

**Liked and Disliked Features of Alcohol Use**  
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**Introduction:**

Study after study has shown that drinking is a normal part of adolescents' high school experience. However, some adolescents drink in ways that are much healthier than others: they drink less frequently, and they are less likely to binge or to drink as a coping mechanism to escape from other problems.

This study asks adolescents who drink regularly two very simple questions:

- < **'What do you like about drinking?'** and
- < **'Are there things about drinking that don't you like?'**

We began with the hypothesis that adolescents who drank as part of a larger social context (i.e. as a background to socializing) rather than drinking specifically to get drunk would show a healthier drinking pattern (drinking less frequently and bingeing less often) and be generally better-adjusted (lower levels of stress and depression and higher levels of self-esteem). Previous work examining the relationship between attitudes towards drinking (sometimes called motivations) and current and future drinking behavior suggested that there are few gender differences in why adolescents drink and that there is some evidence for a differential relationship between reasons for drinking and drinking behavior (Newcomb, et al., 1988, Milgram, 1993, Stacy, et. al, 1993, Gliksman, 1989). This paper extends the previous literature in two ways:

- < **First, by asking adolescents what they *don't* like about drinking,** and
- < **Second by asking whether adolescents' reasons for liking and disliking drinking change as they get older** (and presumably, gain more experience with alcohol).

**Methods**

**Sample:** 120 central Pennsylvania high school students were recruited to participate in a study of adolescent social relationships, leisure, and adjustment. Students were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. The core group of approximately 20 teens were approached directly in locations frequented by adolescents who engaged in problem behavior (i.e. students smoking behind the mall before school or hanging out in or near video parlors after 10:00 on school nights). After receiving student consent and parental permission, adolescents were interviewed and completed a questionnaire. At the end of each interview, students were asked to name up to five of their friends who might be willing to participate in the study. These students, in turn, were contacted to participate.

## **Measures:**

Liked and disliked aspects of drinking. As part of the interview, adolescents were asked about their most frequent, favorite, and least favorite activities. Adolescents were then asked whether they drank alcohol. Those who answered yes and were further questioned about how frequently they drank and in what contexts. Those who answered that they drank only very infrequently or only on special occasions with their parents were not questioned further. 60 of 120 adolescents interviewed indicated that they drank regularly and were interviewed about what they liked and disliked about drinking. (Interestingly, although only one of the 60 adolescents who said they drank regularly had not had a drink in the past 30 days, three of the students who said in the interview they did not drink admitted to drinking on the questionnaire: one of them four or more times during the past 30 days).

Drinking behavior, delinquency, and depression. As part of the questionnaire, adolescents were asked how many times they had drunk alcohol, had five or more drinks, been involved in vandalism or damaging property, or been involved in physical fights during the past 30 days. Adolescents also completed the CES-D psychological symptoms checklist, a measure of depression in non-clinical populations.

## What Do High School Students Like About Drinking?

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<p><b>It's relaxing</b></p> <p>I: What do you like about drinking?</p> <p>S: I think its a nice way to relax, I mean that might, guess that's kinda, it would kinda be a common answer, but....</p> <p>I: No, its just whatever your answer is</p> <p>S: Yeah, Probably to relax, umm, you can have a lot of fun, cause I don't do it all the time, so I basically know what a weekend is without it and what a weekend is with it. You know everyone's in a good mood, it seems, and uh....</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Freshman</i></p>	15	25
<p><b>I like the sensation of being drunk</b></p> <p>I: And what do you like about it?</p> <p>S: I don't know...It's a hard question. I don't know what I like about it...I just do it. I like to get drunk.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Sophomore</i></p> <p>I: Um, and then what do you like about that?</p> <p>S: I like to get drunk</p> <p>I: You like to get drunk?</p> <p>S: Not, like, out of control drunk, just you know feeling dizzy and (unintelligible) and stuff.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Sophomore</i></p>	13	22

