used when

reporting their responses. The responses provided by the participants, and the field notes that the researcher took were shared, but participant identities remained anonymous.

Chapter IV: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to discover the "why" behind binge-drinking habits and patterns among college students, despite the negative outcomes. This study further aimed to examine the consequences, both positive and negative, of binge drinking on the lives of post-secondary students and those around them, as well as the impacts on their academic performance. Finally, this study discovered what the perceived campus resources are, if any, for students engaging in dangerous drinking behaviors. This study was comprised of three research questions that were answered through in-person interviews with college students. This chapter will analyze the results of those interviews and answer the following research questions that guided the study:

1. What are motivators for binge drinking among college students?
2. What are outcomes, both negative and positive, from binge-drinking episodes?
3. What are the perceived campus resources available for students dealing with bingeing and high-risk drinking patterns?

There were five broad questions that guided the interviews to answer the stated research questions along with some follow-up questions that were added based on the conversation flow and participant answers. The interview questions were:

1. What does a night out look like for you?
2. Do you think those around you affect your drinking patterns?
3. Has your drinking caused any negative outcomes?
4. Why do you like to or choose to drink?
5. Do you feel that the school offers resources for people who drink heavily?

Interview Participants

The five participants in this research study were all over the age of 21, males, and enrolled in courses at a university in Florida. They attended classes both in person and online and lived in off-campus student housing. They were either juniors or seniors in college and were involved in Greek life.

Research Question One: What are motivators for binge drinking among college students?

The purpose of the first research question was to determine what motivates college students to binge drink. In order to answer this question, the researcher asked several questions in an interview/conversation style. The questions that guided the data for research question one were: Why do you like to or choose to drink? Do you think those around you affect your drinking patterns? There were several themes discovered after evaluating and coding the transcriptions. The themes for research question one are as follows:

1. Drinking is fun.
2. The social aspect of drinking is important in college.
3. The feeling of being drunk is enjoyable.
4. Drinking makes you more confident.
5. Drinking helps with social anxiety.
6. Drinking helps you build/strengthen friendships.
7. Drinking helps you relax.
8. Drinking creates fun memories.
9. Drinking makes other activities more fun.
10. Peers influence one another's drinking rates.
11. Drinking to fit in

12. Drinking to black out
13. Drinking where it's cheap
14. Freedom

Interview Question One: What does a night out look like for you?

Each of the students similarly described an average evening out consisting of pregaming, where a group of friends would get together at one of their apartments and drink before going out to the bars. These pregame activities would begin around eight p.m. and include small groups of friends to upwards of 40 people. While pregaming, participants described that they would play drinking games such as dice, beer pong, and flip cup, as well as consume about three to six beers. After pregaming, anywhere from nine to ten p.m., the group would take an Uber to the bar of their choice, typically a local bar called "Bar X" that offers all-you-can-drink specials for college students. All five participants mentioned "Bar X" and the all-you-can-drink, student special they offer. With a college ID, students pay \$10 and receive a wristband that entitles them to all they can drink for four hours. Participant one pointed out that most bars charge \$10 each for a drink, "and now it's \$10 all you can drink for four hours, so it's definitely a dangerous game."

They continue drinking at the bars until anywhere from 12-2 a.m. when the bars close. At this point, the group takes an Uber to someone's apartment or home to "postgame." Postgaming is similar to pregaming, where participants described how they continue to drink and play games, and some engage in drug use. Over the course of the entire evening, participants stated their alcohol consumption ranged from a total of 10 to 25 drinks. One participant described the goal of the evening being to "black out," or get so intoxicated that they have memory and time loss and may pass out. When asked why students drink to black out, Participant three stated, "it's pretty much just the norm here. Once you start going, no one really stops until they're on the floor."

Interview Question Two: Why do you like to or choose to drink?

When asked, “Why do you like to or choose to drink?”, the participants all stated that they drank because they enjoyed the social aspect that comes with drinking. Participant one stated, “Drinking is kind of just like a culture.” Participant two stated, “It’s [drinking is] a great social aspect; I think it’s fun.” Participants described that they liked the way alcohol made them feel and stated that drinking made other activities, like watching a football game, more enjoyable. Participant five stated that drinking “is just such a big social part of college life. People tend to get more social.” Participant three stated that drinking helped their anxiety and insecurities and “takes the edge off” of the nerves experienced when talking to girls. Participant four stated that they drank because “it can make you more confident, and it's easier to talk to people.”

Overall, all five participants felt drinking was a fun, social activity that made them feel more confident. They expressed that drinking was part of what helped to build the strong friendships they currently have, and the memories made from drinking activities were important. Participant four said, “I think a lot of drunk, like, being-drunk nights and hanging out with people like builds better friendships for sure.”

