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Citation for final published version:

Aresi, Giovanni, Fattori, Francesco, Pozzi, Maura and Moore, Simon Christopher 2018. I am going to make the most out of it! Italian university Credit Mobility Students' social representations of alcohol use during study abroad experiences. *Journal of Health Psychology* 23 (13) , pp. 1649-1568.
10.1177/1359105316666658

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1359105316666658>

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***I am going to make the most out of it!* Italian university Credit Mobility
Students' Social Representations of alcohol use during study abroad
experiences.**

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Journal of Health Psychology

Abstract

The aim was to explore shared representations of alcohol use in students who were to travel abroad to study. Focus group data from Italian students (N = 69) were collected. Analyses used Grounded Theory Methodology and were informed by the four key components of Social Representation Theory (cognition, emotion, attitude and behavioral intentions). The study abroad experience was described as one that would involve an increase in alcohol consumption compared to pre-departure levels. Reasons given included greater social and leisure opportunities involving alcohol, reduced social control, and features of the host country environment. Opportunities to intervene and address risky alcohol use in this group are discussed.

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Keywords:

Students, Study abroad, Alcohol, Social Representations, Qualitative methods, Travel

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Since 1990 the number of European university Credit Mobility Students (CMSs) participating in exchange programmes, including inter-university exchanges and study abroad programs, has significantly increased. The number of students participating in the Erasmus programme, for example, increased from a few thousand in 1987 to over 270,000 in 2012/2013 ([European Commission, 2014](#)). Moreover, opportunities to study abroad outside of the EU are increasingly available through inter-university agreements. While there are known benefits to studying abroad for young people ([for a review, see Stone and Petrick, 2013](#)), few studies have examined the health risks associated with this time abroad, particularly risks involved with alcohol consumption. Research on other young travelling populations such as backpackers, spring breakers and nightlife tourists ([Bellis et al., 2009](#); [Carr, 2002](#); [Neighbors et al., 2011](#); [Lee et al., 2009](#); [Josiam et al., 1998](#); [Sönmez et al., 2006](#)) suggests that when young people are abroad situational disinhibition, a need to socialize, and a generally hedonistic and less socially restrained outlook contributes to an increase in risky behaviour. Consistently, CMSs also experience alcohol-related negative consequences and engage in heavier alcohol consumption while abroad ([XXX et al., in press](#); [XXX et al., 2016](#); [Hummer et al., 2010](#); [Pedersen et al., 2010](#)). However, little is known on the meaning of alcohol to students travelling abroad, a need that is addressed here.

Perceptions regarding peers' drinking behaviour

One influence on study abroad students' alcohol use while abroad is their beliefs about abroad alcohol consumption by their student peers ([XXX et al., in press](#)). Generally, peers' consumption is overestimated ([Perkins, 2002](#); [Perkins and Berkowitz, 1986](#)) and particularly by members of specific subgroups such as fraternities and sororities ([LaBrie et al., 2008b](#); [Lewis and Neighbors, 2007](#); [Suls and Green, 2003](#)). This relationship extends to study abroad students' pre-departure beliefs about peer alcohol use with the degree of overestimation positively associated with CMSs' own levels of consumption while abroad ([Pedersen et al., 2009](#)). Only one study ([Smith and Klein, 2010](#)), however, has investigated students' beliefs beyond simple perceptions and descriptive norms and considered the *meaning* of the drinking experience. This study of American female college students found that participants believed alcohol use was part of the cultural experience when abroad and that those who consumed more alcohol were likely to describe alcohol as a mean through which behavioural constraints could be loosened in social gatherings. The current study explores representations of alcohol consumption during study abroad experiences for both male and female students and uses Social Representation Theory (SRT), a framework that has been successfully used to contextualize socially constructed concepts related to health behaviours and illness, to inform analyses and guide discussion.

Social Representation Theory

SRT ([Moscovici, 1961](#)) states that people who belong to a social group will share and contribute to the co-construction and conceptualisation of social objects. These social representations (SRs) are typically defined as a system of ideas, practices, images and values that imbues social objects with cultural meaning. They arise through interpersonal relations, communication and conversations among people, and are informed by media influences and the cultural history of the group. They help people comprehend the world and communicate with other members of the social group.