<b>It's fun</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>18</b>
<p>I: Is there anything you do like about drinking alcohol?  S: (giggle) Yeah.  I: Like what?  S: (giggle )  I: Come on.  S: Once in a while I just think it is fun.  I: It's fun?  S: Yeah, just once in a while I like the way it makes me feel and I like the way some of it tastes.  I: OK, How does that make you feel?  S: Just happy.</p>		
<p>I: What do you like about it?  S: Umm, it's fun.  I: Okay, what's fun about it?  S: It's like, you're just like all messed up.  I: All messed up?  S: It's just like kinda, it's like fun.  I: Okay, how does it make you feel?  S: Sometimes stupid but it's like I don't care.</p>	<i>High School Freshman</i>	
	<i>High School Freshman</i>	

<p><b>It helps me escape</b></p> <p>I: And what do you like about it?  S: I just like, you know , just like, not having any worries, just like letting go, going crazy.  <i>High School Sophomore</i></p> <p>I: What do you like about drinking?  S: It's...it's...it makes you feel that your the only one that matters in the world and you don't have to worry about what other people think, what other people do. It's just you by yourself.  <i>High School Freshman</i></p>	<p><b>10</b></p>	<p><b>17</b></p>
<p><b>I like the taste</b></p> <p>I: What do you like about it?  S: Tastes good.  I: Tastes good, Is there anything that you don't like about it?  S: Head rush.  I: Is that the only thing you like that it tastes good?  S: Basically, a light buzz is good too.  <i>High School Senior</i></p>	<p><b>10</b></p>	<p><b>17</b></p>
<p><b>I like being with/doing things with friends</b></p> <p>I: What do you like about it?  S: (pause) Ah, I guess I just like hanging out with my friends.  I: Is that it?  S: Um, basically.  <i>High School Senior</i></p>	<p><b>9</b></p>	<p><b>15</b></p>

<p><b>No particular reason - an activity to fill the time</b></p> <p>I: What do you like about drinking?  S: Um, I really don't know.  I: Okay um,...  S: Its better than sitting around trying to find something to do.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Junior</i></p>	8	13
<p><b>It enhances the social experience</b></p> <p>I: Umm, what do you like about it?  S: I like the social, like, everyone's just sitting around. I like the atmosphere of it.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Junior</i></p>	5	8
<p><b>I like feeling out of control</b></p> <p>I: Uhmm, what do you like about it?  S: What do you like about it?  S: Getting drunk.  I: What about, what is it about getting drunk that you like?  S: The fact that you actually lose control for once, most of my life I'm in control. And when I am drunk I don't really feel like I am in control.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Sophomore</i></p> <p>I: Okay, and then what is it you like about doing that?  S: Um, it's just...it's fun not to have control of your body, really. And just for your mind not to be working right.  I: Um uh. Is there anything that you don't like about that?  S: Often yeah. I don't... I do things that I regret the next day. And I y'know I get sometimes a hangover the next day. And headache and just things like that.  I: Hm, okay.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Freshman</i></p>	4	7

<p><b>It makes people act more relaxed and natural</b></p> <p>I: Ummm...what do you like about drinking?  S: Ummm...it kind of relaxes you, like when everybody gets around, especially my friends and stuff, whenever we are just by ourselves, we just get too drink and everybody gets kind of crazy, you know nothing ever goes wrong, nobody really gets into trouble, we just kinda...we drink and sometimes people drink too much and they get drunk but sometimes we just drink to relax and everybody knows how to be themselves.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Senior</i></p>	3	5
<p><b>It makes other people act out of control</b></p> <p>I: Um, what do you like about it?  S: My friends are hysterical (laughs).  I: Yeah? (laughs)  S: Basically that's it. Like, the other day they came over and they were, like I didn't drink that night but I like took out the video camera and like video taped them...  I: Oh really? (Laughs)  S: ...and it was just a riot, yeah.  I: You can play that back for them, I'm sure they'll like that.  S: I bet. Its hysterical (laughs).</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Senior</i></p>	2	3

