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Socially Acceptable Alcohol Use: The normalization of binge-drinking and the influences of the COVID-19 pandemic in a college sample.

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Human Ecology

By
Carter Golembeski
Under the mentorship of Dr. Trent Maurer

ABSTRACT

The relationship between college students and binge-drinking is a heavily researched and discussed topic. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic a whole new side of the issue is introduced. The impacts of the pandemic on binge drinking episodes, as well as personal desire to binge drink, is valuable data to be analyzed. This capstone project collected data from Georgia Southern students on their drinking habits, as well as how COVID-19 interrupted their social life. Their personal drinking habits were investigated, including how often they find themselves “black-out drinking” and how many drinks they usually consume on a single drinking occasion, as well as what they believe the opinion of their peers on what is acceptable alcohol consumption to be. The survey resulted in every respondent listing the maximum number of drinks they consider to be acceptable to drink as less than what they believe their peers considered acceptable. Additionally, 44% of respondents reported that their desire to drink when school moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while only 8% reported their desire decreased. Some common themes in reasoning for this change in actual consumption included students feeling like they had missed out on too much during isolation due to the pandemic, and drinking as a coping mechanism to deal with stress and depression that came about as a result of COVID-19. These results and more revealed interesting implications regarding social norms and the effects of limited social interaction on those internalized norms.

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I would also like to thank my fellow honors students who were a constant source of encouragement and advice throughout this whole process. Without their encouraging words and pieces of advice, completing this thesis would have been a much more difficult and discouraging journey.

Introduction

The topic addressed in this project is the prevalence of binge-drinking in a college student sample, how normalized it is in social contexts as compared to students' own personal opinions on the issue, as well as the extent to which the isolation because of COVID-19 has exacerbated the issue. This topic is an important one because if one understands why and to what extent the use (and abuse) of alcohol is normalized by college students, from there ways to combat the problem more effectively can be developed (DiGuseppi et al., 2018). Understanding the ways in which harmful behavioral norms such as binge-drinking are normalized is also important when examining data on mental health trends among college students (Cranford et al., 2009). Finally, unpacking the effects of COVID-19 related isolation on the frequency and acceptance of binge drinking is important as the pandemic continues to transform every aspect of "normal life."

Literature Review

The literature documents that binge-drinking is a highly accepted injunctive norm. Injunctive norms are defined by the APA Dictionary of Psychology as "any of various socially determined consensual standards that describe how people should act, feel, and think in a given situation, irrespective of how people typically respond in the setting" (APA, 2020). This was found to be the case even if the individuals themselves did not partake in such behavior. A study by Wombacher et al. (2019) focused on blackout drinking among college students, and conducted face-to-face interviews with said students. They found that even though students readily understand and believe that blacking out is unhealthy, in an effort to appease the group norms surrounding alcohol consumption they will convince themselves it is an okay action to partake in. This study also found evidence for the direct correlation between the normalization of

binge drinking and higher rates of blacking out among groups of college students, a common finding among several studies.

Another common theme was the effects of peer influence. Wombacher et al. (2019) also found that if students believe that their friends have positive opinions of drinking or if they consider them to be heavy drinkers, they are more likely to partake. Another study showed again that research indicates that those who perceive the frequency of their peers' binge drinking to be high, drank more themselves and vice versa. (DiGuseppi et al., 2018). Research points towards the fact that injunctive norms within your friend group correlate directly to the frequency with which you drink, but the normalization of alcohol use throughout your peer group does not necessarily have the same effect. (Krieger et al., 2016).

An interesting study by Banca et al. (2016) highlighted the effects of binge-drinking on one's brain health, specifically one's impulsivity. While this is not directly the topic of this study, the issue of impulsiveness is interesting as it can be related to how likely a college student is to engage in binge drinking if their peers encourage them to do so. The study found that the more someone engaged in binge drinking, the more likely they were to engage in behavior without thinking it through beforehand. This was attributed to the way alcohol affects the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex of the brain. In other health related issues having to do with alcohol, Cranford et al. (2009) showed that college-students report extremely higher rates of alcohol consumption compared to their non-college attending peers. While this study is slightly dated, the information is still interesting as it highlights the risky behaviors taken by a specific group that is working on higher education and so could be expected to be more responsible and smart with their health. The fact that this is not the case speaks to the atmosphere on college campuses.

