

Safety in numbers: Moderate drinking in a group reduces attraction to risk

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New research led by the University of Kent shows that individuals who have consumed moderate amounts of alcohol in social situations are likely to view risky situations with greater caution when considering them as part of a group.

The research, by psychologists from the University of Kent and the University of East Anglia, produced the first evidence found outside of laboratory conditions that being in a group can reduce some effects of alcohol consumption. The findings could lead to the design of new interventions designed to promote safer recreational drinking.

Researchers asked University of Kent students who were drinking in groups in bars and at a music festival at its Canterbury campus to decide what levels of risk they thought was acceptable before recommending someone should take various actions. They accepted a higher level of risk when they were drinking and deciding alone, rather than when they were drinking and deciding in a group of others.

In the study, 101 participants aged 18-30 who were in groups were approached to take part. The researchers compared groups of people who were just under the drink-driving limit with groups that had not consumed any alcohol.

The participants first gave their private judgements about how much risk they would accept before recommending a potentially risky action - for example, whether it would be acceptable to drive to collect a friend from

an airport after drinking. They then re-joined the group and discussed a second problem and the group had to agree how much risk would be acceptable.

Dr Tim Hothrow, of Kent's Centre for the Study of Group Processes, said: 'When intoxicated, it is known that people are more likely to engage in risky behaviour, including the use of illicit drugs, engaging in violent and other criminal activity and driving at dangerous speeds. Our findings confirmed that individual risk decisions are increased by higher alcohol consumption.

'Our previous research, which had been conducted in laboratory conditions, showed that effects of alcohol consumption that affect people drinking alone, such as becoming riskier, are reduced or eliminated when people make judgements together with other drinkers in a group. We wanted to establish whether this would hold true in real drinking situations outside the laboratory, such as a bar or concert, where there are many other influences at work.

'Our findings showed that, even in these natural settings, social interaction in groups can reduce the tendency of individual drinkers to accept risks. Alcohol consumers accepted more risk when deciding alone but the least risk when deciding as a group. We think that this is because drinkers in groups monitor one another closely, becoming more cautious when directly asked whether to take a risk.'

The research, titled *Drinking in social groups: does 'groupdrink' provide safety in numbers when deciding about risk?*, is published in the journal [*Addiction*](#). The research team comprised: Dr Tim Hothrow, Dr Georgina Randsley de Moura, Professor Dominic Abrams and Dr Hannah Swift of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes, School of Psychology at the University of Kent, and Dr Rose Meleady, of the School of Psychology at the University of East Anglia.

Dr Meleady said: 'We know that individuals are more likely to engage in [risky behaviour](#) when they are intoxicated, whether it be having unprotected sex, or engaging in violent or other [criminal activity](#). This research demonstrates that drinking as part of a social group may mitigate the effects of alcohol consumption on risk-taking.

'Rather than seeing groups as part of the problem, we need to see them as part of the solution. Groups over-compensate for [alcohol consumption](#) in the face of risk. When [drinking](#) moderately, there may be safety in numbers.'

Provided by University of Kent

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