<b>My friends want me to</b>	2	3
<p>I: What do you like about drinking?</p> <p>S: Umm, I don't know. I guess it relaxes me, I don't even know. Because, it is kind of sad to say but when your friends are doing it and you're with them that's just like...you have to do it.</p> <p>I: Yeah, how did you first start getting into it?</p> <p>S: Umm, well my stepmother was an alcoholic so there was always liquor around my house so I started drinking on my own actually. But then that behavior kind of stopped (chuckle). That was just kind of like experimental but then I probably started drinking mostly when I was like fifteen. Fourteen or fifteen.</p>		
<p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Junior</i></p> <p>I: And what do you like about it?</p> <p>S: Nothing really.</p> <p>I: Then why do you do it?</p> <p>S: 'Cause my friends are doing it I guess.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Freshman</i></p>		

## What Do They Dislike About Drinking?

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<p><b>Getting sick/spinning/passing out</b></p> <p>I: Is there anything you don't like about it?            S: Yeah, I don't like getting sick and I really don't like getting tired either so like it depends on the night you know, whether it is gonna be a good drinking night or not.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Senior</i></p>	<b>16</b>	<b>27</b>
<p><b>Hangovers/how you feel in the morning</b></p> <p>I: OK, is there something that you don't like about it?            S: The hangover.            I: Anything more about the hang over?            S: Other than the fact that I get a mild hangover, I don't really have that bad of hangovers.            I: OK.            S: I have never thrown up once I have drunk to excess.            I: Uhhmhhh . . .            S: I have a really strong stomach as far as that's concerned, my body for some reason handles alcohol well.            I: Stomach of steel huh?            S: Yes.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Sophomore</i></p>	<b>16</b>	<b>27</b>

<p><b>I don't like how I act</b></p> <p>I: Anything you don't like about it?  S: Yeah, um, it's bad for you, and it makes you do stupid things sometimes and if you drink too much you don't feel real well the next day.  <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Senior</i></p> <p>I: What don't you like about it?  S: It kind of makes you dumb sometimes and I don't like being dumb.  <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Senior</i></p> </p></p>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>
<p><b>I don't like how other people act</b></p> <p>I: Is there anything that you don't like about drinking?  S: Um...well, yeah. 'Cause its just...most of the time it distorts people's way of thinking and their way of acting, and you know...  <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Junior</i></p> </p>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>
<p><b>I don't like the taste</b></p> <p>I: Is there something that you didn't like about it?  S: The taste.  <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Freshman</i></p> </p>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>
<p><b>I don't like getting too drunk or losing control</b></p> <p>I: Ok, is there anything you don't like about it?  S: Uh, I don't like being totally incoherent, like being a causality.  <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Senior</i></p> </p>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>

<p><b>Getting hassled by the police</b></p> <p>I: And what did you like about it?  S: I don't know, I just liked it, it wasn't really like an escape or anything for me, it was just, I just liked it  I: And what didn't you like about it , is there anything you didn't like about it?  S: I was always in jail  I: And how old are you?  S: 18</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Senior</i></p> <p>I: How does it make you feel when you are drinking?  S: Good, but then again you are always worrying, like, how safe you are where you are.  I: Ok, what do you mean by safe?  S: Like, from the lawmakers.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Freshman</i></p>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>
<p><b>I don't like the WAY other people drink</b></p> <p>I: Uhhh. Is there anything you don't like about it?  S: Ummm. Myself, I personally don't have any problems with it, but I have problems with how my friends use it..  I: Yeah.  S: ...and how, like, people use it in general.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Junior</i></p>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>

<p><b>I don't like the feeling of being drunk</b></p> <p>I: Okay, and, what do you like about it?  S: (laughs) I don't know, its relaxing and like wines and stuff, I think they taste good.  I: Umm,hmm. And, is there anything you don't like about it?  S: I don't ever like getting drunk (laughs).  I: (laughs) You don't like getting drunk?  S: No.  I: Okay.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Freshman</i></p>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<p><b>Getting hassled by parents</b></p> <p>I: Okay, is there anything that you don't like about it?  S: Yeah. Umm, I could get in trouble.  I: With whom?  S: Police and parents.  I: Okay. What happens if you get in trouble?  S: Get arrested, stuff like that.  I: If your parents find out?  S: They'd probably like say that they don't want me hanging out with whoever I was with.  I: Okay.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Freshman</i></p>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
<p><b>It's pointless or a waste of time</b></p> <p>I: Is there anything you don't like about it?  S: Um, it's just pointless. Like doing it if I have nothing else to do.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Senior</i></p>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>

