

Exploring the role of social belonging and popularity in UK student drinking behaviour

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Introduction

UK students consume alcohol at higher levels than their non-student peers and US students (Gill, 2002). Despite significant risks, UK students are not ready to change their drinking habits (Longstaff et al., 2015).

Why? Students report experiencing salient positive consequences and outcomes whilst drinking (Park, 2004), including associating alcohol use with the ability to develop a sense of social belonging (Christmas & Seymour, 2014).

Young adults also describe drinking regularly to appear “fun and gregarious” and perceive heavy drinking peers as “outgoing, tough and cool” (Demant & Jarvinen, 2011).

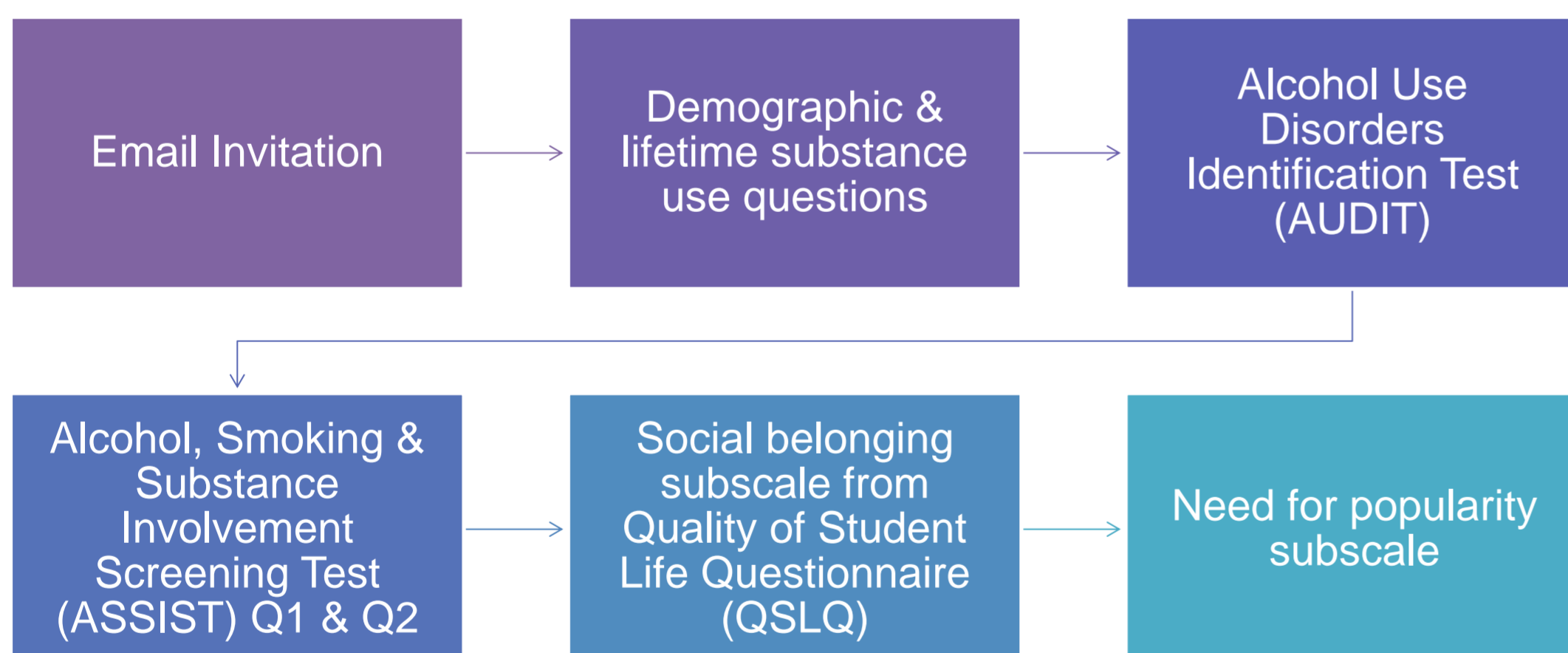
Students have further suggested that they would be more likely to change their attitudes towards drinking for social reasons than health reasons (Penny & Armstrong-Hallam, 2010). However, little is understood about the social benefits of drinking and their influence on alcohol behaviour (Grant, Brown & Moreno, 2013).

✓ **Aim:** To explore the role of positive social factors in the drinking behaviour of students.

✓ **Hypothesis:** Positive relationships will be observed between i) alcohol consumption and social belonging, and ii) alcohol consumption and need for popularity.

Method

- Quantitative data were collected using a cross-sectional survey.
- 734 students** from a UK university completed an online survey, which took 20 minutes to complete and the questionnaire battery included;