Additionally, all five student participants mentioned one bar by name, "Bar X," that offers all-you-can-drink specials for students. For \$10 with a college ID, students are given a wristband and able to take advantage of this all-you-can-drink special for four hours. When asked, “Would you drink as much as you do now if they did not offer all-you-can-drink specials?”, all five participants said they would not drink as heavily and, rather, drank as much as they could since it was "free.” They mentioned they could not afford to drink as heavily without the "all-you-can-drink specials" as they were college students. Participants also stated that, normally, they would

not consume as much alcohol on their own as they did at this particular venue, Bar X, but felt they needed to get their money's worth and get as drunk as they could.

Interview Question Three: Do you think those around you affect your drinking patterns?

The second planned interview question that was asked was, "Do you think those around you affect your drinking patterns?" All five participants stated that they are, in fact, influenced by those around them to drink. They also believe that the rate at which others are drinking affects how much they drink individually. If the group they are with is drinking heavily, the participants stated they will follow suit. Participant three stated that their drinking was "100%" affected by others and mentioned they were in a fraternity, and "there is this big stigma of, oh, we have to drink." Participant three also mentioned an activity called "icing out" where someone calls, "Ice out your drink!" and those around have to "take the ice out and slam it as quick as you can and get another." In other words, the individual takes the ice cubes out of their alcoholic beverage with their hand, and then guzzles down the liquid portion as fast as possible. This participant also stated, "If someone tells me to ice out my drink, I'm not going to be like, 'No'; I'm going to be like, 'Of course.'"

The students interviewed felt drinking was very much a social activity, and "you don't turn down a drink." Participant one stated that "you are a product of your environment." In regard to drinking, "your diet isn't only what you drink, it's the people you surround yourself with. If everyone around you is drinking, then you're gonna want to grab a drink." Participant five had a similar answer stating, "When you see someone shotgunning right next to you, it just makes them more apt to drink." Participant four stated that they have experienced influence in both ways; there are people who entice more drinking and those who may advise others to "slow down," and "being around certain people can choose which way you go." All five participants

identified a collective component to their drinking, mentioning if their group is drinking heavily or taking shots, individually, they will join in and mirror this level of drinking. It was also mentioned that if the group is more “chill” with their drinking, the individual will emulate their slower pace. Participant two said, “If I’m with a group of people that drink a lot, I’ll definitely keep up with the pace, and if I’m the only one drinking, I probably would not keep the same pace as that.”

Follow-Up Questions. Along with the regular interview questions, there were several follow-up questions that the researcher asked the participants. These questions were posed based on the answers the subjects gave. The follow-up questions helped to gain a deeper insight into the students’ emotions, thoughts, and feelings.

Follow-up Question One: Do you think your drinking habits will change when you graduate? When asked if they think their drinking habits will change once they graduate, all students said yes. Participants believed that their current binge-drinking habits are just temporary while they are in college. Participant two said, “I think it’s definitely just a college experience, especially as much as I do it now. As soon as I graduate college, I’ll probably get my stuff together, realize I can’t go out on a Monday or Tuesday but maybe on a Saturday night. I could do it, but no more than once, maybe twice a week.” Participant three said they would change their drinking patterns and stop “binge drinking just to blackout” and instead have a glass of wine here and there. This student said, “My patterns will definitely change, because I’m not going out as frequently once I’m older and graduated.” The participants felt that college is the time for drinking and partying, and once they “get older and graduate,” this behavior will stop. Participant one expressed, “It’s fun, you know. This is the time where you can, you know, learn

time management, get your schoolwork done, but be a crazy kid, do all these crazy things, take on crazy events.”

Follow-up Question Two: Do you think your friendships would be impacted if you were to stop drinking? When asked if they thought their friendships would be impacted if they were to stop drinking, all five participants said no. Participant five stated, “I think it would be different if we didn’t drink, but I don’t think it would impact my friendships.” The response from Participant four mimicked the other 3 students who denied that their friendships would be impacted or suffer if they were to cut out alcohol. When asked if their friendships would change without alcohol, Participant four stated, “I don’t think so; I think I’ve built great friendships, and since I’m in a fraternity, I’ll always have those friendships.”

Follow-up Question Three: How much do you drink over the course of a night out? When asked how much they drink over the course of the night, participants gave a range of 15-25 drinks. Participant one felt they drank 10-20 drinks per outing, Participant two felt they drank 20-25 drinks per outing, Participant three felt their consumption was about 16 drinks, Participant four stated they consume 18-20 drinks, and Participant five said they drink about 10-15 alcoholic beverages per outing. All the participants stated that most of the alcoholic beverages were consumed at the bars, especially when they go to the all-you-can-drink promotions. The average amount of drinks consumed by the participants at the all-you-can-drink venue, "Bar X," was 10 along with some shots. After interviewing the students, it was identified that they consume a range of 2-6 drinks while pregaming, around 10-15 drinks at the venue along with some shots, and then finish with 2-3 drinks while postgaming.