<p><b>It's expensive/hard to get</b></p> <p>I: Okay...ummm...is there anything you don't like about drinking?</p> <p>S: Yeah...I don't like how I feel the next day if I get really, really drunk.</p> <p>I: Really (Chuckles)?</p> <p>S: Yeah (chuckles).</p> <p>I: Okay anything else?</p> <p>S: Ummm...yeah it's expensive, and trying to find someone to buy it for us is kind of like a pain in the butt. Everybody is like "I'm afraid to buy it". I think, now that I'm 18, I should be allowed to drink, I mean they say that you can't drink until you are 21, but they can send me, I can join the service and fight in the war, but I can't even drink beer so...</p> <p>I: Right.</p> <p>S: And everybody does anyway, you know...so...I don't know, I just think that it's stupid.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Senior</i></p>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<p><b>Don't like being responsible for others when they are drunk</b></p> <p>S: Is there anything that you don't like about it?</p> <p>S: It makes you sick</p> <p>I: It makes you sick?</p> <p>S: Plus, you can't really depend on everybody my age to be mature or responsible about it, so, and that can get irritating. Then I have to play mommy even more than usual...</p> <p>I: Right.</p> <p>S: So, that can get irritating.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>High School Senior</i></p>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>

### Worry about drinking and driving

- I: Alright, and what don't you like about that?  
S: Um...just drinking and driving y'know, there could be an accident or something.  
I: Right, so what your saying, like if you know you're going to be driving that you, you don't let yourself drink as much?  
S: I don't drink any when I'm doing the driving....

*High School Junior*

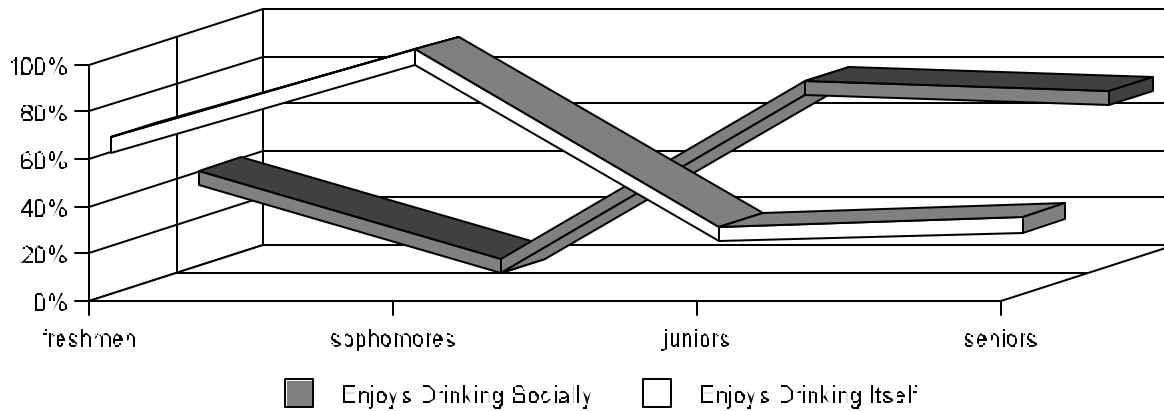
## Do Adolescents Who Have Different Reasons for Liking and Disliking Drinking Drink Differently?

