The Social Functions of College Drinking: Pregaming, Priming, and Protecting the Liminoid Experience

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ABSTRACT

The Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study has concluded that, on average, one in three college students abuses alcohol regularly. However, while highlighting potential risks, academic literature largely neglects the social functions students derive from consuming alcohol. College represents an important milestone in an individual's life and is characterized by what Turner (1969) called liminoid experiences, which involve a temporary suspension of social status, at bars, clubs, concerts, festivals, and college parties, often closely connected to alcohol consumption. This paper explores how women students' practice of "pregaming," that is, drinking alcohol in smaller groups before attending a social event such as a party, enables individuals to achieve the liminoid state while also providing opportunities to resist potential negative consequences of intoxication. College women use pregaming to build a support network with close friends, enabling them to ensure their physical safety. Beyond the integrity of their bodies, women also ensure that their actions during the liminoid experience of a college party are consistent with ideas they have of their personal identity. Although they temporarily suspend their social and personal identities during college parties, women prevent unwanted permanent changes of their sense of self by holding each other accountable to rules they establish during the pregame.

Keywords: liminoid; alcohol consumption; college students; women

At 10:25pm on a Saturday night, I found out that Sarah was able to drink a cranberry-vodka concoction while standing on her hands singing the alphabet backwards. Sarah had invited me earlier that day to come to her room to "pregame" before a party that was happening in the senior residences, the Townhouses, that night. At 8pm, I knocked on her door to find her and three other women sitting on the floor in front of a full-length mirror they flipped sideways, applying various shades of glitter to their eyes. Scattered on the floor were countless jeans, dresses, tops, and skirts that had made it into the final round of an elaborate outfit selection process for every one of the women. What started as a heated group discussion about appropriate coordinated attire for the evening (the consensus fell on denim skirts and crop tops) quickly evolved into an open bar operated out of Sarah's mini refrigerator. Sarah's friends brought spiked Seltzer, and she drank something she poured together from strawberry vodka, lemon juice, ginger ale, and cranberry juice, while I stuck to a can of flavored non-alcoholic seltzer water.

After drinks were settled for the evening, Sarah suggested that we should play a drinking game, since she perceived that "just sitting in a dorm room and drinking would be depressing." Soon after, we started playing "truth or dare," which, when applied as a drinking game, was heavily centered around daring each other to finish our drinks in the most entertaining way possible. While I participated with my water, after a time Sarah's friends proclaimed they were now "comfortably buzzed." That qualified us as ready to attend the party that was supposed to start at 9pm but at which "nobody will hang out until 11." While Sarah made a third round of the vodka drink and the other women

opened another spiked Seltzer, all of us were on our phones. Sarah and her friends flipped through Snapchat stories to see what the rest of our small campus was up to that Saturday night, while I took field notes on my phone. Suddenly, one of the woman's eyes widened as she declared "Do *not*, under any circumstances, let me make out with Nick again, I just saw him on Jack's Snapchat story and he's at their townhouse to pregame right now." That inspired the rest of the group to make their own rules about the evening, before we would, as Amy said, "not be ourselves anymore." Sarah vowed to not dance on the kitchen table (again), while another girl made rules about not texting the cute guy she knew from her Psychology class while drunk. Everyone promised to hold each other to their individual standards, and that concluded a successful pregame. Putting on our shoes, we headed out to the party.

The consumption of alcohol among college students in an undergraduate setting in the United States has been studied primarily through the lens of public health, specifically, investigating the risks of binge drinking and alcohol dependency (see for example Read et al. 2003; Slutske 2005; Wechsler and Nelson 2008; Mallet et al. 2012). Additionally, anthropological research has focused on expressive (and oppressive) heteronormative fusions of alcohol and masculinity, such as hazing rituals (Johnson 2011) or sexual assault (Sanday 1996). The role of pregaming, however, especially for college women, has often been explored as merely part of the social event that constitutes a college night out, not as a separate entity with functions that alter the night as a whole. In contrast, during my research, women employed pregaming as a distinct stage of activity to navigate the promises and potential hazards of a college party. This paper focuses on the practice of pregaming among female college students, exploring how they create intentional bonds with their close friends during pregaming in order to ensure personal and community safety at parties, and how pregaming facilitates a liminoid experience – that is, a temporary suspension of social status through shared limit experiences, as I explain in more detail later – through a shared feeling of intoxication and shared norms for the evening to come.