Another interesting thing to note, in light of the topic of this work, is research by Leech et al. (2020) that highlights the transition into adulthood and how binge drinking may affect that transition. The study acknowledged that the steady trend in binge drinking among young adults ages 22-25 is a departure from what has traditionally been the case, and may signify attempts to delay the feelings of a full transition into adulthood as long as possible. This study also further corroborated the findings of Cranford et al. (2009), that showed higher rates of binge drinking among college students as compared to non-college attending young adults of the same age.

Going along with this, the demographic can be further broken down by sex. Research suggests that men are more likely to have positive drinking attitudes than women, leading to more men casually binge drinking than women (Hashemi et al., 2020). This is an interesting note, as most respondents to this project's survey were female. Knowing this tendency is essential in accurately assessing any findings. Finally, there is not yet a lot of research on the effects of COVID-19 on these issues, which is a gap in the literature I will attempt to address.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

The research question focused on to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic affected college students' perceptions and attitudes towards binge-drinking. This was specifically tailored towards whether their drinking, and/or desire to drink, increased or decreased after the University transitioned to emergency remote teaching in March 2020 in response to COVID-19, as well as their habits as far as actually physically partaking in it. These questions were examined via assessing the average number of alcoholic drinks the respondent typically consumes on a single drinking occasion, how many drinks they consider personally acceptable to consume during one occasion, and how many they think their peers would consider acceptable. To assess whether or not these mindsets and actions were changed by the COVID-19 Pandemic,

information on any shift in their desire to drink, whether they feel they missed out on social activities due to the Pandemic, and whether or not they were living with their parents or guardians during the course of the University being online was collected.

Based on the results from other studies, the anticipation was a high “approval rate” (i.e., injunctive norm) for alcohol consumption, and normalization of binge-drinking behaviors. As far as COVID-19 implications, it was expected that students report higher levels of binge-drinking episodes since the March 2020 transition to emergency remote teaching, with the exception of students who were living alone and then returned home to live with their parents or guardians. Those students for the most part were expected to have lower levels of reported binge drinking.

