

The Factors of Peer Pressure among College  
Students

Lauren Hambrick

CMM 478

May 1, 2018

Peer pressure has often been overlooked as a serious issue to college students and those beyond grade school, particularly because as adults, this matter does not seem relevant. But as many students enter college, peer pressure could become more prominent than ever. But, what exactly is the cause of this pressure? Does the environment strictly influence peer pressure amongst college students? Typically, peer pressure is only brought to our attention during vital developmental stages of students' lives. For example, when students are young, they appear more impressionable and are told to reject this pressure and not give in to the persuasive efforts of those around them. On the other hand, when students go to college they may be faced with more temptations than ever before. Drugs and alcohol are viewed as commonalities amongst this crowd and something that is regularly partaken in. It is possible this is due to the fact that students are surrounded by this behavior. With this being said, it would make sense that more students feel pressured to be involved in these types of activities. As a college student, being aware of this could possibly impact how we act throughout our college career. If peer pressure is prominent in the lives of students beyond grade school, they should be made aware in order to be able to notice when it is taking place, thus not giving in to those influencing negative decisions. If peer pressure in college students is the case and it can be recognized, it is possible that students may make better, more responsible decisions.

### **Media Pressure and Influence on College Students**

Miller and Prentice state (1994) believe that these perceived norms, such as partaking in recreational drugs and drinking, originate from one's own attitudes and

behaviors and observation of others' behaviors. But, we should take into consideration how mass communication sources, especially television, have played a significant role in broadcasting these norms. It has been said that social norms are not only created through mass communication but can shape the perception the audience has of their peers (Miller & Prentice, 1994). Many television shows and movies encourage the idea that college students are normally involved in these activities. Thus, it appears to be something that is normal instead of pressured upon us. This is especially prevalent in a study done by Jessor and Jessor in 1977 when they studied alcohol abuse among minorities. The researchers concluded that not only is the environment of said person a direct influence on their actions, but the rejection of social norms leads to some sense of social control (Jessor & Jessor, 1977). Many values presented in present and past media encourage young adults to go against what is expected of them, suggesting that activities such as drinking and drug abuse are, for lack of a better word, "cool." These types of perceptions can lead people to change their personal behaviors; despite what they may feel is appropriate (Gunther, Bolt, Borzekowski, Dillard & Liebhart, 2003). These researchers discovered that there is a positive correlation between the messages orchestrated by the media and the perceptions of the audience who views or listens to them. Furthermore, these perceptions do not come directly from peers, but the idea that peers agree with this idea due to the media. Thus, the media enhances the idea that certain behaviors are unacceptable or acceptable and the audience then reflects that belief upon their surrounding peers. Students projected beliefs of their peers may not directly come from those surrounding them, but more from the messages they receive from the media.

### **Roles of Peers**

It is important to take into consideration the different types of peers that can impact behavior. Bearman (2002) studied the cause of body dissatisfaction amongst boys and girls. The results concluded that it is not necessarily one's gender, but the different peers surrounding the students play different roles in one's own attitude and behavior development (Bearman, 2002). For example, there are best friends, which one would consider close and reliable, and then there are leading crowds and groups. This is also referred to as "peer proximity" (Bearman, 2002). Unsurprisingly, peer pressure from close friends is much stronger than that from a more distant group. When comparing themselves to their peers, they are ensuring that their own behaviors are appropriate and acceptable (Festinger, 1954). For example, Gunther, Bolt, Borzekowski, Dillard & Liebhart (2003) found moderating effects of peer proximity on smoking amongst young adults, such that adolescents' media exposure to smoking campaigns formed more negative attitudes toward smoking and less intention to smoke only through their perception of close peers (not necessarily the message being conveyed), but not about distant peers. Similarly, Yanovitzky (2006) found that alcohol use by college students closest friends directly impacted their alcohol use as compared to distant peers. According to Bearman (2002), many students may have different perceptions of peers, thus some may be more influenced by close peers while others tend to think more about the opinions of distant peers. Ultimately, it is usually the close peers who have the most impact on decision making rather than those outside of a tight knit friend group. The idea that peers see a reflection of themselves within those they are closest to could silently influence their behaviors whether they are conscious about it or not.

