Under the Influence: Unveiling Gen Z Perspectives on Drugs and Alcohol

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Introduction

Alcohol-overdose causes 140,000 deaths a year in the US alone, with binge drinking responsible for more than 40% of these cases (Center for Disease Control, 2020). College aged people (18-24 years) have significantly higher drug-use patterns than people in other age groups (SAMHSA, 2021; Kramarow & Elgaddal, 2023; Seifert et al., 2011). This may be related to an increased need for coping strategies among college-aged students, particularly among the current college generation, Generation Z (Saleh et al., 2017). In 2022, Harvard University sampled college students within the 18 to 25-year age cohort and found that 36% reported anxiety and 29% reported depression, nearly twice as many as the teenagers just a few years younger. Hari (2015), proposed that addiction is an adaptation to a stressful environment, and that unhealthy or unstable connective bonds contribute to addiction (Hari, 2015). Increased stress as related to the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as a decrease in social contact may have created a cohort of college students with poor coping skills combined with challenges early on in social connection. Connection is deeply important to most social mammals, it is what so much of our experiences are based around achieving and is something that everyone needs. At our most base level, connection is something we will prefer and choose over even nutrition. Harlow (1958) found that infant monkeys preferred an inanimate cloth-covered monkey mother, one that felt comforting and soft over one that simply provided food. Sroufe (2005) found that healthy attachment styles in infancy are correlated with healthy emotional regulation, self-reliance, and social competence later in life. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-V (2013), addictive disorders can be behavioral (e.g., shopping, social media, sex or gambling) or substance-related disorders (e.g., substance-use disorders, APA, 2013). Substance-use disorder in recent decades is beginning to be viewed through the lens of attachment, with insecure attachment styles linked to higher levels of substance-use disorder (SUD). Further, adolescence is a crucial time for the development of attachment and substance-use behaviors (Schindler, 2019). Considering this, it is understandable how an entire generation of adolescents reacted to social isolation for the better part of a year and in some cases, depending on geography, more than two years

Empirical Question

Does the increased stress and decreased attachment level associated with the Covid-19 pandemic affect drug use and attitude in Generation Z?

Participants

We will convenience sample upwards of 100 undergraduate students at Pacific University, a small liberal arts college in the pacific northwest consisting of 1655 undergraduate students (M$_{age}$ of 21; SD=1 years) to participate in our study (Office of Institutional Research, 2022). We anticipate the student demographic diversity (i.e., sexual orientation, gender composition, and ethnic and religious identities) will conform to the demographic data reported in 2022 (Office of Institutional Research, 2022).

Proposed Method

The materials for this study included a standard demographic measure as well as the following published, cited measures:

Brief Version of Caffeine Expectancy Questionnaire assesses caffeine use and dependence on a 1-4 Likert similarity scale in 20 items(Kearns et al., 2018).

Modified Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test: Self-Report Version assesses levels of alcohol use and dependence using a 10-item measure with a Likert frequency response scale scored from 0-4 (WHO, 1989).

Severity of Dependence Scale for Cannabis is a 5-item measure using a 0-3 Likert-like frequency scale assessing use and dependence on cannabis and only referring to the past year (Gossop et al., 1995).

Modified Nicotine Dependence Syndrome Scale is a 23-item measure assessing nicotine use and dependence using a 1-5 Likert scale and a fill in the blank question (Shiffman et al., 2004).

Life Event Scale for Students assesses life stressors in the past year using a dichotomous scale with each question being weighed 1-100 (Clements & Turpin, 1996).

Drug Attitude Use Scale uses a 1-4 Likert Similarity scale in 6 items to assess attitudes toward drug use (Millier & Forks, 2023). This study will be distributed through Qualtrics®, an online survey software. Participants will complete an informed consent form, modified for implied consent using an agreement action button prior to the delivery of the questions. Following the completion of the measures outlined, participants will be offered a written debriefing that also serves as a research or participation receipt. This section will include wellness resources and contact information, a suicide hotline, and a hotline for substance use treatment information. We will distribute our surveys using a sampling frame of email, college list services, and social media. To test our predictions of higher stress levels, drug use, and differing drug attitudes; participants will be able to answer a variety of questions regarding their stress levels, usage of nicotine, cannabis, alcohol, caffeine, and their attitudes surrounding drug use. In order to assess substance-use on campus, how stress affects use, and the attitudes surrounding these substances, we will use a variety of measures specialized for each type of drug. The scores will be evaluated using R.

Anticipated Results

The results will be interpreted using Pearson's r for all continuous data: age, and high scores on each inventory. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient analyses will be done by measure to evaluate score reliability and homogeneity of the sample. A 3 x 3 MANOVA religion x gender will be conducted across all scores by measure. For significant main effects and interactions, we will conduct an effect size estimate as well as pairwise comparisons using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference post-hoc test.

Conclusion

We predict that the results will show that drug use and dependency has increased in Generation Z as compared to other generations, correlation with higher overall stress levels and a difference in drug attitude. This is due to pervasive unhealthy attachments corresponding with the Covid-19 pandemic and isolation protocols in a time of elevated stress: the transition into college and/or adulthood.

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Other Resources

Pacific University Wellness Resources

If you feel you need immediate support on campus, the Student Counseling Center is located on College Way, in a small building beside Campus Public Safety. The Center is open Monday through Friday from 9 am to 5 pm, the appointment line is 503-352-2191. Students are also welcomed to attend a walk-in hour Monday through Friday from noon-1 pm.

National Wellness Resources

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255

National Institute of Mental Health: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/

SAMHSA National Helpline

Confidential free help, from public health agencies, to find substance use treatment and information:1-800-662-4357

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