Because there was so much variability in adolescents' likes and dislikes about drinking, a K-means cluster analysis was performed to group adolescents according to the pattern of their reasoning. Two clusters emerged:

<b>Cluster One: Enjoys Drinking Socially (32 students)</b>	<b>Cluster Two: Enjoys Drinking Itself (28 students)</b>
< It's relaxing	< I like being drunk
< No particular reason - an activity to fill time	< I like the taste
< It enhances the social experience	< I don't like getting sick/spinning/passing out
	< I don't like hangovers

These two clusters of motivations appear to capture two different types of drinkers: those who drink as part of a larger social experience and those who drink as an end unto itself. All adolescents who spoke mournfully of the physical consequences of drinking (i.e. throwing up or suffering hangovers) appeared to speak from experience (for example, mentioning throwing up almost every time they drank and reportedly drinking at least once every weekend). This is consistent with the idea that those who report disliking that aspect of drinking are also those who report that what they like most about drinking is getting drunk.

## Liked and Disliked Aspects of Drinking Change with Age



Interestingly, although older adolescents tended to describe the reasons they like and dislike drinking more in social terms while younger adolescents tended to drink for its own sake ( $O^2=15.08$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.002$ , see below), there was no difference in the frequency with which the two groups drank, or the likelihood that they would binge drink, be involved in vandalism, get into fights, or be more depressed ( $p>.05$ ). In other words, although older students tend to drink for different (and more adult-like) reasons, their *behavior* does not change. Given that neither the frequency of drinking nor binge drinking by the two groups differed, but the social drinkers reported fewer physical side effects, it also appears that older adolescents have learned to consume larger quantities of alcohol (often in very short amounts of time) without suffering as severe physical consequences.

### Conclusion:

In order to tailor programs designed to reduce drinking among adolescents, we need to understand more about what it is about the drinking experience that adolescents find attractive as well as what aspects they don't. Like other researchers, we found that adolescents, like adults, drink for relaxation, because it is enjoyable and serves as a social lubricant, and because it can help them forget their worries. In discussing the negative qualities of drinking, adolescents emphasize the consequences of excess: the vomiting and spinning that can accompany drinking too much, too fast, and the morning after effects. Relatively few adolescents mentioned what adults most worry about for them: the dangers of drunk driving or unplanned and unprotected sexual contacts.

Our study began with the hypothesis that adolescents who drank as part of a larger social context (i.e. as a background to socializing) rather than drinking specifically to get drunk would show a healthier drinking pattern (drinking less frequently and bingeing less often) and be generally more well-adjusted (lower levels of stress and depression and higher levels of self-esteem). Results of our analysis showed no such relationship. Instead, if our cross-sectional analyses are interpreted as evidence of a longitudinal trend, we found that as adolescents get older, their thinking about drinking changes, but their behavior does not. Looking at these results within the framework of drinking as leisure activity,

these results are consistent with the interpretation that for younger adolescents, closer to the initiation of drinking, the novelty of the experience of alcohol use makes it an activity unto itself and, for many of the adolescents in our sample, the centerpiece of any social gathering. As adolescents grow older, the novelty of drinking passes, and it becomes an expected part of a social gathering. Thus for younger adolescents, drinking is the major activity of the evening. For older students, socializing is the major activity, but drinking is a part of the socializing experience. Unfortunately, as drinking moves from foreground to background, neither its frequency nor its intensity changes.

These findings suggest several avenues for future research. Pragmatically, they suggest that the dissatisfaction that many adolescents express about their own and others' behavior when drinking might be harnessed in the design of leisure education programs. Might adolescents learn how to create more satisfactory leisure experiences for themselves that have the positive aspects of social drinking, but minimize (or eliminate) drinking and/or over-indulgence? Secondly, they suggest a normative shift in the context of drinking and the aspects of drinking that adolescents like and don't like. However, no change in behavior accompanied this shift. It is possible that high school is still too early in these adolescents' drinking careers to find a relationship between motivational patterns of drinking and drinking behavior. Alternatively, it is also possible that those adolescents who continue to drink as an end unto itself well after it is normative to do so will also continue on with a pattern of less healthy drinking typical of this younger sample well after their peers have left it behind. Finally, these results suggest that it may be useful to explore what adolescents dislike about drinking more thoroughly in order to differentiate those who continue to drink heavily in their later life from those who eventually slow down.