

Young adults drink more in the company of a heavy drinker

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Young adults drink more alcohol if they are in the company of peers who drink heavily. NWO researcher Helle Larsen has scientifically confirmed this link for the first time by observing young adults in a research lab converted into a cafe. She defended her PhD thesis on 19 March 2012 at Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

Larsen investigated the extent to which about 600 students imitated drinking behaviour in the company of [peers](#). In a laboratory, students carried out various tasks in pairs such as assessing advertisements. Then they could take a break together in a bar that could not be distinguished from a real cafe. What the participants did not know was that the real experiment took place during the next 30 minutes. One of the two students was an actor and had been instructed beforehand to drink either one to three glasses of beer or wine or to opt for a soft drink. On average half of the study subjects opted for alcohol if the instructed actor took an alcoholic drink. If the actor drank more, then the participant consumed 2 to 3 times as much alcohol than in cases where the actor opted for [soft drinks](#) or only took a single glass of alcohol. Furthermore, if both drank alcohol then the study subjects sipped their drink at the same time as the actor significantly more often than if one drank alcohol and the other a soft drink.

Genetic predisposition

Larsen investigated several factors that could influence the imitation of

the drinking behavior such as the participant's degree of stress, the relationship between the study subject and actor, and the gender of both. None of these factors were found to exert an influence. "The [group dynamics](#) might be so dominating that it overshadows the other individual factors that could determine the alcohol consumption," explains Larsen. The researcher did, however, establish that students who have a specific variant of the gene DRD4 - which controls the [reward system](#) in our brains - were more influenced by the actor to drink alcohol than the students who did not have this variant.

Major problems

For many young people in the Netherlands drinking alcohol is part of going out and spending time with each other. Almost 40% of men in the age group 18 to 24 years can be considered heavy drinkers. Heavy drinking can have many negative consequences ranging from aggressive and violent behaviour to traffic accidents and various health problems. Discovering what provokes [young adults](#) to drink is therefore important. Subsequent research must clarify whether people imitate the alcohol use of another person because they are seen as a role model who sets the standard for the drinking of alcohol or whether the imitation is a subconscious cue. "It could be important to make people aware of the fact that they imitate the drinking behaviour of others in social situations," warns Larsen. 'Increasing the awareness of processes underlying [alcohol consumption](#) might help to prevent the development of undesirable drinking patterns."

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