Ethnographic Setting

This research was conducted at St. Lawrence University, a private liberal arts college in upstate New York, May through July 2019. The student population was then about 2,500, with a 55% to 45% female to male ratio (St. Lawrence University, 2019). St. Lawrence University is located in a rural community in the village of Canton, with the vast majority of students living in some form of on-campus housing.

Despite being a small school, St. Lawrence University has a vibrant social life. The campus resembles a park, with wooden benches under maple trees and winding paths connecting academic and dormitory buildings. Students spend time outside as much as the weather and long, harsh North Country winters permit. Winter temperatures plunge well below freezing for weeks on end. This means that for much of the academic year, social life takes place indoors, with most popular drinking and partying locations being mostly in student dormitories. While during the day, most students might meet their friends in the Sullivan Student Center to chat, complete their homework, or grab lunch from the café downstairs, in the evenings, students are usually found socializing in their dorms or attending one of the venues on campus that play music and host college parties. Attending a college party at some point during their four-year undergraduate career is something most students at St. Lawrence University cannot avoid, whether they consume alcohol or not. Most of my participants went to the Java Barn, a garage space with a stage that hosts life-music events once a week.

Students most often described partying at the Senior Townhouse residences, small apartment buildings that house about six students per unit. Each townhouse has a kitchen and living room space that permits students to host more people than a typical dorm room. The townhouses are also arranged to create an outdoor quadrangle that is often used as a partying space during the warmer months, when students leave their back door to the quad open, which allows for mingling and socializing in different townhouses. Another popular partying spot for students are the residential buildings with suites, small, apartment-like dorms where five to seven people share a living room, kitchen, and bathroom. The suites, and especially the townhouses, represent inherently liminal, which is to say, "in-between" or "threshold" spaces. They are not only located on the edge of campus, furthest away from any of the academic buildings, but they are also designed to look like apartments rather than dorms, making them more self-contained than the other buildings that have dorm rooms, shared bathrooms and long hallways. In their design, resembling non-college living while being embedded in the college social scene, they are liminal since they are neither the sheltered college dorm with Resident Assistants, nor the autonomous apartments or houses of independent adults. They represent an "in-between" kind of living for students, which became clear during my fieldwork as the townhouses were always the second or third party location of the night for students. The Townhouses were sought out specifically when a certain level of intoxication – and suspension of personal identity – was achieved, and therefore serve as a special marker of the liminoid experience.

Methods and Ethical Considerations

I used both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data during my research. Since anthropology is a social science concerned with preserving the complexities and nuances of human interaction, I favoured an ethnographic approach to analysis. This means that instead of placing a central emphasis on the quantitative data I collected in a survey, I drew on those data to support the qualitative data collected through interviews and participant observation. This means that my analysis goes beyond observing patterns of behavior to situate the phenomenon of college alcohol consumption in a theoretical framework that better elucidates what functions alcohol occupies within a residential undergraduate college campus. This stands in contrast to more public health or consumer-focused research, as the primary goal of my project is to understand the culturally specific meanings of

consumption, not necessarily change or stigmatize a group of the student population.

To collect quantitative data, I sent out an online survey (available from author upon request) set up in the Qualtrics platform, recruiting respondents through closed St. Lawrence class Facebook groups as well as by email among students I knew. Participation in the survey was anonymous. At the end of the survey, detached from the survey responses, participants 21 years of age or older could voluntarily provide their email addresses to participate in an interview. Although I had initially aimed to interview participants of all ages to gain a better understanding of age and class-year differences and drinking behavior, I complied with the Institutional Review Board regulations placed on the project, which prevented participation of students too young to legally consume alcohol. In total, 102 students submitted responses to the survey, with 54 female-identifying respondents and 48 male-identifying respondents. The survey enabled me to conduct a statistical analysis of alcohol consumption at St. Lawrence University. I draw on this analysis in a secondary manner in this article, to gain insight into the similarities and differences in responses to questions about alcohol consumption in social settings. The survey also helped prime participants for more in-depth engagement with the study. I posed versions of the survey questions in my interviews (see Appendix 1) in order to gain more in-depth knowledge of the different perspectives around a particular issue. Furthermore, I wanted to use the survey as a tool to make interviews less threatening. By seeing my survey questions, I hoped that potential interviewees would become more familiar with my research topic and have a better idea of the kind of questions I would ask during the interview.