Follow-up Question Four: Have your drinking patterns changed throughout your education? All five of the participants believed that their drinking had decreased since they first

began college. Participant two stated that they drink about four or five nights a week currently, down from 7. Participant three felt their drinking had been cut in half since their freshman year stating, “I was probably having 20, 30, 40 drinks a week, and now I’m probably having 10 to 20.” Participants noted that the frequency at which they go out as well as the amount they consume has decreased since their freshman year. Participant three stated, “When I was a freshman, I was just so happy to be here, just sitting in my dorm getting drunk like 7 nights a week because we’re free. Now, it’s about 3 nights a week, so it has declined.” Participant one stated that their drinking had declined due to “maturity” and that now they “just like focusing on more important things and putting my energy into other things.”

Research Question Two: What are outcomes, both negative and positive, from binge-drinking episodes?

Participants identified a myriad of outcomes from their binge drinking, some positive and some negative. The positive outcomes identified by participants included making new friends, building existing friendships, creating lasting memories, having fun, feeling relaxed and confident, and feeling good. The positive outcomes were also the motivators for these students to drink. Despite having had serious negative outcomes in the past and knowing there would be almost certain negative outcomes from bingeing such as hangovers, the students still chose to drink. The students felt that the positive experiences and outcomes outweigh the negative and had a strong sense that the worst was in the past. Collectively, they identified being more mature and felt that this maturity would reduce the negative outcomes they would face. There were several themes identified when exploring the positive outcomes of drinking including:

1. Strong friendships
2. Lasting positive memories with friends

- 3. Feeling relaxed and confident
- 4. Having fun
- 5. Making connections

There were also several negative themes identified including:

- 1. Property damage
- 2. Drug use
- 3. Legal troubles
- 4. DUI
- 5. Physical injuries
- 6. Hangovers
- 7. Fights with friends/others
- 8. Aggression
- 9. Missed Classes
- 10. Regrets/shame

Interview Question Four: Has your drinking caused any negative outcomes?

When asked if their drinking had any negative outcomes, the most common and frequent theme all five participants identified was hangovers. All five participants also mentioned that they had been involved in or around verbal and physical altercations because of their drinking or someone around them who had been drinking. Participant three stated that they broke their ankle over Christmas when they were “really drunk” and, in a separate incident, fell on a classmate’s TV and broke the television. A participant experienced an intoxicated roommate punching a hole in the wall of their student housing apartment due to being drunk and angry. Participant two got a DUI due to their binge drinking and, in another unrelated incident, got into a car crash from

being intoxicated. Four of the five participants admitted to using some form of drugs when they are bingeing. Drug use ranged from vape use, to marijuana, to hard drugs like cocaine. Participant one expressed that when they drink, they engage in vaping, but when they are sober, they do not like smoking or vaping. Three participants admitted to smoking marijuana when they drink, and 2 of the participants admitted to using cocaine during binges. All five participants acknowledged that there is prevalent drug use when bingeing in their student friend group, particularly cocaine and marijuana. The 2 students who used cocaine when drinking stated that they only do this when intoxicated and never when they are sober. Participant four was the only participant who denied any drug use but stated, “I don’t do drugs, but I know a lot of people who do that.”

Second to hangovers, all the participants mentioned regrets, shame, or embarrassment being the next greatest and most common negative effect from their binge drinking. Participant one stated the worst aspect about drinking is “waking up hungover, like, 'oh [expletive redacted],’ just going through your messages from the night before like 'what did I do?’” Participant five felt that they did things that were out of character when they were intoxicated, stating, “I’ve definitely drank and done things that I regret or should not have. I just lose my moral compass and do things I wouldn’t normally do.”

Follow-up Question Five: Has your drinking caused any negative outcomes with your schooling? Participants were adamant that their drinking did not cause any severe negative outcomes in regard to their education. Three participants admitted to missing some classes due to hangovers but said these absences did not egregiously affect their education. Participant five stated, “I have missed classes because I’m hungover, but it’s not drastic. It doesn’t drastically affect my school, but it definitely has an impact on it.” This student also noted that their drinking and subsequent hangovers have affected their grades but “not to the point

where I need to stop drinking.” Participant three said they were guilty of “sleeping through my fair share of classes because I’m too hungover” but did not believe that this “had too much of an impact to where I have to re-evaluate my lifestyle.” The participants noted that they strategically plan their outings, and if they knew they had an exam the next day, they would take the night off. Overall, the five participants did not feel their binge drinking had a significant impact on their education. Acknowledging small mishaps, not a single participant felt concerned for their grades or thought they needed to adjust their drinking habits.

Figure 2

Negative Outcomes Experienced by Study Participants



Research Question Three: What are the perceived campus resources available for students dealing with binge and high-risk drinking patterns?

The purpose of this research question was to determine if students felt that their school offered resources for those who drink heavily. As many schools around the country have implemented anti-drinking campaigns, the researcher was looking to find what resources, if any,

were available to the participants. The participants were asked, “Do you feel that the school offers resources for people who drink heavily?” From this question, several themes were identified including:

1. There are resources available
2. Students are unsure what these resources were
3. Students are unsure where to find resources
4. Guest speakers
5. Presentations
6. Fliers
7. Participants don’t feel they have drinking issues

Interview Question Five: Do you feel that the school offers resources for people who drink heavily?