SRT focuses on how lay knowledge is generated and influenced within the social environment and how it therefore contributes to social norms that in turn guide behaviour. SRs serve five social functions ([Purkhardt, 1993](#)). First, they establish order in social contexts and facilitate the control and regulation of behaviour; second, they facilitate communication by affording people categories and common codes to select and classify social objects (e.g., justice, sexuality, human rights, violence, money); third, they delimit and consolidate groups; fourth, they model processes of socialization that start in parent-child relationships; and, finally, they make familiar what is unfamiliar through assimilating unknown concepts into a known social reality.

Within conversations and relationships people attribute features and meanings to objects in order to make them a part of their group's social world ([Wagner et al., 1999](#)). Knowledge is therefore shared and co-constructed ([Staerklé et al., 2011](#); [Pozzi et al., 2014](#)). These shared representations are composed of four elements: cognitions (beliefs), attitudes, emotions and behavioural intentions ([Palmonari and Emiliani, 2009](#)). SRT therefore facilitates the investigation of psychosocial phenomena and is used here to explore CMSs' representations of alcohol consumption during study abroad periods.

Aims and Method

Focus group data from prospective CMSs' were collected to describe students' representations of alcohol consumption during the study abroad experience. All prospective outbound students on credit mobility programmes (mostly the Erasmus) (N=643) at the host university (a university in the north of Italy) were eligible to participate and students were recruited through direct contact by telephone. All participants provided written and informed consent. All aspects of the study were approved by Human Research Ethics Committee at XXX. Focus groups lasted 90 to 120 minutes. Discussion was prompted by questions concerning students' expectations about their lifestyle while abroad. A brainstorming session was also included that involved writing information relating to alcohol use on notes that were then attached to a board and subsequently discussed in the

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group ([Peterson and Barron, 2007](#)). The focus groups were hosted in the university and conducted by two trained researchers. Participants were compensated €25 for taking part. A questionnaire was used to collect participants' socio-demographic characteristics and study abroad program details. Six male and six female focus group discussions were conducted before students departed (July 2015, 1st semester; January 2016, 2nd semester). Focus groups were conducted in students' native language, Italian, and transcribed then analysed. Excerpts for publication were translated to English with the original language quotations included as supplementary material.

Transcripts were coded using NVivo (11.0) by authors XX and XX. Grounded Theory (GT) informed analyses ([Charmaz, 2006](#)) whereby a recursive and iterative process of data analysis was used with the aim of saturating emergent categories. The initial stages of the study was used to learn how students describe the target SR. In subsequent steps more analytic conceptualizations of the research material emerged. The final stage involved organising conceptually-relevant themes into higher-order categories consistent with SRT (i.e., beliefs, attitudes, emotions and behavioural intentions). For exposition, relevant quotes from each main category were selected and are presented here with participants study identification, gender, discipline of study and country of destination.

Results

A total of 69 prospective CMSs participated. Mean age for the entire sample was 22.1 years ($SD=1.34$), 53.6% were female. Course of study were bachelor degree (50.7%) and master degree (49.3%). Social sciences (e.g., anthropology, economics, political science, sociology, psychology) (53.6%) and the humanities (e.g., language studies, literature, arts, philosophy) (27.5%) were the two most prevalent disciplines. Most students lived with their family (58.8%), 25% lived in a shared flat, 10.3% in university accommodation and the remaining students resided in their own apartment or with a host family.

Beliefs: alcohol, socialization and leisure

Socialization and leisure time were central to the anticipated study abroad experience. CMSs usually travel alone and expect to meet a large number of people from different countries during the first weeks. Having a limited amount of time abroad motivated students to travel and to take advantage of other opportunities that helped them get to know the host country's culture and traditions. They were also motivated to socialise. Having a finite time period abroad encouraged them to be active and go out a lot: '[I wrote on the post-it] *'drinking to excess' because you spend a very limited amount of time in the foreign country, far from home, and therefore you strive to make the most out of it'* (#4, male, Economics, Belgium). Further, socialization was *'amplified because when you are there,*

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you know you have few opportunities and limited time. While at home with your friends you know you can meet them anytime... if it is not tonight, it will be in a year' (#266, female, Finance, Switzerland). Alcohol is expected to enhance the time spent with new friends and to facilitate doing *'crazy stuff, yes, crazy in a positive sense...to hang out with friends, to have memories of things that you would have never had done if you were totally sober'* (#23, female, Finance, Mexico). Alcohol was considered pivotal in the creation of new friendships because it loosens behavioural constraints and eases social contact with new people in unfamiliar situations (e.g., talking in a foreign language). One participant (#14, male, Economics, Australia) stated that *'drinking is somehow related to disinhibition, not because one is unable to have fun without it, but because one may be shy [...] and it helps if you are shy'*. The risk of heavy drinking is therefore present *'because you drink all the time. You need to know new people and you are pushed to go out at night a lot...and if you go out, you drink... a beer, then two, three'* (#179, male, Management, Spain).