I carried out semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data and to gain insight into the underlying structures that produced the alcohol consumption patterns reflected in the survey. I conducted ten interviews with a cumulative interview time of twelve hours. These semi-structured interviews provided shed light on individual perceptions of consuming alcohol at St. Lawrence. They also gave participants space to narrate personal stories and provide nuanced descriptions of how social relationships are transformed by alcohol. With participants' permission, interviews were recorded and the files stored in a password-protected, deidentified file. Interviews were not transcribed but rather organized and coded in a "topic log" in which the topics, notes, and direct quotes from participants were noted alongside the time on the recording. This allowed me to recognize patterns in the responses of my participants more efficiently than full transcription.

The third research method employed was participant observation. Although most students do not live on campus during the summer, when this research took place, about 50 to 60 students do remain on campus during the summer for research projects, internships or on-campus employment. This provided me with the opportunity to observe students aged 21 or older during their pregames and at the local bar popular among St. Lawrence students, The Hoot Owl. Observations at The Hoot Owl complemented the pregaming research, because they gave me insight into the liminoid experience that pregaming preceded. Participant observation was largely documented with field notes I took on my phone, which is protected with face-recognition. The added security of using a phone with face-recognition prevented other people from gaining access to my fieldnotes, which was especially important given the behaviors students engaged in while vulnerable due to being intoxicated. The notes – entailing bullet-points of descriptions, quotes, and personal interpretations of what I observed – were later secured in a password-protected file on my computer and expanded upon when I got back from a night of observations. Fieldnotes were analyzed in the same way as interviews, using topic logs, to sort fieldnotes by broad theme and enable a coherent analysis.

Pregames were chosen as the focus of this research in part because they are invite-only social events. As such, all participants could be informed about and consent to my participant observation at the pregame beforehand. Participants in the pregame were aware that I, as the researcher, drank little to no alcohol. I chose to put my seltzer in a can sleeve so as not to visually exclude myself further from the

normal pregame proceedings. All participants also consented to me recording events and stories from pregames in my field notes, which I took on my phone.

Aware of the increased challenge of doing research on drinking in such a small, intimate college environment, I took every measure possible to protect the privacy and confidentiality of my participants. In this article, I have changed all names and I include personal details only to the extent where they are necessary to build my analysis. Furthermore, to protect the confidentiality of my participants, the stories I tell here are a combination of elements, such as quotations and descriptive details, from accounts shared with me in interviews or observed by me during my research, a technique also employed by Willis (2019), Ward (2013), and Wertz et al. (2011), among others. A further benefit of this presentation of my data is that I can use a single story to allude to experiences representative of several participants (Willis 2019, 472).

The Rules of the (Pre)Game

Pregaming is always hosted by one member of a social group, usually a close friend group, in their small dorm room. College parties typically start at around 9pm, but peak arrival time is 11pm. Most college women start their pregame around 7 or 8pm, depending on how late they are going to join the party or event they plan to attend. The pregame host is responsible for supplying music and ice for drinks. When other members of the group arrive, the host usually puts on music and the first round of drinks is prepared. Alcohol is often shared, each group member bringing some supplies to distribute throughout the group.

Usually, the alcohol content of beverages increases throughout the evening, starting with canned alcohol like spiked seltzer and escalating to straight shots of hard liquor at the height of the pregame. While sipping on the first drinks, participants debate on clothing for the night, as determined by the event, the season, and what other group members are wearing. After that, the women college students usually apply their make-up, which is why pregaming sites with private bathrooms,

generally found in dorms inhabited by students in their junior or senior years, are preferred.

After everyone is pleased with their appearance for the night, participants usually come together and sit on the ground, the bed, or any other available pieces of furniture in the small dorm rooms. While some groups talk about their past experiences on a night out or take pictures for social media, others play drinking games to speed up the process of intoxication. As all players get increasingly intoxicated, the games usually dissolve as people get caught up in conversations based on personal stories revealed through drinking games, revealed for instance from a daring "never have I ever" statement. Winning is clearly not the objective; the games are instead a means of achieving somewhat equal levels of drunkenness among the members of the group. Once the group decides it is late enough to go to the actual event, usually around 10:30 or 11:00 pm, all members usually down a final drink and then grab a bottle or can to bring to the party.

Creating Intoxicated *Communitas*

Attending a four-year liberal arts college is often described as not only a time of earning a degree, but also a time to mold adolescents into well-rounded and critically thinking adults who will contribute productively to society. As such, in the United States, attending college can be seen as a rite of passage that constitutes a definite exit from childhood and transformation into adulthood. Rites of passage entail the cultural notion that life consists of different stages or statuses, associated with distinct duties and responsibilities.