After interviewing those five participants, all of the students felt that their university did offer resources for students who drink heavily. They also felt that their school offered tools and promoted responsible drinking. None of the students interviewed were able to name any of these resources or tell where they would go to find them. They all agreed their school did have resources but did not know what they were. The participants did feel that they should know what these resources were. Regarding resources being offered, Participant three said, “Yeah, definitely, [school name redacted] offers a lot of resources, I’d say, but I’d never pursued any. I’m sure they’re available.” When asked if the participant knew any specific resources, that participant replied, “No, I actually don’t know any.” Participant four stated, “I would hope so. I’m not too sure because I have never really looked into it, but I would hope so.” Only one of the participants was able to identify particular times when the school addressed drinking, stating that

the school “offers a great program, and they always talk to us about it and show us these PowerPoints and what we could do.” When asked what these programs were or what they were told they could do, the participant was unable to describe what was discussed during these talks, saying, “I probably should [know].” Participant two said they felt the school did have resources, but they didn’t really advertise them. The student stated, “They obviously do have them [resources], but I don’t think they’re really like in your face. I think it's more like a flier or something like that. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten an email or something like that.” When asked about available resources, Participant one said, “I don’t know if they offer resources. I should look into that, because I think we should promote that more.”

Follow-up Question Six: Have you ever been concerned with how much you or a friend drinks? When asked about their drinking practices, none of the participants felt they needed to make any changes to their drinking patterns, despite the negative consequences they described and the continuous alcohol-induced blackouts. All participants felt they had their drinking under control, had learned their lesson, or had matured since their last significant negative incident. When asked if they were concerned for any of their friends, four participants felt that their friends also had their drinking under control, and there was no cause for alarm. Participant one expressed that he is aware of some friends with drinking problems and wishes they would speak out. This participant said, “I definitely know there are people who do have drinking problems but haven’t said anything.”

Each participant felt the level of drinking they engaged in was normal and just part of being in college. None of the participants felt that drinking to blackout was an issue. They also were not concerned by the property damage or physical injuries they incurred in bingeing

episodes. Rather than being cause for alarm, these incidents were looked at as comical events that contributed to the making of fun memories with friends.

Body Language

While interviewing the participants, the researcher took note of the students' body language and behavior. The participants were very forthcoming, honest, and comfortable with the discussion. Their body language showed confidence and comfort as they used hand movements and gestures. Three of the participants sat back in their seats, acting very relaxed during the interviews. The other two participants leaned forward and acted relaxed but more engaged by sitting forward in deep conversation. Participant four was the only student who exhibited slight nervousness at the beginning of the interview, but as the discussion went on, this interviewee loosened up and became more comfortable and outgoing. Initially, the participant was slightly shaky and stuttered when speaking. After the conversation started rolling, this behavior stopped, and the participant seemed to feel at ease. When the question of drug use came up, this participant became shaky and quickly responded that they do not use drugs. The other four participants were unphased by this same question and were open in sharing the type of drug use they engaged in. The participants seemed very comfortable talking about their alcohol use and even the negative or embarrassing outcomes they had experienced. It is important to note that although the participants spoke freely, they were very concerned that the study was guaranteed to be anonymous. Participants recognized that the activities they had taken part in might be cause for concern with the university and their fraternity group leaders and did not want to have any repercussions for participating. Once the processes of ensuring anonymity were again clarified by the researcher, the participants began the interview and spoke with confidence, seeming unbothered to express the outcomes of their drinking. Their expression and dialogue

showed that these activities were conventional in their university. The five participants had become accustomed to regular binge drinking and the accompanying negative outcomes.

Chapter V: Conclusions and Discussion

After speaking with the five participants, it was clear that they all exhibit the clinical description for binge drinking and alcohol abuse, yet none of the participants felt their drinking was a problem. Despite all the participants' experiencing negative and serious outcomes from alcohol misuse, none of these individuals thought that they needed to make any changes. These students all felt that their drinking behaviors were heavily influenced by their peers and felt this social aspect was the most important and influential reason to engage in dangerous drinking practices. While all the students felt their school did or should offer resources, only one of the five participants was able to describe a specific time when the school addressed alcohol misuse.

Research Question One: What are motivators for binge drinking among college students?

After interviewing five college students who were self-admitted binge drinkers, there were several themes that developed as motivators for their binge drinking behaviors, including:

1. Drinking is fun.
2. The social aspect of drinking is important in college.
3. The feeling of being drunk is enjoyable.
4. Drinking makes you more confident.
5. Drinking helps with social anxiety.
6. Drinking helps you build/strengthen friendships.
7. Drinking helps you relax.
8. Drinking creates fun memories.
9. Drinking makes other activities more fun.