Students expected to socialise more frequently and consume more low-cost, low-quality alcohol. High volumes of low-cost alcoholic drinks were inherently part of the representation of Erasmus parties because students have limited financial resources: *'Low cost drinks are popular among Erasmus students because you need to spend your money carefully. You don't get what you usually get at home, because the more quantity the less*

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quality' (#18, female, Psychology, the Netherlands). These expectations were informed by narratives of past study abroad students and through observing study abroad students in their home city. Students, for example, discussed how a drinking habit typical of Spanish youth has been adopted by many study abroad students and is now a part of the Erasmus students' representation of alcohol use, as are drinking games such as beer-pong. In Spain, young people often congregate in public spaces to socialize and consume alcohol before going on to a bar, a tradition referred to as the *botellón*, similar to pre-loading in other contexts. Simple activities that involve alcohol in social events consolidate group membership and are easy to engage with, irrespective of students' language and social skills. Alcohol is therefore considered a central component of the social experience while abroad and accordingly participants felt that there would be more pressure to consume alcohol during the first weeks upon their arrival. This was further motivated by the greatest pre-departure fear: social isolation. Students drank "*to survive. That is because I have the impression that during the first few days you know nobody...everybody drinks a lot during the Erasmus, especially in Spain, and it becomes almost a requirement. You can't do as you were home where you have many friends and can simply say you don't feel like drinking*" (#32, male, Literature, Spain).

Beliefs: other factors influencing drinking

The representation of a CMS was defined by frequent alcohol consumption and occasional excessive consumption. Although most participants denied this applied to them, many described factors that would be expected to facilitate excessive consumption. One was the lack of social constraints that would normally inhibit excessive alcohol consumption in their home environment. Many participants cohabitated with their immediate family and studying abroad was in part motivated by the desire to be more independent. In addition to parental supervision other constraints included the next door neighbour, landlords and peers. The implications associated with excessive alcohol use were therefore muted while abroad and there were few long-term consequences associated with such behaviour.

'When you return home at night you do not need to hide from your parents... my parents are pretty normal, as are many others, but I will definitely have fewer restrictions' (#35, male, Economics, Sweden).

'Even if you do not live with your parents, you cannot have a big party in your apartment because you live in that apartment and you expect to live there until you graduate. You can't just have a party, tear the apartment apart and call the landlord saying you made a mess. But while on Erasmus you can since you will leave in a few months' (#179, male, Management, Spain).

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The price of alcohol while abroad was an additional factor that students expected would influence alcohol consumption. Students travelling to countries where the cost of living was significantly lower compared to their home country expected to drink more because *'cheap alcohol makes you drink more'* (#265, female, Law, Portugal). Furthermore, students were aware that there would be promotions including cheap alcohol that were designed to attract international students: *'at all Erasmus nights alcohol is very cheap and people drink much more'* (#266, female, Finance, Switzerland). Another example of a constraint that would not apply while abroad involved driving a motor vehicle to go out at night. Most participants did not expect to drive while abroad: *'I mean I have many limitations here, I often have to drive and therefore I limit myself'* (#7, female, Language studies, Germany).

Characteristics of the host country were also expected to influence the alcoholic beverages consumed and where young students would socialize. Some destinations were stereotypically associated with heavier drinking patterns: *'in Spain there is a different drinking culture, I believe... people drink to get drunk!'* (#38, female, Literature, Spain) and, for example, Belgium was specifically associated with beer. Participants felt obliged to follow local customs in this respect: *'abroad I will change my drinking habits...I'm going to*

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a country where beer is delicious' (#172, female, Economics and Management of the Artistic Heritage, Belgium).

Although participants cited factors that they expected would encourage their use of alcohol while abroad, they also stated that a lack of social control would require them to be more responsible as individuals and as students.

'I will need to manage myself in respect of university activities. I mean, the next morning I will have to go to class. [...] I go there to study [...] and I will have to set some limits [...]if I have to study the next day it is better I don't overdo it too much' (#1, male, Banking, Hungary).

