

**The Glorification of College Drinking in Film:
The Reinforcement of a Detrimental Ideal**

Natasha Ho

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Professor Zighelboim

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Drunken nights of freedom and irresponsibility are considered the best parts of college life by many. When this becomes the expectation of upcoming students and is reinforced as a tradition in educational institutions, it conditions individuals to rely on alcohol to have fun. Not only is this a dangerous belief to abide by but the pop culture that feeds into this is manipulative to young individuals. Film typically depicts alcohol in a light-hearted manner with maximum benefits and little or temporary consequences. Alcohol usage in films depicting college life specifically, is heightened as characters are placed in a middle ground between a teenager and a young adult with no true responsibilities. When enrolled in college where many live among their peers who are usually fresh out of parental restrictions and dependant routines, students are more inclined to experiment with new situations outside of their comfort zone. Consequently, the potential risks are constantly overlooked and its rose-colored narrative in film only fuels this behavior. The glorification of college drinking in fictional media has normalized the expectation to consume alcohol prematurely. Its promotion in film illustrates binge drinking as a symbol of coming of age, teen rebellion, and freedom which incidentally causes a dangerous trend of drunk driving, sexual assault, and fatal accidents. Movies such as *Animal House* (1978) epitomize the glorification of this behavior, demonstrating that continuous exposure to drunken content will further detriment the lives of young students, and ironically, criticize current educational institutions for allowing such traditions to carry on. Heavier viewing restrictions should be placed on alcohol-related media and educational systems should be improved to prevent alcohol-related casualties.

Prospective college students enter college with the hindered expectation that their social life is dependent on partying and drinking. When an individual is set to enter a social situation alone, finding comfort in a familiar concept can ease that anxiety. Films teach college students

that alcohol is an easy gateway to becoming involved in the campus social scene, and institutions within most universities reinforce this belief with frats and sororities. In Timothy M. Osberg's study, "From *Animal House* to Old School: A Multiple Mediation Analysis of the Association between College Drinking Movie Exposure and Freshman Drinking and Its Consequences", he explores the correlation between college drinking and college drinking exposure to college-drinking movies. A sample of 598 college freshmen was used and Osberg hypothesized mediators that contributed to their current relations with alcohol. He explained that college party life is so heavily engrained in some cultures that it could be a major contributing factor to a student's college application and decision.¹ The "networking of drinking and personality variables"² that arises from this practice is attractive to new college attendees. Therefore, they may feel pressured to do so to become successfully integrated into a new environment. An illustration of this pattern in film conditions students to follow this path but the individual's inclination to do so is not limited to the influence of movies. Childhood upbringing, parental guidance, and social environment may encourage or restrict one's morals, altering their reactions to this belief. To further prove that college drinking culture has become an internalized belief among teenagers, the study gathered that a majority agreed to an extent that "[becoming] drunk is a college rite of passage"³ or that it is inherent to the college experience. Overall, The study proved Osberg's hypothesis correct and concluded that willingness to drink and drinking behaviors have a strong correlation with the exposure an individual has to films containing alcohol. "Movie exposure [exerts] both direct and indirect effects"⁴ on decision-making and this

¹ Osberg, Timothy M. "From Animal House to Old School: A Multiple Mediation Analysis of the Association between College Drinking Movie Exposure and Freshman Drinking and Its Consequences." *Science Direct*, March 31, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2012.03.030>.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

often results in an altered perception of binge drinking consequences and norms of the college social scene.

An iconic film that epitomizes the glorification of the college drinking culture and is used in many studies to exemplify its effects is National Lampoon's *Animal House* (1978). The comedy film is centered around the spontaneous lives of the troublemakers in the Delta Tau Chi fraternity; filled with drinking, fraternizing with women of all age ranges, and rebelling against authority. The raunchy movie was a massive box-office success due to its idealized depiction of an "action-packed college experience".⁵ It pushed the boundaries of the rowdiness expected from the college party scene and went further to romanticize rash indulgences such as substance abuse and sexual encounters. The writers and producers of *Animal House* had experienced the cultural shift that the United States endured during the 1960s which translated into themes of rebellion and free love in the film.⁶ The countercultural revolution introduced and encouraged the civil rights movement, sexual liberation, and a collective fighter spirit which made these movements significantly impactful. The members of Delta Tau Chi personified these traits and are characterized as selfish and directionless rebels, ironically drawn from the personal experiences of the writers: Ramis, Kenney, and Miller.⁷ Although the plot is highly sensationalized, it seemed attainable which established a heightened expectation of the college experience; one full of extreme partying, sex, and consistent rebellion against authority.