10. Peers influence one another's drinking rates.
11. Drinking to fit in
12. Drinking to black out
13. Drinking where it's cheap
14. Freedom

The biggest motivator to binge drink among the participants was the aspect of fun that they experienced from being intoxicated. The participants described that the feeling of being drunk was enjoyable, as were the activities and events that took place when drinking. They expressed that alcohol made normal things that they were doing, such as watching a sporting event or playing games, more fun.

The second most important motivator for binge drinking was the aspect of social interactions and friendships. The participants felt that drinking helped to strengthen their friendships, and the wild or funny events that happen from being drunk created lifetime memories. These students believed that drinking was an important factor in creating the relationships they currently enjoyed and was key in making new friends.

Another important motivator for binge drinking was social pressures or influences. All of the participants felt that their drinking habits were influenced by their peer group. Several participants noted that they would feel out of place if they didn't drink and would often match their rate of drinking to that of the group they were with. Although the students felt that alcohol was pivotal in creating the friendships they had and that their peers influenced their drinking patterns, they did not feel their friendships would be adversely affected in any way if they were to quit drinking alcohol. They thought they had built strong relationships, partly thanks to the fact they had engaged in risky drinking behaviors with these peers. The students did think that

they would feel out of place if they did not drink and largely drink to fit in, evidenced by their description of never saying "No" to a drinking challenge.

Building confidence and anxiety reduction were also popular motivators among the students to drink heavily. Participants felt that alcohol made it easier to be social and removed the inhibitions they felt prior to engaging in conversations. With increasing confidence and lowered social anxiety, subjects felt it was easier to engage with members of the opposite sex. They felt drinking relaxed them prior to social engagements and “took the edge off” of nerves.

Research Question Two: What are outcomes, both negative and positive, from binge drinking episodes?

Participant interviews revealed that although outcomes for students are largely negative, they are willing to tolerate these negative consequences for the positive outcomes they experience. Overall, all five students interviewed felt the positives outweighed the negatives. They felt that drinking in the manner they do is just part of being a college student, and it is the only time in their lives they will ever be able to behave this way. The positive experiences described by students included:

1. Strong friendships
2. Lasting positive memories with friends
3. Feeling relaxed and confident
4. Having fun
5. Making connections

There were also several negative themes identified including:

1. Property damage
2. Drug use

3. Legal troubles
4. DUI/car crashes
5. Physical injuries
6. Hangovers
7. Fights with friends/others
8. Aggression
9. Missed classes
10. Regrets/shame

The students felt that the fun they feel when drunk, the memories they make from drunken endeavors, and the friendships they build through alcohol are all positive outcomes from binge drinking. They did not seem to think that the physical injuries, such as the broken ankle, or the legal troubles, such as the DUI, were any cause for concern. They were not bothered by the property damage they had caused or experienced, car crashes, hangovers, altercations, or missed classes. The group felt that these were all normal college experiences.

It became apparent that negative and dangerous outcomes these students experienced were so commonplace in their university and within their peer groups that they did not realize the severity of these actions. These dangerous drinking patterns were laughed off by the participants, as were the outcomes that could have endangered the lives of these students or the lives of others, particularly the DUI and car crash incidents. The students also did not think that drinking to black out or drinking until they pass out were dangerous activities. These activities take place so often and on such a large scale that this group of participants was detached from the level of danger and severity of their actions. It was discovered that this group of college students had

been conditioned to feel that binge drinking and the accompanying activities and negative outcomes are normal.

Research Question Three: What are the perceived campus resources available for students dealing with binge and high-risk drinking patterns?

While all five students felt that their university did or should have resources for those who engage in dangerous drinking patterns, none of these students could name a single resource. One of the participants recalled that his fraternity had been spoken to about drinking through use of a PowerPoint presentation but could not relay what was discussed in this meeting. The consensus among the group was that their school should have resources for those who binge drink, but they did not seek any of them out as they did not feel their drinking was dangerous or a problem. The students felt confident that should they need these resources, they would be available, but they did not know where to go to find them. Again, they felt they did not have a problem with drinking, so they had no need to be aware, let alone use, campus drinking resources. Although their described drinking patterns are by definition alcohol abuse, misuse, and bingeing, these students felt that resources should be available and advertised better for those who do, in fact, have drinking problems, themselves excluded.

Additional Research Conclusions:

Skog's Theory of Collectivity

After interviewing five university students, it was evidenced that Skog's theory of collectivity was, in fact, true for peer groups at the college level. Skog's theory (1985) factors in human behavior as a point that contributes to collective drinking patterns:

If certain structural requirements are fulfilled, nearly everybody will influence and be influenced by nearly everybody else, either directly or indirectly. In this case, the

population will tend to behave as a collective. Therefore the population might be connection between the general level of consumption in the population and the prevalence of heavy use. (p. 97)

This was evidenced when the students described how their peers influenced them to drink both directly and indirectly. Students shared that they were directly influenced to drink more when their peers would challenge them to “ice out.” They also showed how they were indirectly influenced when they described how someone “shotgunning” next to them would influence them to begin drinking more heavily. By that same token, students shared that being around those who are taking it slow with their alcohol use would influence them to do the same. One of the students stated that “being around certain people can choose which way you go.” The students described how when they are in a group that is drinking heavily, they will individually also drink heavily. If they are in a group that is not drinking heavily, they too will drink less, thus proving Skog’s theory to hold true.