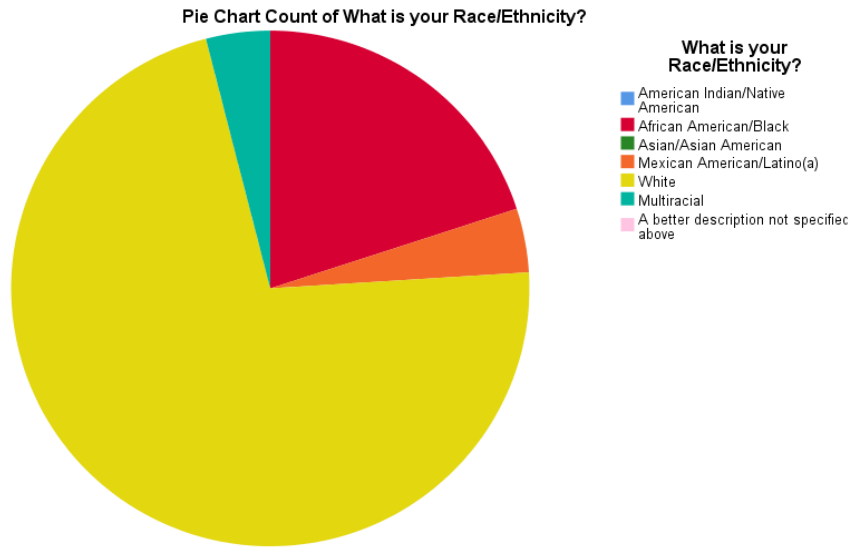
Method

Sample and Participant Selection

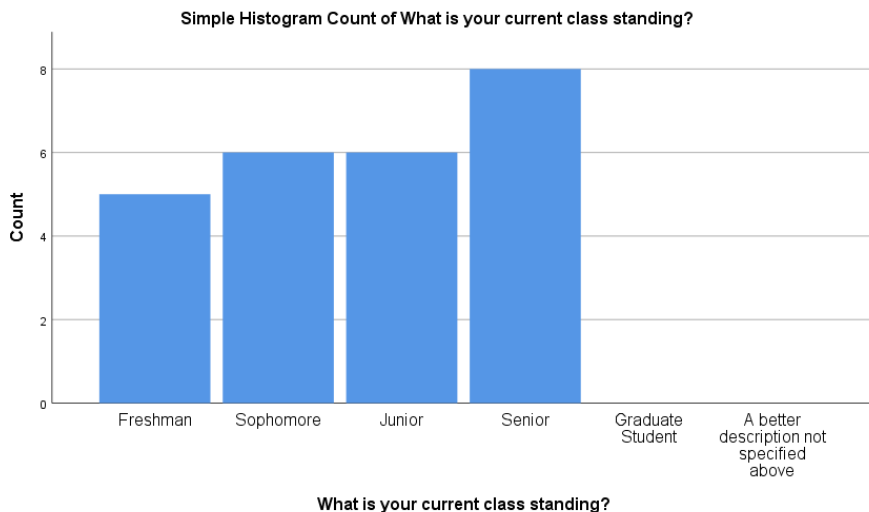
Participants in this study were college students at Georgia Southern University. The participants were recruited with the aid of several professors of Child and Family Development who shared the survey link with their classes via the Folio Learning Management System. The survey was also shared with the Child and Family Development Club via a link shared during their monthly virtual Zoom meeting, and with the sorority Kappa Kappa Gamma through a groupchat on the app Groupme. There was no incentive offered to participate in the survey, and all participation was voluntary. In addition the survey was completely anonymous, meaning professors who shared the survey link with their classes had no way of knowing which, if any, of their students actually completed the survey. This ensured that no special favor could be shown towards any student who participated in the survey over those who chose not to do so.

The survey was completed by 25 individual participants. Ninety-six percent of participants identified as female. Further breakdown of participants shows one identifying as

male, and twenty-four identifying as female. As seen in the figure below, seventy-two percent of participants identified as White, twenty percent identified as African-American, four percent identified as Mexican-American/Latino, and four percent identified as Multiracial.



Seventy-six percent of participants fell in the 18-20 age range, with twenty-four percent being in the 21-23 age range. Finally, as seen below, twenty percent of participants were classified as first-year students, twenty-four percent as Sophomores, twenty-four percent as Juniors, and thirty-two percent as Seniors.



Assessments and Measures

The research measures used in this study were adapted from Krieger et al. (2016), where injunctive and descriptive norms about binge-drinking were examined. Exact questionnaire items were not provided in the publication, nor were they available from the authors, so a similar questionnaire was developed from their description of the items in the publication. This questionnaire was not previously validated with Georgia Southern students, but is similar to measures of injunctive and descriptive norms about binge-drinking that have been used with college students at other institutions.

The survey was a total of seventeen questions, thirteen having to do directly with the research and the remaining four being demographic questions. The questions mostly involved sliders for responses, with a few multiple choice and two open ended questions. Questions asked throughout the survey included the average number of alcoholic drinks the respondent typically consumes on a single drinking occasion, how many drinks they consider personally acceptable to consume during one occasion, and how many they think their peers would consider acceptable. (See Appendix A.) Participants were also asked to report how many occasions of “black-out” drinking occurred for them within a given month. These month spans were from the start of the Spring 2020 semester to when Georgia Southern went fully online in response to COVID-19 in March 2020, from March 2020 until the fall semester began in August 2020, and from August 2020 through December 2020. These questions tied back to the research question of norms being changed by the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of the survey, where information was gathered via a few open response questions regarding whether their drinking and/or desire to drink had increased, decreased, or stayed the same since the University transitioned to emergency remote

teaching in March 2020 in response to COVID-19, and why they believe any change may or may not have occurred.

Procedure

Participants completed a short online survey on Qualtrics. (See appendix A.) There were no experimental manipulations. There was no direct interaction with the participants, as the research was collected 100% virtually. The survey was made anonymous by turning off the setting that allows for collection of IP addresses. Passive consent was used to maintain anonymity. All data was reported in the aggregate, and quantitative data was subjected to descriptive and inferential statistics. Qualitative data was subjected to content analyses for emergent themes, and exemplar quotations were used.

Upon first entering the survey, participants read the consent form, and if they agreed to the terms and conditions of the research they clicked forward to begin. No names or IP addresses were collected for any responses. Participants were also taking the survey completely voluntarily, and had the ability to close out of the survey at any time should they decide not to complete it. At the end of the survey a debriefing page was shown, giving participants information on the Georgia Southern University's counseling center, should any of the questions on the survey have been unsettling or distressing.