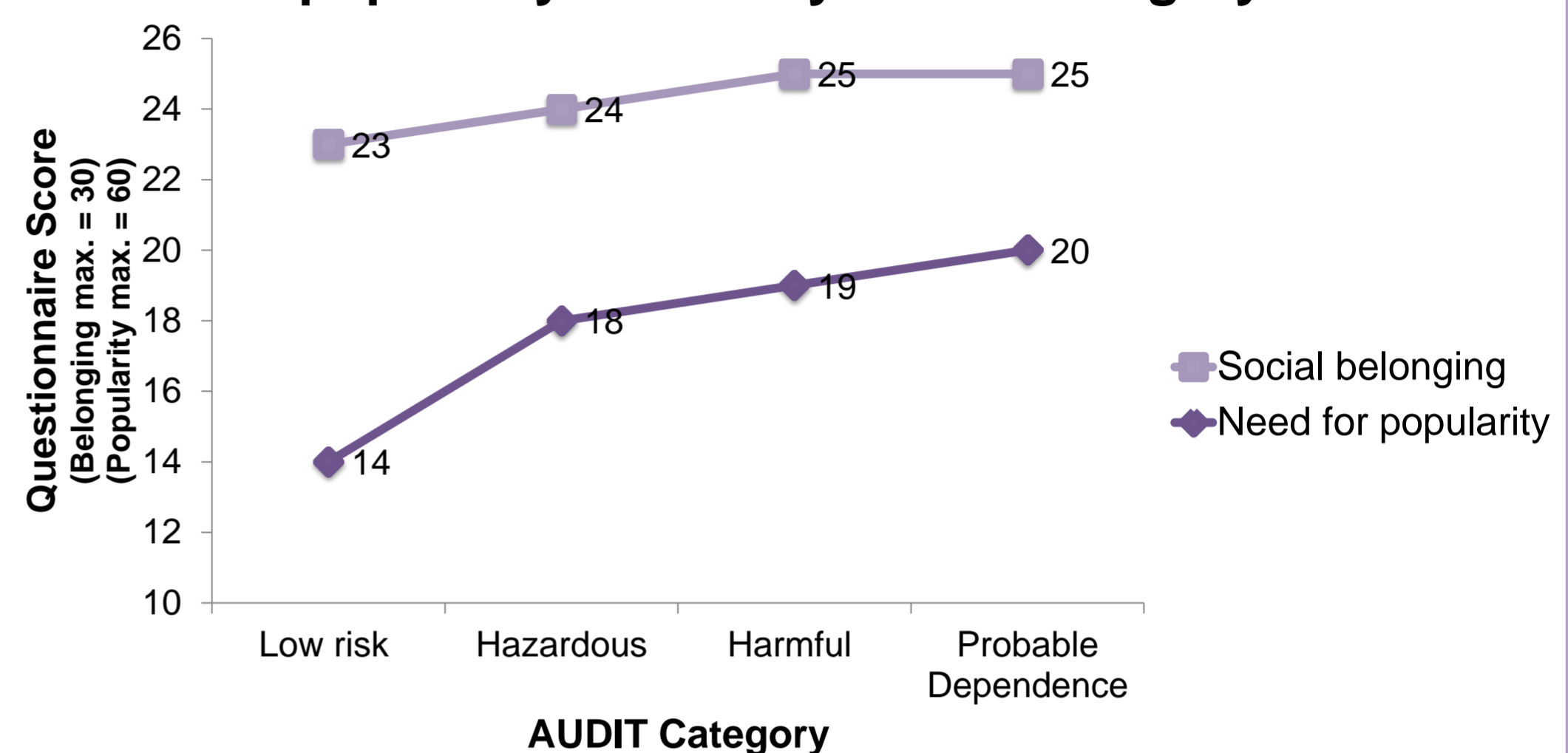


- AUDIT, QSLQ and the need for popularity subscale have all been used previously with students and in our data had Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .70 to .89. Mann Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to analyse differences between groups.

Results

- Students consumed hazardous levels of alcohol (Mdn = 10.00), with 76% scoring 5 or above on the AUDIT-C (max. score = 12) indicating increased or high risk drinking.
- After alcohol, cigarettes (7%) and cannabis (6%) were the most frequently used substances on a monthly basis.
- 18% of students had used a new psychoactive drug at least once in their lifetime, with nitrous oxide (42%) and ‘poppers’ (27%) the most commonly cited.
- Students categorised as ‘hazardous’, ‘harmful’ and ‘dependent’ drinkers had significantly higher perceptions of social belonging than ‘low risk’ drinkers ($p < .001$, Figure 1).
- Need for popularity scores were also found to increase as AUDIT score increased, with students in the ‘probable dependence’ category possessing the highest need for popularity scores ($p < .001$, Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Social belonging and need for popularity scores by AUDIT category



Discussion

- Results highlight the hazardous drinking behaviour of UK university students. These findings are consistent with previous research in the UK (Heather et al., 2011).
- Positive linear relationships were identified between i) social belonging and alcohol consumption and ii) need for popularity and alcohol consumption.
- Students drinking at levels associated with dependence, harmful consequences and impaired behavioural control appear to be rewarded with social benefits.
- The consumption of alcohol may also be seen by students as a means by which they can achieve popularity among their peers.
- Students who drink at high levels may appear friendly, likeable and willing to disclose information about themselves which can facilitate positive interpersonal interactions with others (Leary, 2010). These positive exchanges with others are likely to lead to a perceived sense of social belonging and an elevated social standing with peers.

Conclusions

- UK students are continuing to take risks with their health by drinking at hazardous levels.
- This study provides evidence that exploring the positive social factors associated with alcohol use may help us to understand the allure of drinking at high levels despite the associated negative consequences.
- To be effective alcohol interventions may need to be socially orientated, encouraging students to develop a sense of belonging through alternative ‘dry’ activities, such as visiting the cinema, restaurants or museums with peers (Murphy et al., 2006).

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