Peer and Social Pressure

Through student interviews, it was unearthed that social pressures and constructs have a large influence on the drinking habits of individuals. Similar to Skog’s theory, peer pressure goes hand in hand with dangerous, collective-drinking patterns. “Perceived peer pressure has been shown to increase engagement in risky drinking practices, such as drinking games. Alcohol consumption frequently occurs in contexts where social influence through others may operate and is embedded within many social rituals” (Morris et al., 2020, p. 2). As the students mentioned, they would feel out of place if they did not drink or drink to the level of their peers. The pregame drinking games the students described begin the risky drinking patterns of bingeing even before the group reaches the bars, where the majority of their drinks are consumed. This

pressure to be social, fit in, and participate in group activities is a significant contributor to binge drinking.

Targeted Student Advertising & Specials:

Successful campaigns to reduce student alcohol abuse both on and off campus were guided by restricting alcohol advertising on campus (Wechsler et al., 2000). It was discovered that schools with successful anti-drinking programs worked with the community and barred venues from targeting student groups with student discounts or all-you-can-drink specials. Colleges near bars that target the student demographic with student specials, low prices, and free drinks have greater rates of harm both to student drinkers and the members of the community (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008).

The students in this research study described that as college students, they do not have a lot of extra money, therefore, they look for venues that offer student discounts or all-you-can-drink for one, low price. All five students in this study mentioned one bar by name; to retain anonymity, this bar will be referred to as "Bar X." Bar X offers all-you-can-drink specials to college students at \$10 for a four-hour period. The participants said that this special drove them to drink and drink to an excess they would not have, had this special not been available. The students felt that this was a good deal, and in order to get their money's worth, they had to drink as much as they could in this four-hour window. Had the venue not offered this special, the students felt that they would not drink as much as they do, as they cannot afford it. Therefore, offering all-you-can-drink specials and targeting students with low prices does, in fact, contribute to dangerous drinking behaviors. Easy-to-get and cheap alcohol close to campus are large contributors to coeds' dangerous drinking patterns. The students described that the bulk of their drinking was done at the bars, particularly ones that offer student pricing. If venues were to

remove these specials and targeted advertisements, it can be inferred that dangerous student drinking patterns and harm to students would be reduced.

Drinking in Greek Life

The participants in this research study were all involved in Greek life, although none of them lived in a fraternity house. The participants felt that their membership in Greek life did cause them to drink more heavily and frequently than their non-member peers. Research shows that involvement in Greek life allows for higher rates of binge drinking patterns from members than individuals not involved in fraternities or sororities. “Virtually every study of drinking in college shows fraternity members tend to drink more heavily and more frequently, and to have more alcohol-related problems than their fellow students. In fact, the single best predictor of binge drinking in college is fraternity membership” (Wechsler et al., 2009, p. 396). Largely, the abusive drinking patterns in fraternities are due to the number of social gatherings the group has, the collective nature of the groups themselves, and the pressure to fit in during these group activities.

As Skog and this study found to be true, there is a strong collective component to the rate of alcohol consumption within a group (Livingston & Raninen, 2020). As the nature of fraternities are collective, these groups are more at risk for higher rates of alcohol abuse than other student groups. The participants in this research study identified that due to their membership in a fraternity, they are more likely to drink often and heavily.

Underage Drinking

Underage students face a higher risk of bingeing than that of their legal-aged peers. Post-secondary students, particularly males aged 17-20, are more likely to engage in impulsive, high stimulation, and risk-seeking behaviors such as binge drinking (Morris et al., 2020). All five

students in this research study felt that their drinking had decreased since they first began classes in college. Although the students still drink in excess to a level that can be considered abusive, these students believe that as freshmen, they were drinking double the amount they are currently. Underage, freshman drinking is attributed to peer pressure and newly found freedom, both of which the students identified. Research indicates that lack of parental supervision along with the desire to belong heavily affects drinking behaviors among underage students (Iwamoto & Smiler, 2013). After interviewing the five participants in this study, it can be concluded that the research presented on underage drinking does apply and hold true to this group of students.

Practical Significance

The purpose of this study was to discover the "why" behind binge drinking habits and patterns among college students, despite the negative outcomes. This study further aimed to examine the consequences, both positive and negative, of binge drinking on the lives of post-secondary students and those around them, as well as the impacts on their academic performance. This study also discovered what the perceived campus resources were for students engaging in dangerous drinking behaviors.