Results

Quantitative Results

Descriptive statistics are displayed below in Table 1. Statistical analysis showed that every respondent (n=25) listed the maximum number of drinks they consider to be acceptable to

drink as less than what they believe their peers considered acceptable, by approximately two drinks. This result came as no surprise based on previous research done on injunctive norms. However it was interesting how low the “acceptable number” was throughout the responses, coming from university students who are generally stereotyped to be heavier drinkers. The average respondent listed the maximum number of drinks they personally would consume to be 5.36, with the average they believed the average college student would consider the maximum number to be being 7.56. Out of the all respondents, 44% (n=11) reported that their desire to drink increased when school moved online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas only 8% (n=2) reported their desire decreased. These results were interesting, as this means the plurality of respondents (48%) reported that their desire to drink stayed the same. This is important to note, as the original hypothesis for this study expected a high approval rate to be associated with binge-drinking among college students and their peers.

When asked to what extent they felt that they had missed out on social activities as a result of COVID-19 safety precautions, the majority (n=14) of participants claimed they missed out “a great deal.” The second most common answer (n=8) was “slightly,” while the lowest response by far (n=2) was “not at all.” Similarly, the majority of respondents (n=13) reported that they felt the pandemic affected their views on alcohol consumption, making their drinking habits as well as their desire to drink increase. The second largest group (n= 8) claimed that the pandemic did not affect their desire to drink at all, and a small number (n=2) claimed it affected their desire and attitudes by making them more conscious and cautious regarding their drinking habits.

In order to effectively analyze the data, it was important to record which individuals were living at home with parents or guardians before the university shut down in March of 2020, as

well as who moved back in with their parents or guardians after the university shut down.

Results showed that the majority of participants (n=19) were not living at home before the shut down, however of those who were not living with their parents or guardians, most (n=12) did return home following the shut down.

Table 1.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
No. of Drinks typically consumed	25.00	0.00	12.00	3.64	2.63
Blackout Occasions- January-March 2020	19.00	0.00	4.00	.58	1.17
Blackout Occasions- March-August 2020	17.00	0.00	2.00	.29	.59
Blackout Occasions- August-December 2020	17.00	0.00	3.00	.71	1.05
Max # of Drinks-Acceptable Personally	25.00	2.00	14.00	5.36	2.64
Max # of drinks-Acceptable to Average Student	25.00	2.00	15.00	7.56	3.16

Change in Desire to Drink- March-August 2020	25.00	1.00	3.00	1.64	.64
Change in Desire to Drink-August-Dec ember 2020	24.00	1.00	3.00	1.87	.68
Missed out on Social Activities due to COVID-19	25.00	1.00	2.00	1.29	.47
Living With Parents before March 2020	25.00	1.00	2.00	_____	_____
Moving Back in with Parents/Guardians During COVID-19	17.00	1.00	2.00	_____	_____

Qualitative Results

Participants' responses to the open-ended questions were subjected to qualitative content analysis to identify emergent themes. This process resulted in around three main themes regarding why personal consumption did (or did not) change. One common theme that came up in survey responses as far as reasoning for this change in actual consumption included students feeling like they had missed out on too much during isolation due to the pandemic and now needed to make up for lost time. The number of students who felt this way (n= 4) is interesting in regards to research on peer influence on drinking habits, and begs the question of how far and how long lasting of a reach this influence has. Another theme (n= 4) was using drinking as a coping mechanism to deal with stress and depression that came about as a result of COVID-19.

Some common responses as to why respondents' desire to drink changed included being stuck at home with "nothing else to do" other than binge drink as well as, again, a result of stress and depression. One respondent stated "I think in the summer I wanted to drink more because I was unable to leave the house to do more fun sober activities like going on adventures, movies, and time with friends." From the mental health side of things, responses included "The boredom and stress of online class took a toll on my mental health" and "I think my desire changed, because I was coming out of depression." The most common response (n= 4) among those who reported that COVID-19 did not influence their drinking habits or desire to drink was that they simply were never drinkers at all to begin with. One respondent simply stated "Drinking isn't that exciting to me. Even if COVID didn't happen, I wouldn't drink super often."

Discussion

When looking at the question of to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic affected college students' perceptions and attitudes towards binge-drinking, the results of this study seemed to clearly point towards the fact that the pandemic decisively impacted the many of respondents' attitudes, making them more likely to want to drink more often than before, as well as more likely to actually partake. As stated above, the majority of respondents (n=13) reported that the life changes and stressors that COVID-19 introduced affected the way they viewed their alcohol consumption, in that they found their desire to drink and their actual drinking habits increased. However, rather conflictingly, the reported level of binge drinking episodes among respondents after returning to campus in Fall of 2020, while they were higher than reported from March to August 2020, was on average lower than pre-COVID. This conflict makes it harder to assess whether or not the hypothesis that students would report higher levels of binge-drinking episodes since the March 2020 transition to emergency remote teaching. While cases of blackout drinking

went down, that does not automatically mean that cases of binge drinking without blacking out did not increase. This is something that could have been assessed directly in order to get a clearer interpretation of the relationship between COVID-19 isolation and drinking habits among the participants.