Rites of passage are usually defined as public events of transition whereby individuals or entire age cohorts go through processes that let them leave a previous status behind and attain a new status (Hylland Eriksen 2001, 63). Turner (1969) dubbed this unique "in between" state a liminal phase, in which individuals occupy a role that is associated neither with cultural values from their previous stage of life nor the life phase after. Liminal phases represent the mid-phase of rites of passage (Turner 1982, 25), and they separate the individual from societal norms and constraints of acceptable behavior

by stripping them of their previous status while they are not yet occupying their new status (Rowe 1998, 47).

This loss in status during liminal phases equalizes individuals, since entire cohorts experience the same temporary loss in status. The resulting "intense comradeship" between individuals undergoing the rite of passage is crucial, according to Turner (1969, 360), in building a social bond that functions outside of ordinary social roles and constitutes a more universal human connection (Turner 1982, 25), which he terms *communitas*. In his study of the Ndembu of Zambia, Turner (1969) argued that liminality is crucial to ensure that individuals are discouraged from the desire to keep resources to themselves, as they will remember the holistic connection they felt with others during the liminal phase even after it is over.

The concept of the liminal phase has become largely impractical in the context of westernized state-level societies, since groups now rarely if ever truly exist "outside" the technologically connected society (Spiegel 2011, 12). In contrast to liminal phases, liminoid moments or spaces are not specific to certain cycles, whether social or biological, and their occurrence is based more on the interest of participants than on ritual obligation (Spiegel 2011, 13). Through separating people from the social structure, liminoid moments involve a temporary suspension of social status, but they do not result in a changed status of individuals, as liminal phases would. Drawing on Spiegel's (2011) discussion of the contemporary distinction between liminal and liminoid, I would argue that college has itself been institutionalized as a defined state of life, instead of representing a liminal phase between childhood and adulthood. Rather than moving together through a liminal phase, students share liminoid experiences during college that do not result in a permanent change in status but constitute temporary withdrawals from the social order to experience the universal bond of *communitas*.

In the case of college students, alcohol consumption is a way to facilitate the liminoid experience. While students experience a structured daily life with regular classes, sports practices and other extracurricular activities,

drinking provides a contrast to this controlled environment, where students can choose to be "out of control." One of my participants, Cathy, called this the "work hard, play hard" mentality:

> In my view, Sunday through Wednesday are the work hard-days at St. Lawrence. I see people working really hard in school and their other commitments. And then Thursday through Saturday people play hard, they let loose, and often alcohol is the way to do so.

Cathy speaks of the work-leisure divide that is characteristic of industrialized societies. The freedom of leisure framed in contrast to a structured work or academic day represents a freedom from responsibilities (Adorno 1991). As one of my other participants described, there is an immense liberty in "just being another drunk college kid at a party." It is this feeling of "letting loose" and suspending personal and social responsibilities that makes college parties liminoid spaces, as students rarely think about future obligations while being intoxicated at a party. While Turner's analysis of rites of passage and the liminal was centered around smaller-scale, non-Western societies, the students' behavior suggests that in modern state-level societies dominated by capitalism, the liminoid as a contrast to focused productivity still occupies a crucial cultural and social role.

The liminoid is often seen as a personal choice compared to the obligation of a liminal rite of passage, but my participant Lilly expressed a certain pressure to drink in college:

> It's almost easier to drink, because it takes some of that anxiety away from awkward social situations. I felt a lot of pressure in my sports team, because the upperclassmen were heavy drinkers, so I was a little intimidated. A lot of our team bonding was centered around drinking.

Lilly saw heavy drinking as a desirable skill for successful socializing that she tried to acquire. In fact, all ten interviewees talked about a pressure to consume alcohol because of their status as college students. At college parties, the kind of behavior perceived as acceptable is often connected to intoxication. When I asked Emily about going to a party without having consumed alcohol, without pregaming, she

said, frowning, "You just don't go to a party sober. You just don't do it." Even though Emily does not give a specific reason as to why being sober at a party is inherently negative, her implicit knowledge of how unacceptable it is triggered the physical reaction of uncomfortable squirming.