Binging and heavy episodic drinking in college have been consistent and dangerous problems across college campuses. Understanding why students binge drink is an important and necessary factor in being able to develop successful solutions to the problem. Through this study, the researcher was able to answer the posed research questions and add to generalized knowledge by providing rationales and personal experiences that are not widely expressed in the open by students. As binge drinking tends to carry a stigma or taboo, many practices are hidden or normalized to avoid detection as a problem. The information provided in this research study through student interviews can benefit others by providing tools to help universities address

binge drinking by understanding how and why it occurs. This information can further provide guidance for college administrations and communities in creating policies to ensure student safety.

P-20 Implications

Throughout the course of this research study, P-20 principles and implications were considered. P-20 education is a fluid process from childhood through adulthood. P-20 principles recognize that education is not one-size-fits-all (Mead, n.d.). Societal changes require educators and academic institutions to adapt to the needs of their students, changing times, and consider outside influences to meet people where they are (Mead, n.d.).

College students face innumerable obstacles throughout the course of their education as they transition from adolescents to adults. P-20 fundamentals are important in creating student-life programs, campus policy, and resources that acknowledge these challenges that students will face, particularly with drinking (St. John et al., 2013). During this study, it became evident to the researcher, through the tool of student interviews, just how severe the challenges of drinking are for young adults in college. Although resources were perceived to be available, these five selected participants were unable to identify the severity of the level of alcohol abuse that they took part in. The lack of attention on alcohol abuse in college, namely the university in this study, is an ongoing issue within P-20 education.

Study Limitations

While this study successfully answered the research questions it aimed to solve, there were limitations to this study. The sample size for phenomenological studies is generally smaller, as was the case in this study. When interviewing a smaller sample size, it is not guaranteed that

this subset of individuals adequately represents the feelings, experiences, and sentiments of the whole.

The second limitation to this study was while interviewing students, even when promised anonymity, there was the risk that their answers may have been less than truthful to avoid potential retaliation. Finding similarities within answers from different individuals allows for the researcher to conclude that these answers are truthful, but with some outlier answers, particularly on sensitive topics, it is possible for respondents to mask the truth.

The third limitation to this study was that the group interviewed all were involved in Greek life. Research shows that Greek life members drink more heavily and frequently than their non-member peers (Wechsler et al., 2009, p. 396), therefore, the answers and extent of bingeing from this group may more accurately represent the subset of fraternity members of their university than non-members.

Recommendations

After interviewing the five participants in this study, it became apparent to the researcher that a large part of the problem with alcohol abuse among this group was that none of the individuals felt they were, in fact, abusing alcohol. It can be inferred that the rest of these individuals' peer groups also do not feel their drinking is a problem or cause for concern.

It is the recommendation of the researcher that educational institutions invest more time into educating students on what alcohol abuse actually is in addition to then sharing resources for students. It is also recommended that universities work with their communities, local legislatures, and law enforcement to ban targeted alcohol advertisements, all-you-can-drink specials, and student discounts on beer and liquor.

Recommendations for Future Research:

After reading relevant research presented on how alcohol abuse and misuse can lead to future alcohol use disorder (Meda et al., 2017), the researcher recommends future research into how many college binge drinkers suffer from AUD in the future after graduation. While all five students in this study stated that after graduation, they would not continue drinking in the manner they currently engage in, whether or not these individuals are actually willing and able to stop abusing alcohol will not be seen for some years ahead.

It is also recommended that this study be re-created in the future using a more varied subject pool. While using snowball sampling is a powerful tool to find participants when researching taboo topics, it also has the capability to provide for a narrow selection of subjects. This study was limited in that all the participants were male and members of Greek life. Recreating the study with more participant variation could allow for results that more accurately depict the student body as a whole, rather than a subset.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form



Study Title: Binge Drinking in College: A Phenomenological Study

Primary Investigator: Kristin Andrews, Murray State University

Faculty Sponsor Contact: Dr. Brian Parr, Murray State University, bparr@murraystate.edu, 270-809-2966.

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted through Murray State University. This form contains information you will need to help you decide whether to be in this research study or not. You must be at least 21 years old to participate. Please read the form carefully and ask the researcher questions about anything that is not clear. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

1. **Nature and Purpose of Project:** You are being invited to take part in a doctoral research study that will investigate your personal experiences, feelings, and perceptions regarding binge drinking and your college experience. The purpose of this study is to gain a modern-day insight into the current state of binge drinking in college, and understand the 'why' behind bingeing patterns and habits.
2. **Participant Selection** You are being asked to participate because you are at least 21 years of age, are enrolled in college courses, and meet the criteria to be considered a binge drinker.
3. **Explanation of Procedures:** The time frame for this study is September 2022-December 2022. The researcher plans to conduct one, in-person interview with you, covering 5 broad research questions. The interview style will be relaxed and conversational, and there may be additional follow up questions based on your answers. The interview should last approximately 30 minutes to an hour depending on how much you wish to share. The interview will take place at a public location that is mutually agreed on. You will be provided with a copy of the research questions prior to the interview so you can determine if you are comfortable participating, and you can think about your responses.
4. **Recordings:** Your interview will be audio recorded for the purpose of interview transcription. Audio recording is required for accurate transcription, if you do not wish to be recorded you should not enroll in this study.