'Studying abroad means that a sense of responsibility and self-accountability is required. Freedom is beautiful, but you need to be able to manage yourself' (#20, female, Economics, France)

Attitudes, emotions, and behavioural intention

Alcohol use while abroad was expected to be positively associated with social and leisure activities with peers. Even some of the negative consequences associated with alcohol were considered a natural part of the experience: *'a friend of mine gained a lot of weight [because of drinking]... but it was a beautiful experience anyway'* (#21, female, Political

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Science, Argentina). Negative attitudes and emotions arose when they discussed ways of drinking that were considered not normative or even unacceptable. Participants, for example, had negative attitudes towards solitary drinking: '*you drink with others, not by yourself [...] drinking by yourself is a bit sad*' (#31, female, Language studies, USA). Similarly, exceeding certain social boundaries and the misuse of alcohol were considered socially unacceptable, particularly for women.

'I cannot stand those girls that reach a state where they are embarrassing, really embarrassing. I do drink a lot, but, if you drink and get wasted, don't drink! I have girlfriends that cannot take any alcohol and I don't understand why I should keep an eye on them while they are lying on the floor' (#22, Female, Literature, Spain).

Female participants also expressed concerns that were not shared by men, in particular the lack of a reliable and supportive social network when in need. Furthermore, being in a foreign country might mean students may have to describe events to the police or other emergency services using a language they had limited knowledge of. In consequence, female participants expected that a greater level of attention and self-awareness than in their home country would be required, especially during the first weeks of the study abroad experience when relationships would be new and trust limited.

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'It is the fear of being left behind [...] when I go out at night here, I know that some of my friends will bring me back home, I know they wouldn't leave me by myself. While on Erasmus I will constantly wonder whether I am with people that would leave me behind, whether I am with people I cannot trust. That is something that scares me' (#18, female, Psychology, Netherlands).

'In a foreign country, if you lose your self-control you are not surrounded by friends [...] I will need to be in control of myself and of the situation' (#33, female, Language studies, Spain).

Being unfamiliar with the host country's social norms and legislative environment were concerns for both male and female participants. Many admitted possessing limited knowledge for what would be considered socially acceptable or legal in the host country.

'I thought about the police. If I lose control of myself, the fear is that I don't know how things work there. I have no idea whether they are strict or not' (#25, male, Economics, Poland).

'I am thinking about the things that you are allowed to do... for example, just being a bit tipsy when I am in a foreign country and where I do not know the law' (#23, female, Economics, Mexico).

Discussion

Study abroad students acquired their pre-departure alcohol-specific expectations for the study abroad period through their observation of study abroad students in their home town and from narratives generated by past study abroad students. The emergent social representation for alcohol was one where alcohol enables socialisation during the time abroad. In general, students and young people intentionally use alcohol to become disinhibited. Consistent with findings reported here, disinhibition is believed to promote social interaction, enhance enjoyment and in turn consolidate positive memories ([XXX and XXX, 2016](#); [Hunt et al., 2014](#); [Kuntsche and Cooper, 2010](#)). However, the study abroad experience also brought additional unique features. Study abroad students reported that the limited time in a foreign environment increased the desire to socialise and so avoid social isolation. There was also a desire to fit in and some study abroad students even suggested that alcohol could help with language barriers by promoting social activities that did not involve language, such as drinking games ([Zamboanga et al., 2014](#)). Therefore, the representation of alcohol was one that study abroad students believed would help them to make the most of their intercultural experience.

The dominant approach in research looking to understand the relationship between beliefs and alcohol consumption has been the social norms approach ([Perkins, 2002](#); [Perkins and](#)

[Berkowitz, 1986](#)). This posits a relationship between alcohol use and the exaggerated beliefs about alcohol consumption levels in other students. Social Representation Theory, the approach adopted here, moves away from unidimensional constructs and so provides a richer perspective on how alcohol is constructed in terms of cognition (beliefs), emotions, attitudes and behavioural intentions. Attitudes were positive, alcohol was viewed as something that enabled socialisation which in turn produced positive emotions, for example “fun,” and is consistent with other studies of young people ([Kuntsche and Cooper, 2010](#)). These were enhanced by the behavioural intention to “make the most” of the study abroad period. Even the negative consequences typically associated with alcohol, such as a hangover, were reinterpreted as a natural part of the overall experience and thus part of a pleasant social experience ([Mallett et al., 2008](#)). Negative attitudes and emotions arose only when participants discussed forms of alcohol use that were neither considered normal nor acceptable (i.e., solitary drinking or heavy drunkenness), views that are typical of young Italians ([Nordlund and Østhus, 2013](#); [XXX and XXX, 2016](#)).