This pressure to drink is one of many social norms college students learn as they participate in a complex and multilayered social system that influences their drinking behavior. Social systems are sets of social relations that are reproduced in everyday life through interaction (Hylland Erikson 2001, 71). Social systems heavily influence individuals' drinking behavior, because they dictate which behaviors are acceptable. For example, individuals might have their own moral code of how they engage in alcohol consumption. However, their friend group influences that behavior by rewarding or sanctioning behavior deemed "acceptable." Not attending a party sober is an example of behavior that is deemed "normal" and "necessary" in order to blend in and ultimately successfully participate in the liminoid experience of a college party. Especially on a small campus like St. Lawrence University, being accepted into a social group and establishing close friends are of central importance. In the realm of pregames, students indicated that they would only pregame with close friends, with whom they would also attend a party. Participants would not go to a party alone because it would be "awkward," "lonely," and "an isolating experience." Since it is unacceptable to arrive at a party either alone or sober, it is crucial to drink with close friends during pregaming events to participate successfully in the campus party scene.

Students' perception of how much others drink and how individual college students fit into this perception is highly significant. In the survey, I asked students to indicate how many times a week they personally drank and how many times a week they thought a typical St. Lawrence University student consumes alcohol. As can be seen in Figure 1, students thought their average peer drank more than they did. Students indicated that on average they drink on weekends, while they thought the typical student would drink 3-5 times a week. Fellow

college students are not the only agents shaping students' perception of how college students consume, or ideally should consume, alcohol. Alcohol is regulated by the formal and informal categorization of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, ranging from the legal drinking age to student handbook rules, often based on the status of individuals in the society.

Alcohol is a common catalyst for social bonds. Most of my participants talked about alcohol's effect on building relations, as well as easing discomfort when making social connections. This emotional effect is not unique to college students and can also be found in other societies. Consuming alcoholic beverages or fermented foods with alcohol content is part of most societies and the consumption of alcohol is thus regulated by societal expectations (Gould 2001; Mason 2006; Kunitz 2008; Dudley 2014). Mason's study of health care workers in China describes how consuming alcohol with coworkers during and after work is a crucial "social obligation" to achieve professional advancement in government-employed public health workers in China (Mason 2013, 109). As such, alcohol can be seen as a way of portraying a certain status among both Chinese health care workers and U.S. college students.

With very few abstemious exceptions, drinking at parties is essential for maintaining the status of being a college student, as it ensures the shared participation in intoxicated *communitas*. Performative drinking is important to signal social belonging, as my survey also showed that students at St. Lawrence consistently associated certain alcohols with certain groups of people, such as beer with men. While mingling with other groups during parties is accepted, because the liminoid character equalizes attendees as simply "college students", following the party, students' interactions have consequences for their social life on campus afterwards. This is another way in which students are "betwixt and between" (Turner 1969) as they seek more universal identities as St. Lawrence students and as college students, while navigating a more individual social position – which students carefully construct – in pregame and post-party spaces.
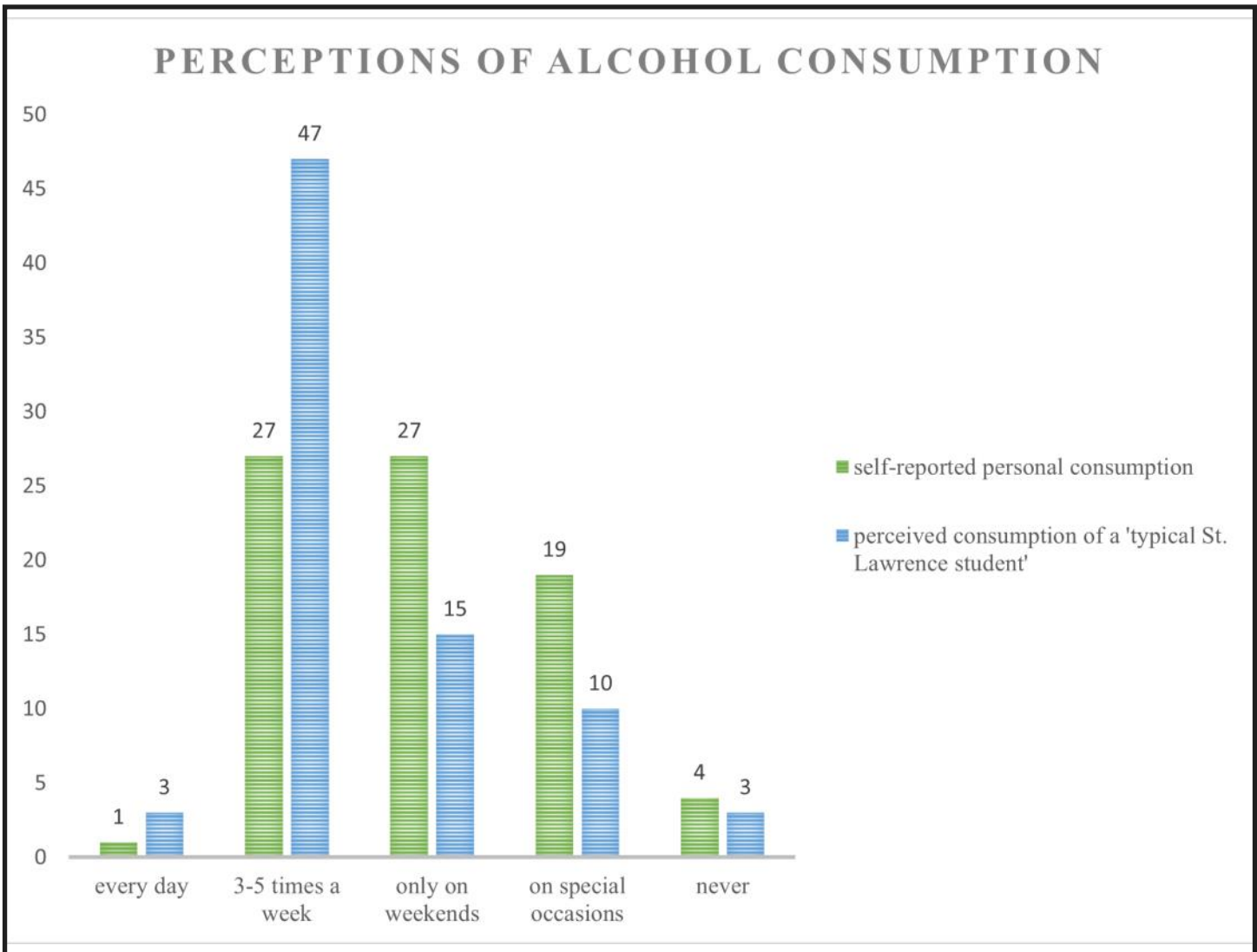
PERCEPTIONS OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