At the same time as this appears confusing, the results showing that cases of blackout drinking were lower when students were not on campus than when they were (both pre and post university shut down) may not be that surprising. It holds to the findings of previous study by Banca et al. (2016) that highlighted the effects of binge-drinking on impulsivity, demonstrating how college students are more likely to binge drink if their peers are encouraging them to. Therefore when students are separated from their peers, it makes sense that their reported numbers of blackout drinking would go down. This is still interesting, however, given that the majority of respondents claimed their desire to drink went up.

Another result that is supported by past research in the field of binge drinking and injunctive norms is the fact that the average respondent reported the maximum number of drinks they consider acceptable for themselves to consume was lower than what they expected their peers to consider acceptable. This split in reasoning has been documented in studies such as those conducted by DiGuseppi et al., (2018), and Krieger et al., (2016).

Limitations

Unfortunately, discussion is limited as there were a variety of different limitations in this research. Having only twenty-five participants limited the scope of potential implications from the research. With such a small sample size the results are difficult to generalize to a larger

population, and leave little chance of identifying any significant trends or correlations. Although some of the respondents' answers were intriguing, 25 individuals at a university with over twenty-five thousand students is a far cry from a large enough sample size for any sort of generalization.

Some specific things that limited the results of this study were lack of detail in the survey short-answer questions. Given the results and looking back on the development of the survey questions, it would have been helpful to add a follow up question to ask about whether or not students felt they missed out on social events due to the COVID-19 pandemic. If they said they did not, why not? Was it perhaps due to them not being overly social individuals to begin with? Or did they not follow CDC guidelines to a T and therefore were not really affected by isolation due to the pandemic, or was there another reason? Asking this would have widened the discussion on the effects of socially acceptable alcohol use and the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Future Directions

One key aspect revealed in the results of this study were the implications of COVID-19 affecting students' mental health, and how any possible decline in mental health may have impacted their drinking habits. This is research that should be followed in the upcoming years. It would be valuable to see how long this impact lasts, and whether it affects individuals in minor ways, or to the extent of long term issues such as alcoholism. In addition, as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to shift and change, individuals are continuing to adapt and change to it as well. Future study done on this topic should be interesting, as the long term effects of COVID-19 on college students and socially acceptable drinking habits will be able to be assessed. Even from the start of this research, this process has begun. When research for this paper was first started, there was virtually no published work on COVID-19 and college students to be found online.

Now, a year and a half later, a simple google search will bring up a variety of theories, findings, and possible implications. The continuation of this research will provide clarification and further details that should address the limitations that bound this study, hopefully gathering enough data to mark significant trends.

Reflective Critique

Throughout the course of developing, researching, and writing up this honors capstone project I believe I have grown as a student, an academic, and an individual. When I first started working on this project, I immediately felt overwhelmed, and considered quitting several times. My second semester working on it, I felt more capable but still could not fathom how I would get to the “end of the road” and actually complete the work. Now, I am at the end and have completed my honors thesis. The experience, though overwhelming and frustrating and confusing most of the time, has been priceless. I now feel like I am much more confident in myself, my skills, and my capabilities as an academic. I have completed research, constructed, conducted, and implemented a survey, learned how to code data, how to display my findings, and so much more.

I am so grateful for the Honors College at Georgia Southern for giving me the opportunity to pursue undergraduate research, as well as my mentor Dr. Maurer for supporting me when I needed it, but also staying hands off when he knew that would be the most helpful thing for me in the long run. The growth I have had as a researcher can be summed up simply by looking at the terminology I use so casually now. If I had been asked my first semester to talk about the process of coding, I would have informed you that I was not a computer science major

and you had the wrong person. The learning curve was a tough one, but this experience was more than worth it.

