Reviewer’s report

Title: Problem drinking among Flemish students: beverage type, early drinking onset and negative personal & social consequences

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Reviewer: Christine Walther

Reviewer's report:

The authors of the manuscript under review examined relations between consequences of substance use and frequency and onset of use of specific alcoholic beverages among a sample of Flemish college students. The authors are correct in their assertion that European students are an understudied population, as the majority of literature examining college student substance use has utilized American samples, as well as the lack of consideration of age of onset and frequency of use of specific alcoholic beverages in the literature. While the authors address an important gap in the literature, there are a number of problems in the current manuscript that need to be addressed before publication will be possible.

First, the authors do not establish the importance of beverage type and drinking onset in the introduction, nor do the authors clearly explain the importance of studying European samples. The portions of the introduction describing problematic substance use and consequences should be shortened so that the authors can provide further explanations of the importance of their variables of interest and sample. The authors also need to be careful about citations. Some statements in the introduction should have citations for the source of the information being reported, but the authors do not always provide the necessary citation.

The authors also need to clarify how variables were coded in the analyses. For example, the authors describe using midpoints of categories and 11.25 times for the upper categories for the consequence variables. I am not sure what this coding means in terms of how the scale was used in the overall analyses. This is especially important given the statement about the coding of the dependent variables in the limitations section of the discussion. The stated limitation makes me wonder why the authors did not adopt the summed score of dichotomized items mentioned in the limitations. Clarification of the coding scheme for the dependent variables in the analyses would help me understand the authors' decisions about how the dependent variables were treated in the analyses. Similarly, the tables of results refer to an answer option being used as a reference category for the independent variables, but the authors never explain what specific coding was used (e.g., multiple dummy coded variables). The authors should also include statistics related to reliability and validity for the measures rather than only stating that the instrument is reliable and valid. The scale for the frequency of alcohol use is also confusing, though this primarily stems from what is likely an error in the description of the scale.
In the results, the authors write about the drink specific descriptives and analyses, but many students consume more than one type of alcoholic beverage regularly. This means beer drinkers may also be represented in the other drinking categories and vice versa. Clarification about whether participants are only using one type of alcohol, as well as the similarity in frequency of use and onset for different types of alcohol for those who report use of multiple types of alcohol, is needed. The authors also need to include comparison information when they make statements about the strength/size of associations in relation to other results, such as "the IRR was less strong." In this statement, the reader is not sure what the IRR is being compared to.

The tables for the regression results are a bit overwhelming for the reader. The authors should consider adding a note to the tables specifying the reference categories rather than having a blank line of information. The authors should also consider either combining columns of information, such as the regression coefficient and standard error columns, or limiting the information reported in the tables to that which is most pertinent to the results.

In the discussion, the authors fail to fully integrate suggestions about policy with their results. Policy suggestions also need to be fully explained so that the reader understands why the authors are making specific suggestions. Some limitations also need to be fully explained. For example, the authors state that the focus on alcohol specific consequences is a limitation of the current paper given the measure of consequences across different types of substances in the overall project, but this seems like a decision that keeps the paper focused rather than a limitation. Clarification regarding the authors meaning is needed.

The conclusion section is fairly weak and the ideas presented need to be expanded upon. Providing more specific suggestions about risks and interventions would strengthen this section of the paper. Expansion of the ideas in the conclusion would also allow the authors to further demonstrate implications of their results.

In addition to section specific concerns, there were some recurrent issues in the manuscript. In multiple places in the manuscript, the authors mention the increase in substance use that occurs during the transition to college. However, the authors do not limit their sample to transitioning students. A broader description of high rates of substance use among college students would be more appropriate. The authors are also inconsistent in the number of decimal places reported for percentages and other statistics in the manuscript. Two decimal places are relatively standard in many fields, and the authors may want to follow this convention. The authors also repeat some phrases throughout the manuscript. This becomes very formulaic, and the readability of the manuscript would be improved by the use of a greater variety of phrasing. Finally, there are numerous typos/grammar errors throughout the manuscript. These errors will need to be corrected in future versions of the manuscript.
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

Does the work include the necessary controls?
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

No

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