Figure 1: Perceptions of frequency of alcohol consumption (*n* = 102)

Sober Rules in Drunk Spaces

As liminoid spaces, parties are a space of mingling between different social groups of the university that would not usually have contact with each other. With alcohol acting as a social catalyst, college parties always bring the chance of meeting a romantic love interest in an informal setting. All participants reported that romantic involvement outside one's own social group most often starts at parties, but this phenomenon also complicates the liminoid space. Cathy insisted that during the party, "nobody would really care who you make out with on the dance floor," but the next day, students might find themselves in a new social territory that they might not have wanted to navigate in the first place.

Intoxication as a welcome catalyst for social interaction—especially when approaching a romantic interest—and intoxication as a serious risk factor for non-consensual physical intimacy are entangled in complex ways, from the perspective of women in my study. Alcohol consumption, as Abbey et al. report, leads intoxicated men to misinterpret women's friendliness as sexual cues (1996, 149). In comparison to pregames, parties are much more public spaces, and the noise and limited space in the small dorms was not only stressful but sometimes a reason for students, especially women, to feel unsafe. For women, this indicates an increased risk for sexual assault (Corbin et al. 2001), something never explicitly discussed by women participants during participant observation, but always implied in their actions. Many pregame rules revolved around not leaving a party space alone— especially not with a man—or checking up on each other, even during encounters with men,

by agreeing upon certain hand signals, facial cues (blinking fast directly at your friends to signify being uncomfortable) or even safe words or phrases such as really loudly saying "I love this song," to give other women the chance to pull an individual away under the guise of going to the dance floor together.

Despite their promise of fun, college parties present the danger of self-sabotage, according to the women I interviewed. Engaging in physically risky behavior at parties, such as binge-drinking beyond consciousness, therefore jeopardizes students' personal identity. Succumbing to the dangers of drinking is not necessarily seen as personal failure by students, but rather as a careless or unexperienced endangerment of one's social and personal body. This is not least because there is a perception that it is more acceptable to approach a person of romantic interest, at a party or elsewhere, when intoxicated. Among college students, alcohol is often associated with increasing sex drive and sexual affection (Benson et al. 2007, 348). Lilly had very personal experience with that:

> For women, drinking can often be associated with sexual action. I have heard so many of my friends say, "I have to be drunk if I am going to talk to this guy tonight" or "I would have to be drunk to hook up with this guy." Sometimes I am not sure if they're shy or if they feel like they should hook up with people drunk because that seems to be what you do in college. And I think that it makes things really blurry and unsafe. Because sometimes, I don't even know myself if I really want to do something, or if I'm just drunk. And then I wake up the next morning and think: My god, I really did that. So guilty.