Contextual features also emerged as potential determinants associated with alcohol use. Consistent with studies in similar areas ([Chaloupka et al., 2002](#); [Kuo et al., 2003](#)), alcohol promotions that target study abroad students and the availability of low cost alcohol were associated with greater expected alcohol use for study abroad students. Informal social

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control also emerged as a feature. The age at which young people leave home is increasing across Europe and is higher in Southern Europe ([Eurostat, 2015](#)). This suggests that the study abroad experience is the first time many students are free from key informal controls, such as their parents. A less supervised environment was, in fact, associated with greater alcohol use during the study abroad experience ([X et al., 2014](#)). In addition, students expected to experience pressure from peers to consume alcohol socially. Thus, the study abroad experience is not only a change of location but one that also involved significant changes in opportunities for alcohol use that were strongly associated with a motivation to socialise, a feature that is a characteristic of students ([Sher and Rutledge, 2007](#)) and young people ([Kuntsche et al., 2005](#)) generally.

Integrating the research presented here with broader intervention development initiatives could be facilitated through adopting context and event-specific social norms feedback interventions ([Lee et al., 2014](#); [Neighbors et al., 2009](#)). These could be used to challenge perceptions and expectations concerning alcohol use and the study abroad experience.

Beliefs about the level of alcohol consumed by peers are typically exaggerated ([Brett et al., 2016](#)) and results from brief online interventions that correct these beliefs suggest they may be successful for at least credit mobility students from North America ([Pedersen, 2012](#)).

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Socialisation is critical for travelling students, alcohol enhances social occasions and protects against social isolation. These social pressures could be targeted by brief personalized feedback interventions incorporating study abroad specific drinking motives ([Canale et al., 2015](#); [LaBrie et al., 2008a](#)). Furthermore, host institutions could include alcohol-focused preventive interventions and offer guidance for in-bound foreign students during orientation sessions at arrival ([Riordan et al., 2015](#)). Moreover, host institutions could provide opportunities for inbound students to realise their goals of cultural enrichment and socialisation through hosting events that do not involve alcohol. Finally, since most students appear to be unfamiliar with host country processes at pre-departure, such interventions may also focus on providing basic information regarding what is considered socially acceptable in the host country (e.g., acceptability of public drunkenness) and the legislation surrounding alcohol use (e.g., public drinking laws). The current study does have limitations. The study sample size is modest and involved students from only one country. Results may not therefore generalise. Moreover, measures of alcohol use were not collected and therefore any relationship between social representations and actual drinking are unknown.

Conclusion

Ongoing work is beginning to highlight alcohol as a dominant feature of students' study abroad experience. The frequency of alcohol consumption and the likelihood of heavy episodic drinking increase when credit mobility students travel abroad ([XXX et al., in press](#)) and social drinking motives predict alcohol-related negative consequences among American study abroad students ([Pedersen et al., 2012](#)). The current work is the first time social representation theory has been used to explore how alcohol is socially represented and demonstrates study abroad students use alcohol to make the most of their experience abroad. Notably, these expectations are acquired vicariously and are not based on direct experience. Alcohol use could therefore be interpreted as self-perpetuating, in that students preparing to travel abroad are informed by students currently visiting their home country. When they subsequently travel abroad they will in turn inform other students preparing to travel abroad. This suggests that beliefs are amenable to change and highlights how social representation theory can play a constructive role in the development of measures designed to target alcohol-related harm in this group.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to XXX of the university XXX (Italy) for the support in conducting the present research study. We also thank the student research assistants XXX and XXX (XXX) for their contribution to the research study.

Funding

Blinded for review

Declaration of conflicting interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹This study is part of a larger study on European study abroad students' health behaviours.

A mixed methods longitudinal study (pre-departure and post-return focus groups and questionnaires) is being carried out at the principal investigator's institution on both fall and spring semester study abroad students. Post-return data collection is being carried out at the time of writing. Students are being surveyed on their drinking behaviour as well as on predictors including demographics, study abroad specific factors, perceptions regarding different reference group peers' drinking behaviour (descriptive norms) and attitudes (injunctive norms), and measures of acculturation and adjustment in the host country.

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