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Appendix A

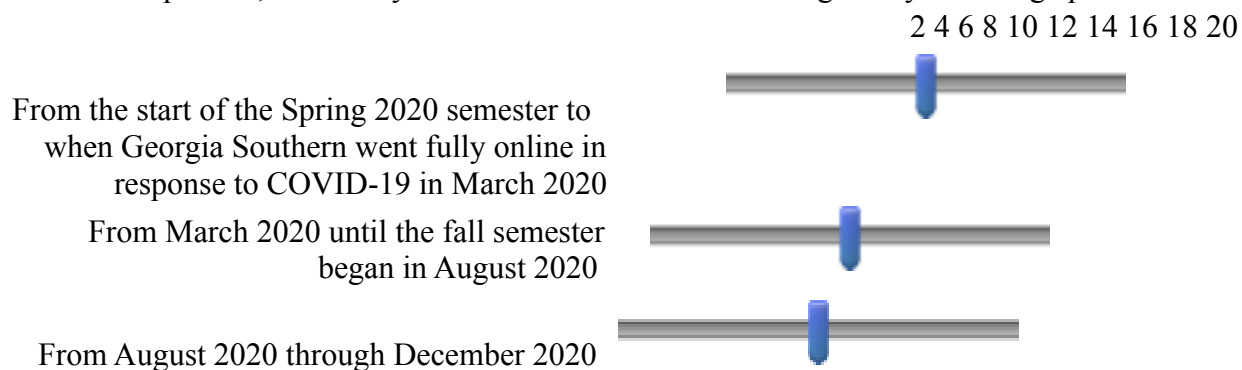
Alcohol-Consumption and COVID-19 Survey

Start of Block: Block 1

When you drink, how many drinks do you typically consume?



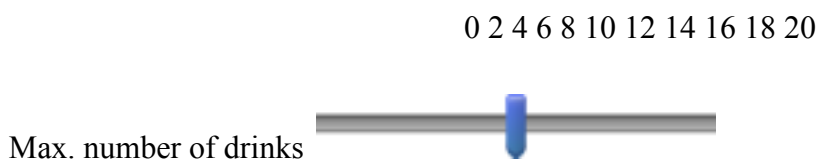
Below we are going to talk about three different time periods in the past year. For each of these distinct time periods, how many occasions of “black-out drinking” did you average per month? 0



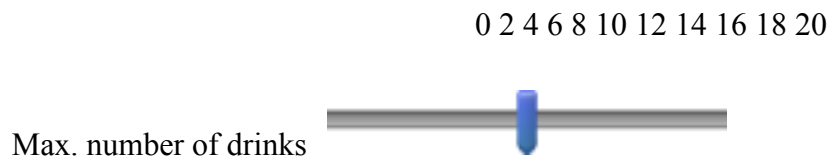
End of Block: Block 1

Start of Block: Block 2

Maximum number of drinks you would consider acceptable to personally consume on a single drinking occasion



Maximum number of drinks a typical university student would consider acceptable for a person to drink on a single drinking occasion



End of Block: Block 2

Start of Block: Block 3

To what extent did your desire to drink increase, remain the same, or decrease during the following time periods?

Increased (1) Stayed the same (2) Decreased (3)

From when Georgia
Southern went fully
online in response to COVID-19 in March 2020 until August 2020? (1)

From August 2020

(2) until December 2020?

Why do you think your desire to drink changed, or did not change?

End of Block: Block 3

Start of Block: Block 4

How did the life changes and stressors that COVID-19 introduced affect the way you viewed your personal alcohol consumption?

To what extent do you feel you missed out on social activities as a result of COVID-19 safety precautions?

- Not at all (1)
- Slightly (2)
- A great deal (3)

Before Georgia Southern transitioned to fully online in response to COVID-19 in March 2020, were you living at home with your parents/guardians?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Skip To: End of Block If Before Georgia Southern transitioned to fully online in response to COVID-19 in March 2020, were... = Yes

When Georgia Southern transitioned to fully online in response to COVID-19 in March did you move back in with your parents/guardians at that time?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

End of Block: Block 4

Start of Block: Block 5

What is your age?

- 18-20 (1)
- 21-23 (2)
- 24-26 (3)
- Over 26 (4)

What is your current gender identity?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Gender Fluid (3)
- Genderqueer or Non-Binary (4)
- A better description not specified above (5)
- Prefer not to answer (6)

What is your Race/Ethnicity?

- American Indian/Native American (1)
- African American/Black (2)
- Asian/Asian American (3)
- Mexican American/Latino(a) (4)
- White (5)
- Multiracial (6)
- A better description not specified above (7)

What is your current class standing?

- Freshman (1)

- o Sophomore (2)
- o Junior (3)
- o Senior (4)
- o Graduate Student (5)
- o A better description not specified above (6)

End of Block: Block 5