In order to minimize the possibility of having experiences that would jeopardize their carefully constructed social personas, women discuss their love interests at length during pregaming. Often, individuals will make "sober rules" about the evening. Cathy explained to me that sober rules are usually instructions given by one woman to her friends. If she has romantic interests in another student, she outlines during the pregame, while she is still sober, exactly what kind of physical and social behavior she is comfortable with. If her friends

see her engage in anything but the behavior she has outlined as acceptable, they have permission to intervene in the situation or at least check in with her and remind her of the rules she had set for herself when she was not intoxicated. Such self-protective measures are necessary, according to Cathy:

> Sometimes, I gotta take care of my drunk self because I go a little crazy. And I might have done something I did not want to do or at least not in public and the worst is everyone will know.

Pregaming helps build a dynamic of trust between close friends also because, for the majority of my participants, it provided an exclusively female space. All of my participants were heterosexual, and when they talked about sexual health and "hooking up," they referred exclusively to men. While a feminist analysis necessitates a critical evaluation of men's behavior as the main perpetrators of sexual assault (see for example Abbey 2002; Abbey et al. 1996; Zawacki et al. 2003), in the realm of this paper I focus on how women protect themselves and each other in a mainstream context of gender relations, carving out agency through their collective partying experience as women. Through pregaming, women protect the physical integrity of their bodies by creating *communitas* with a feeling of mutual responsibility for one another even during a liminoid party, a space where social relations are open to new interpretations. Emily, one of my participants, emphasized this when pointing out that pregaming was not merely about "getting 70% messed up before you even start the party." More importantly, she added, it also provided an opportunity to "catch up" with friends and remind individuals of "the people that matter." Turner (1969, 371) outlines how liminoid experiences create *communitas*, the intense emotional bonds of intentional groups of people. People who pregame together consider each other close friends who solidify their friendships further by pregaming together. It is these people that you trust to help you comply with your sober rules during the party.

Sober rules highlight the separation the women make between mundane sober life and liminoid drunk experiences. Even though the

party itself represents a liminoid period, the time before and the day after does not, meaning that students have to face any repercussions of actions during the night out exactly as the person they were when they entered the college party. This is difficult because, as one of my participants, Mary, expressed, students might feel like the persona they expressed when they were intoxicated at a party was not actually them, yet they have to deal with the physical and social consequences, like bad hangovers or mockery from their friends, all while still trying to make sense of what they did the night before. Sober rules help college women navigate the liminoid space because in that liminoid space, their social identities are not irrevocably transformed but temporarily suspended.

Conclusion: The Culture of Liminoid Intoxication

The Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study, which provided the first nationally representative picture of college-student alcohol use, assesses that alcohol consumption poses "a major public health problem at college" (Wechsler and Nelson 2008, 2). According to the study, "nearly 1 in 3 students qualifies for a diagnosis of alcohol abuse" (Knight et al. 2002: 266). Students in the survey indicated that they binge-drank (had five or more drinks in one sitting) on average about once or twice a month. When I talked about the survey results with Cathy, she just shrugged: "This isn't alcoholism, this is college." For her, as for virtually all of my other participants, public health data meant little for how they conceptualized their and their peers' drinking habits. Health simply is not their primary concern when deciding to attend a party with their friends.

Students' apparent disregard for their health is not, however, due to a lack of awareness of or indifference to the dangers of alcohol consumption. Emily said that when she came to college, she felt nervous about drinking because of a history of alcoholism in her family. She shared with me, "I just saw what it did to people, how it changed them." However, by her second semester she considered herself a regular alcohol consumer, despite being underage at the time. Even though her perspective on her family members did not change, she said that she felt like college was the time for her to consume alcohol with her friends, occasionally in excess.

All students I interviewed reported at least one occasion when, the day after drinking, they could not remember parts of the night before. For Lilly, this experience and seeing her friends go through similar nights of being "blacked-out" had a lasting impact:

I feel like there are a lot of people at St. Lawrence that can speak to having a really bad night with alcohol. I know I had some of those nights, where you just test your limits. Mostly, I knew I had too much, but I was having a really good time, or I just wanted to push [my limits] a little bit more. But it changed me, I did that a few times and not again, because you learn, you grow, you mature out of it.