### **Conformity Among College Students**

According to Brown (1986), “it appears that the individual's need for affiliation with his or her peers is manifested by conformity to group norms and that the group itself is strengthened when members exert conformity pressures on one another.” Although little is known about the thought process of students when pressured into certain situations, it can be suggested that their eagerness to “fit in,” or conform to predetermined norms can impact their decisions. For example, Wolfe, Lennox, and Cutler (1986) revealed that self-reported drug use was positively related to the individual's concern for appropriateness. They suggest that fears of social anxiety and disapproval of others directly impact their personal decision to partake in drugs and specifically alcohol abuse. Ultimately, Curran, Dodge & Kapplow (2002) conclude that these behaviors derive from the beliefs shared by members of that person’s reference groups. Thus, if a young adult is surrounded by someone who is taking part in drug or alcohol abuse, and they are closely related, they are more likely to do the same in order to avoid the negative repercussions of denying these activities, sometimes being parents and family members. This is particularly apparent when these groups allow this behavior to become the norm, or see this as normal behavior. To those involved in the group, they feel pressured to go along with these actions because it is perceived as normal, thus not conforming would be abnormal. It goes unsaid that college students may feel particularly pressured to conform due to their impressionable age and the natural fear of dissent. If surrounded by a group of peers who regularly participate in these activities, they may feel more confident in their decision to do so as well simply because of the natural desire to fit in.

### **Peer Pressure and Comparison**

According to Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), it is natural for humans to compare themselves to others. For example, young adults may compare themselves to the images projected in mass media. If students are constantly shown that drinking and drugs are normal activities amongst college students, they will probably behave it to be true. The same belief can be applied to peers as well. In fact, comparison to peers impacts young adults more than if they compared themselves to someone they have seen in a magazine or on television (Krones, Stice, Batres, & Orjada, 2005). This is due to the fact that it may appear easier to attain the qualities of a peer rather than someone who may seem unrealistic. Furthermore, most people have everyday interactions with peers as opposed to media figures and may consider peers to be more relevant for self-evaluation (Krones, Stice, Batres & Orjada, 2005). This can be especially prevalent in college students amongst their peers. It is very likely that college students may feel pressured to behave a certain way because of those surrounding them who they inadvertently compare themselves to. For example, if a student feels inadequate compared to someone who may be involved in drugs and alcohol, they may feel the need to also become involved in these activities to receive acceptance. In addition, individuals are less likely to compare themselves to those who seem dissimilar (Krones, Stice, Batres & Orjada, 2005). Thus, those who compare themselves to others within the same peer group may feel mass amounts of pressure to go along with their thoughts and ideas, even if they are negative. Ultimately, it may not necessarily be about what the group says to pressure others into certain activities, but how the individual sees them and how others will view them if they refuse to conform. Compared to their surrounding peers who advocate this behavior, they may feel as if they have no other choice but to agree.

## **Sensation Seeking**

Contrary to the belief that peer pressure directly influences the behaviors of college students, others believe it is dependent on an individual's personality. Sensation seeking is defined by an effort to achieve intense experiences and the willingness to take these risks in order to gain these types of experiences (Zuckerman, 1979). This trait was found to be a strong predictor in many risk taking activities that are common amongst college students such as smoking, alcohol and drug use, drinking and driving and risky sexual behavior (Sheer & Cline, 1994). It is also said that high sensation seekers underestimate the risks associated with substance abuse, specifically alcohol, and do not see it as unsafe behavior (Zuckerman, 1979). Parent and Newman (1999) examined the role of sensation seeking in alcohol use among college women with the goal of determining whether sensation seeking mediates the effects of gender on alcohol use. They discovered that these behaviors were similar between men and women in terms of using alcohol to achieve this sensation. Although this study was primarily focused on the use of alcohol in order for sensation seekers to reach satisfaction, it prompts us to believe that there may simply be a difference in personality types. Those who are more likely to be sensation seekers are also more likely to participate in such behavior; thus being more susceptible to peer pressure. In this case, college students are not simply impacted by those surrounding them but instead it is seen as more of a personal choice. Those who are deemed as sensation seekers are most likely going to partake in such behavior. Those who do not obtain this personality type might not feel the need to, furthermore they may not feel peer pressured into situations because they do not desire this "sensation."

Ultimately, it can be determined that there are a multitude of reasons for college students to be pressured into self-destructive activities. Research has proven that there are many underlying factors that contribute to this behavior other than environmental influences. Although images produced in the media and the stereotypical encouragement from close friends impacts an individual's decision making, there are many, more personal, underlying causes that seem to play an even larger role. It appears that a person is more likely to gravitate towards groups of people who have similar interests. Unfortunately, these interests may not always be positive. Self-esteem looks to be a recurring theme that sometimes leads to insecurity and sensation seeking behaviors, causing students to not only desire the ability to conform in whatever way possible, but in a way that might satisfy their psychological concerns. It can be said that college students specifically may indulge in these activities on a more regular basis as compared to adults in their 30's or so on, but possibly because they are unable to address these underlying issues. After all, these behaviors appear to be the "norm" for young adults. After my findings, I do not believe that peer pressure amongst college students even necessarily relates to the idea that young adults are impressionable. It seems that, for whatever reason, some individuals are possibly more prone to partake in such activities based upon the way they view themselves, their upbringing and their own personal desires. Those with corresponding tendencies are more likely to form friendships, thus the behavior will most likely continue until the person decides that change is necessary, as opposed to being "pressured" into it.

