



Influence of Pop Culture on College Drinking

Pumphrey Law Scholarship --- August 5th, 2019

Rebecca Gutierrez

At some point in time a college student has woken up hungover in their dorm, looked over to the red solo cup they brought back from a party the night before and wondered, “Was that really worth it? It’s nothing like in the movies.” Media often depicts the best part of college life to be the parties filled with binge drinking and drug use. From the hit movie *Superbad* to the music video for Katy Perry’s six times platinum song “Last Friday Night”, pop culture takes no shame in romanticizing the culture of partying with alcohol in college. Such depictions of substance consumption may seem negligible, but impressionable young adults are often enticed by the promise of a ‘fun night they won’t remember’. These depictions of college culture are harmful for students in the way they misrepresent

the college experience, dismiss the dangers of consuming alcohol, and diminish the intent of higher education.

Drug and alcohol consumption in college are portrayed as the norm in pop culture, and has real life consequences. A study done at Rutgers University for the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs found that “college students drank more than noncollege peers and, in general, drank more frequently than did noncollege peers”[1]. In other words, pop culture’s glamorization of college drinking has been shown to have an impact on student’s drinking behaviors. This, in turn, encourages pop culture to further emphasize it as an important part of college culture. Notably, there are other ways in which pop culture could depict college students in a favorable manner. Perhaps the most well-known attribute of college students is that they do not get much sleep. This could be from pulling an all nighter with friends to study for a midterm or getting to know their dorm-mates better during an activity held in their common room. There is a multitude of activities which are enjoyable and do not encourage substance use, but still contribute to the college experience. Unfortunately, such events are rarely depicted in mainstream media. When pop culture puts drinking at the forefront of the college experience, it minimizes the other memorable events which make college worth the time and money. Of all the activities which could be associated with college culture, it is a shame that substance use is the most prominent.

Binge drinking, defined as “a pattern of drinking that brings blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels to 0.08 g/dL...typically after four drinks for women and

five drinks for men” by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [2], is the type of drinking which pop culture associates with college. One clear example of this is in the party scene of the movie *Pitch Perfect* when Stacie, a main character, asks another main character “When I drink too much tonight, can I count on you hold my hair back if I puke?”[3]. This dialogue makes it clear that the intent is to drink in excess. This is also alluded to be the goal when characters in college drink in other movies and TV shows. Students who choose to drink have likely never consumed alcohol before college and are unaware of their own limits. Making them think that consuming a large amount of alcohol at once is safe is extremely dangerous because it is untrue. Binge drinking poses many health risks, the most fatal being alcohol poisoning. Despite being a large danger for college students, it is hardly ever mentioned in pop culture. It is no wonder that dramatizations of college drinking exclude the dangers of consuming alcohol, it is a difficult subject to approach and would feel out of place when depicting college kids having a good time. However, excluding the potential harms of alcohol is problematic because a majority of young adults’ main impression of college drinking comes from pop culture. After all, if Emma Watson has admitted to picking up the red cups in college to Seventeen magazine [4], how dangerous can it be?

Pop culture also seems to have also normalized the idea that wanting to party is a valid reason to attend college. Rather than searching for a college which best fits them, it is easy for students to choose to attend a so-called ‘party school’ solely because the drinking environment made it an appealing choice. According to the 2017 International Student Survey done by Hobsons, 22% of participants noted

that “to experience university life and have a good time” was one of their top three reasons to attend college [5]. Although there are many reasons to go to college, such as wanting to meet new people or to become familiar with a new city, furthering one’s education should always be the primary reason to go to college. Earning a degree requires dedication to one’s major and is a wonderful achievement, and students who see higher education as a place for social drinking rather than a place for personal and educational growth detracts from the intent of the institution. Even though the social aspect of college can be important for many students, it is important to remember that friends should support academic endeavors, not tell you to forego them to go out for some drinks.

In essence, the representation of alcohol consumption in college by pop culture is damaging not only to current college students, but future ones as well. There is no need to glorify drinking culture in college when approximately 88,000 people die from alcohol-related causes annually [6]. Students should not feel pressured to consume alcohol in order to get what is often referred to as the full college experience. Pop culture is partially to blame for the rampant alcohol issues higher education institutions deal with. Although some alcohol use can be attributed to students’ newfound freedom to do so, the romanticized portrayal of college parties certainly does not help students to make an informed decision of whether or not to participate.

References

- 1- Carter, Ashlee C, et al. "The College and Noncollege Experience: a Review of the Factors That Influence Drinking Behavior in Young Adulthood." *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, Rutgers University, Sept. 2010, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2930506/.
- 2- NIAA, "Drinking Levels Defined." *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 26 Jan. 2017, www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/moderate-binge-drinking.
- 3- Moore, Jason, Director. *Pitch Perfect*. Universal, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wOjaHwu6ms>
- 4- McGrath, Kara. "Celebs Dish On College Life." *Seventeen*, Seventeen, 18 July 2017, www.seventeen.com/life/school/advice/g2172/celebrities-in-college/.
- 5- Bhardwa, Seeta. "Why Do Students Go to University and How Do They Choose Which One?" *The World University Rankings*, 6 June 2017, www.timeshighereducation.com/student/news/why-do-students-go-university-and-how-do-they-choose-which-one.
- 6- Bose, Jonaki, et al. "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health." *Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics, 2015