Emily also spoke of nights like the one Lilly described. She emphasized that through this excessive alcohol consumption, she was able to grow as a person. By exploring her limits, she explored her personhood at these limits as well. Especially waking up hungover in the morning, she knew "I didn't actually want to be that person. I did not enjoy being that person," something that helped her more clearly know and vocalize her limits. Emily and Lilly both spoke of becoming more focused on extracurricular activities in clubs and organizations, because they realized that drinking as their only leisure activity was not fulfilling. The visceral learning experience of drinking alcohol to excess showed Lilly her personal limits by pushing her physical limits.

Public health efforts so far have focused on restricting alcohol consumption or providing information about the dangers of overconsumption. However, college is not only a time of "polarizing drinking behavior" merely because of peer pressure or disregard for personal health (Wechsler and Nelson 2008, 3). Pathologizing drinking and partying risks pathologizing the liminoid itself. After all, Turner also saw liminal, and liminoid, phases as times of great promise, when "everything seems possible" (1969, 372) because they show

us that our social structure is arbitrary, and radical change is possible. Much of the liberal arts promise of educating future leaders and visionary thinkers (see for example Seifert et al. 2008; Urciuoli 2003) is encompassed in experiences of the liminoid.

There seems to be a lack of functional and widely accepted alternatives to ritualized drinking that satisfy the need to both lose oneself and find deep bonds of *communitas* with others, in ways that are both personally viable and socially acceptable. Humans have a deep and universal fascination with altered states of mind, and especially with alcohol consumption. So far, anthropologists have not found a single society without alcohol consumption, whether the culture is permissive toward intoxication or not. Dudley theorizes that there is something in our paleoanthropological past that connects humans to alcohol on a quasi-biological level (2014). Furthermore, there is evidence that even other mammals such as primates and elephants deliberately consume fermented fruits and foods to achieve some form of intoxication (Siegel 1989, 118). Even though alcohol might not inherently be connected to the liminoid experience, altered states of conscience help facilitate that experience, especially in the secular, industrialized society that has largely been stripped of magic and ritual through the ascension of rational thought and the scientific method.

As Turner asserted, liminal rituals have largely been replaced by the liminoid. This poses the question of whether liminoid experiences deemed problematic, such as intoxicated students at college parties, can be effectively replaced, and what they would transform into. Even though college students do not undergo a dramatic change of personhood during college parties as in rites of passage, the broader human bond and connection that they experience, the temporary dissolution of their selves, is crucial to the liminoid experience. Consuming alcohol and attending college parties serve the purpose of finding that connection for many students, and it does not seem readily replaced. Sports games or music festivals, both explored in the anthropological literature as also providing liminoid spaces (Rowe 1998, Taheri et al. 2016, John 2001), are often also connected to alcohol consumption and might therefore pose similar public health issues of binge drinking and overconsumption. This does not mean that the negative health impacts of binge drinking are negligible. Neither, however, are they attributable only to the personal failings of individual college students.

Pregaming and college parties represent more than a craving for social belonging or the suspension of personal problems, even though these effects might be welcomed by students. *Communitas* provides a relief from the structure of society, in this case the structure of college life. By juxtaposing leisure and academic "work" life, college parties provide an opportunity for students to temporarily exist outside that structure. It is therefore questionable whether any policy change on the university or legal level could effectively remedy the negative effects of college-student drinking, since college parties stand as a contrast to structure itself.

Acknowledgements

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

1. Please tell me when you had your first drink (in college).

2. What did you know about drinking at the time?

3. How did you feel about drinking in college at the time?
   4. Has the way you think about drinking in college changed since you first got to St. Lawrence?

5. What does a typical night out look like for you? Can you describe what you would usually do in a sequence of events?

5. What would you typically drink? Do you drink different types of alcohol for different occasions?

6. What does pregaming mean to you?

7. How would pregaming look like for you?

8. Who would you pregame with?

9. Who would you not pregame with and why?

10. How do you feel about drinking games at St. Lawrence?

11. Do you have a favorite drinking game and what does it look like? What are important skills you need for a drinking game (you described)?

11. Has the way people drink at St. Lawrence influenced your behavior? How so?

12. Since coming to St. Lawrence, have you changed the way you drink? Why?

13. Have you changed the way you act on a night out since coming to St. Lawrence?

14. Do you and your friends have similar drinking behaviors? How are they similar or different?

15. Do you have anything you want to add?

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