### **Goals of Research**

For my study, I wanted to take a closer look into what factors, if any, played a role in the pressures among college students at our University. I wanted to discover if students on campus felt pressured by their peers, or if the norms of drinking and drug abuse were the cause of underlying influences. Due to time constraints, I wanted to focus mainly on the pressure that Marshall students felt directly from their peers and the people they surround themselves with. Based on whether students felt pressured, further research could be done to understand if any other outside influences had an impact on their decisions. My hypotheses was that students did feel pressured by others to participate in drinking and drug related activities simply because it is "expected" of them. Due to the influence of the media and the images or ideas surrounding college life, it is typical that drinking and using drugs is seen as a commonality. Previous research proves that there may be other reasons college students end up taking part in these activities, such as media influence, parental guidance and the fear of fitting in. It can be assumed that because this is seen as normal, students may be pressured by others without being fully aware that it is happening. For example, if a student drinks or uses drugs with their friends when they do not necessarily feel like doing so, it can be assumed that the person in question is being influenced by others. I wanted my research results to ask specific questions that would directly entail if the students felt compelled to drink and/or use drugs because of their peers or if they felt as if they were able to make their own decisions without the pressure of others.

By doing this research and proving or disproving my theory, I hope to draw attention to the idea that peer pressure is not only something that happens to middle school and high school students. We sometimes forget that college students are still

extremely impressionable, and college is most likely the first experience young adults have outside of their families home. They are no longer being watched and monitored by a group of people that genuinely care about their wellbeing. College can be a trying time for most, especially if they are at a school away from home where they may not know many people and their surroundings are new. It is natural instinct to want to be liked and fit in with the crowd. College students are more than likely still searching for a sense of self and confidence. They are not as likely to stand up for their own thoughts and morals if others are not behaving the same way. It is much easier to go along with others and seem “normal.” If anything, students at this time simply want to have friends. They risk being disliked and losing friends by not participating in the activities that they do, not to mention that said activities are usually stereotyped as “cool.”

Once students are aware that they may be being influenced by the people the surround themselves with, they will find it easier to make their own decisions and not go along with the ideas of others. Drinking and drug abuse can become a serious issue, especially among college students. Unfortunately, this can happen without the person even realizing they have a chance to take control of their own actions and decisions. While decreasing the use of drugs and alcohol on college campuses would probably take a much longer time to achieve, creating awareness is the first step in allowing young adults to realize that there are alternatives. There are certain cases where students will begin drinking alcohol and using drugs recreationally and it turns into a habit that they cannot kick or a gateway to other, more severe substances. While this is not something that always occurs, there is always the possibility that it may. Stopping this process in college when students are still extremely impressionable is one of the best ways to put a

stop to the downfalls of what may seem innocent and harmless at the time. Young adults will also learn at an early age that there are long lasting positives to being able to take responsibility for your choices without feeling as though they were imposed upon you.

### **My Research**

I wanted my research to focus mainly on freshmen students. I thought that these were the students that would be the most honest and most likely to remember if they were pressured by others. There was the chance that by giving the survey to upper class students, they may not have realized if they felt pressured into decisions. I wanted my research to be as accurate as possible. I also thought that a quick survey would gage the most results. My survey questions were short, concise and easy to understand. The survey itself only took about 5-10 minutes in all. I wanted to retain as many responses I could. My survey questions focused mainly on whether students felt as if they had been pressured by others to do either drugs or use alcohol. I asked some other questions that could lead into whether there are outside sources involved just to be sure that students were feeling pressure directly from campus life rather than hereditary or personal influences. While as many students did not take the survey as I had hoped, the responses still proved that peer pressure in college is a prominent issue that needs to be addressed.