_____ I agree to be audio recorded
Initials

5. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. There is the possibility for emotional discomfort such as embarrassment when providing responses. The research questions are provided prior to participation in the study so you can decide if you would like to continue to participate.

All digital data from participants will be treated confidentially and stored on a password protected laptop. Audio recordings will be kept in a locked safe and destroyed after they have been transcribed and the transcriptions have been reviewed. The researcher is the only person with access to the laptop and safe. All confidential documents will be retained for the Federally required 3 years, upon which time they will be destroyed.



6. **Benefits:** Taking part in this study may not benefit you directly, however, your participation, experiences, and responses may help to increase our understanding of binge drinking among college students, and may provide guidance for implementing campus resources for future students.
7. **Participant Compensation:** You will be compensated with \$50 for your time and participation in this research study. To be eligible for this compensation, you must fully complete the study. This means answering all questions presented by the researcher.
8. **Confidentiality:** Your identity will be known only to the researcher, and pseudonyms will be used when reporting your responses (i.e. Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.). The responses you provide, and the field notes the researcher takes will be shared, but you will remain anonymous.
9. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Your participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw/stop participating at any time with absolutely no penalty. While study participation is voluntary, all questions must be answered in order for your individual responses to be included in the study results.
10. **Contact Information:** Any questions about the procedures or conduct of this research should be brought to the attention of Kristin Andrews at (redacted) or redacted). You may also contact if you would like to know the results of this study.

Your signature and continued participation indicates that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Murray State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the MSU IRB Coordinator at (270) 809-2916 or msu.irb@murraystate.edu

Participant's Name (printed): _____

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

Appendix B: Study Invitation



Dear Student,

You are being invited to participate in a research study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral dissertation. You have been selected as a potential participant by one of your peers who has referred me to you based on your qualifications for the study. The requirements to participate in the study are that you are age 21 or older, enrolled in college courses, and when drinking alcohol, you consume 4 or more drinks in a row if you are female, and 5 or more drinks in a row if you are male. The study is titled Binge Drinking in College: A Phenomenological Study, and looks to gain insight into your personal experiences with alcohol.

If you decided to participate, I will be conducting a one time, one-on-one interview with you at a mutually decided location. The interview will consist of 5 broad questions which will be provided to you along with this document. In addition to the 5 questions, there may be follow up questions based on your answers to gain additional insight into your experiences. The interview should last approximately 25 to 45 minutes depending on the conversation flow and depth of answers. In exchange for your time and sharing your experiences, you will be compensated with \$50 upon completion of your interview.

Also attached with this document you will find the informed consent form. Please read through this form carefully as it will help you determine if you wish to participate in the study.

I hope you decide to take part in this study, your feedback and participation will be greatly valued. If you have any questions or would like to confirm and schedule a date and time for participation I can be contacted at (researcher contact info redacted)

Thank you,

Kristin Andrews

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. What does a night out look like for you?
2. Do you think those around you affect your drinking patterns?
3. Has your drinking caused any negative outcomes?
4. Why do you like to, or choose to drink?
5. Do you feel that the school offers resources for people who drink heavily?

☐ Note: These are broad questions to guide conversation, there may be additional follow up questions based on your answers.

Appendix D: IRB Approval



Institutional Review Board

328 Wells Hall
Murray, KY 42071-3318
270-809-2916 • msu.irb@murraystate.edu

TO: Brian Parr, Hutson School of Agriculture

FROM: Jonathan Baskin, IRB Coordinator *JB*

DATE: 9/20/2022

RE: Human Subjects Protocol I.D. – IRB # 23-012

The IRB has completed its review of your student's Level 1 protocol entitled *Binge Drinking in College: A Phenomenological Study*. After review and consideration, the IRB has determined that the research, as described in the protocol form, will be conducted in compliance with Murray State University guidelines for the protection of human participants.

The forms and materials that have been approved for use in this research study are attached to the email containing this letter. These are the forms and materials that must be presented to the subjects. Use of any process or forms other than those approved by the IRB will be considered misconduct in research as stated in the MSU IRB Procedures and Guidelines section 20.3.

Your stated data collection period is from 9/22/2022 to 12/31/2022.

If data collection extends beyond this period, please submit an Amendment to an Approved Protocol form detailing the new data collection period and the reason for the change.

This Level 1 approval is valid until 9/19/2023.

If data collection and analysis extends beyond this date, the research project must be reviewed as a continuation project by the IRB prior to the end of the approval period, 9/19/2023. You must reapply for IRB approval by submitting a Project Update and Closure form (available at murraystate.edu/irb). You must allow ample time for IRB processing and decision prior to your expiration date, or your research must stop until such time that IRB approval is received. If the research project is completed by the end of the approval period, then a Project Update and Closure form must be submitted for IRB review so that your protocol may be closed. It is your responsibility to submit the appropriate paperwork in a timely manner.

The protocol is approved. You may begin data collection now.

**Opportunity
afforded**

murraystate.edu