### **Survey Results**

My survey results were very interesting and gave some detailed insight into the idea that peer pressure is still prominent in college life. The survey showed that most of the students who drank or used drugs felt pressured by their peers to do so. None of those who took the survey said that they had felt this way sometimes, rather that they had either felt pressured or did not. The same amount of students who claimed to have been

pressured into drinking specifically said that they had been influenced by their friends to drink even when they did not necessarily feel like doing so. This means that students not only felt as if they were pressured by those around them, but they felt as if they had to partake in this activity for some underlying reason. This can open the door for future researchers to discover why students felt the need to do something that they did not want, simply because they felt coerced into doing so. It is possible that the student may have felt ostracized and excluded if they did not participate. On the other hand, all of those who took the survey said that their friends would not view them differently if they decided to not drink. Perhaps this feeds in to the idea that students may not realize that they are being pressured by outside influences. Students may be so impressionable that while they may wish to believe their friends would not judge them, they still do so even when they do not feel like it. Thus, students feel that there will be some sort of repercussion if they decided to say they did not want to drink. None of the students who took my survey admitted to using drugs, which while there is no way to be certain, is still a positive because it appeared that others who took the survey answered truthfully.

Another interesting fact that I pulled from my results was that students who said that they had drank before attending college were also more likely to say that they drank once attending college. There is a chance that since this lifestyle is a normality for them, they bring that with them to college where they may find it acceptable and something that is not uncommon. It would be easy for these students to view those who did not grow up in the same fashion as abnormal. Also, I had expected that students who claimed to have not drank before college and whose family members did not drink to say that they had experimented with it in college, the opposite occurred. Those who responded “no” to

drinking before college said that they did not feel pressured to do so when they arrived. There is the possibility that this is because those who do not experiment with alcohol may tend to surround themselves with people who feel the same. Young adults are usually directly influenced by their close friends, so it ultimately depends on who they are surrounding themselves with and if they share the same thoughts about drinking. They are probably more accustomed to a lifestyle without partying or drinking, so it is not something that even occurs or is brought up.

Lastly, all students responded that they were capable of making their own decisions. I found this very interesting because while they claimed to have been pressured by others to consume alcohol at times when they did not feel like doing so, they felt as though it was their decision to do it anyway. This proves that students are unaware that they are being influenced by others since they are not being outwardly forced to do so, they assume that it is their decision. In reality, if they felt comfortable and confident in making their own decisions, they would more than likely be able to say “no” when asked to do something they do not want to do. I was somewhat surprised by the results of my survey. I expected some of the data and responses would be contradicting, which helps further prove my hypotheses. On the other hand, I did not expect so many respondents to admit that they had felt pressured by their peer at some point and were so influenced by others that they decided to drink against their better judgment.

### **Conclusions from Survey**

Due to the results of my survey, it can be said that hereditary and environmental factors play a role in whether students feel pressured or not. It is clear that drinking is something that is normalized on college campuses that can lead to very dangerous results.

While it may seem harmless at the time, there are many cases where college students and drinking get out of hand. It can lead to abuse, of not only the product but of others, that can impact the lives of these young adults forever. Peer pressure may not always appear to be serious, but it definitely is. It is also apparent that students feel as though they make their own decisions when they are clearly being influenced. I think drawing attention to this fact is very important. Being able to make decisions for oneself this early on in life is something that should be applauded instead of looked down upon. Encouraging students to be more aware that they are being influenced by others can be the small steps to the beginning of change on a much larger scale. If more research is done and more people paid attention to the fact that students face more pressure in college than early on in life, it can alter the future for some. There are no programs or studies that specifically target peer pressure in students 18 years or older, proving that it is a subject that is completely ignored and overlooked.

### **Areas for Improvement**

If I had the chance to do this survey again or continue on my research, I would look further into the idea that the media plays a large role in the idea that drinking and drug abuse is something that is seen as normal on college campuses. More specifically, the media has influenced later generations more than those early on. It is possible that drinking is more common now because of how it is depicted in the media to those who are now in college, or it is possible that it just depends on the person. I think more research into this idea would be very interesting and beneficial. I would have also liked to look more into the idea that students feel as if they need to fit in. Especially in situations where students are new and may not have a lot of friends, drinking can make the situation

seem less awkward. This could also be the reason that students may drink even when they do not feel like it, not just because they were pressured to do so. I would have also liked to broaden my sample for the survey. For example, I would have liked to survey students from other colleges to see if they had the same responses and then compared them all. It is possible that some students may feel more inclined to partake in drinking because of their area and if it is common across all campuses.

Overall, I believe my research shed some much needed light on an issue that has never been studied in full. My hope is to create some sort of awareness for those in or going to college so that they can be more aware of whether they are being influenced or not by their peers or if there is an underlying issue that they need to focus on within themselves. Of course, drinking and drug use can always be recreational, but there are a lot of instances where it gets out of hand. Students may be more able to recognize when situations are getting out of hand and how to be more responsible for their own decisions. Schools who would decide to make this issue known could result in better academics, a decrease in the idea that drinking and drug use is normal in college and possibly less dropout and higher graduation rate. It is something that should no longer be overlooked as insignificant.

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