The comedic flare that is used to graze over toxic coping mechanisms in films such as *Animal House* is unrealistic, manipulative, and dangerous. For example, when the members of Delta Chi Tau were evicted from their frat, they embarked on a road trip to an all-girls school in

⁵ Cosby, James A. "Five Ways 'Animal House' Changed The World." PopMatters. April 28, 2014. <https://www.popmatters.com/180471-in-honor-of-harold-ramis-five-ways-animal-house-changed-the-world-2495671643.html>.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

hopes to get dates for the night. A Delta Tau Chi member, Otter, pretends to be the boyfriend of a recently deceased student in order to gauge sympathy from the girls of that college. Another example of manipulation that occurs in the film is when the character, Flounder had just discovered that his fellow Delta Tau Chi brothers had destroyed his brother's car. Feeling remorseful about the condition of his brother's car, Flounder sobs. Bluto coldly responds to his crying with: "My advice to you is to start drinking heavily" and hands him a beer.⁸

Demonstrating that manipulating emotions for sex is common or that men should deal with their sadness with drinking minimizes the impact of these serious topics. It encourages individuals, especially men, to fill a void or blow off steam by distracting themselves rather than processing these emotions and reacting rationally. Furthermore, Bacchanalian parties held by college spring breakers in the early 80s were glorified on digital media, strengthening the association between college partying and relaxation. Instead of recognizing these issues and acknowledging them in campus programs, the college system reinforces institutions and trends that allow for these behaviors to continue.

A recurring source for news-worthy college drinking consequences stems from fraternities and because Greek life is notoriously engrained in many universities, their traditions will likely remain unchanged. In Charles S. Coprew III and Avery D. Mitchell's study, "Keeping it Frat: Exploring the Interaction among Fraternity Membership, Disinhibition, and Hypermasculinity on Sexually Aggressive Attitudes in College-Aged Males", they used a sample of 217 college males in southern universities to examine "sexually aggressive attitudes towards women"⁹ which are hypothesized and proven to be driven by hypermasculinity. The need to be in

⁸ *National Lampoon's Animal House*. Universal Pictures, 1978.

⁹ Coprew, Charles S., I,II and Mitchell, Avery D. 2014. "Keeping it Frat: Exploring the Interaction among Fraternity Membership, Disinhibition, and Hypermasculinity on Sexually Aggressive Attitudes in College-Aged Males." *Journal of College Student Development* 55 (6) (09): 548-562.
<https://login.libproxy.newschool.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/keeping-frat-exploring-interaction-among/docview/1617933174/se-2>.

control, which the fear of rejection can intensify, can become a toxic cycle of both physical and mental aggression that is commonly seen in males enrolled in fraternities. Fueled by the open access to alcohol and its entrenched party culture, this establishes a foundation for many alcohol-induced casualties to occur. The common misconception that sexual assault only occurs when the victim physically struggles allows for many sexual assault instances to occur without consequence. "Hirsch (1990) posited that at least one in four women would be the victim of sexual assault in her college career"¹⁰ and this is supported by the repetition of college rape cases that both occurs unreported and reported. This illegal and socially unacceptable behavior has been passed as drunken mistakes or reluctant consensual acts in many fraternity-related scenarios which the study successfully proves and tries to resolve. A section of the study compared results from fraternity and non-fraternity members and it showed a statistically significant distinction. Fraternity men reported more sexually aggressive attitudes and "scored higher on the disinhibition subscale".¹¹ No significant differences were reported in terms of hostility toward women. However, "significant positive associations were found between hypermasculinity and fraternity membership" which clarifies the relationship between the two variables.¹²

Hypermasculinity can be easily adopted by males who enter college because many tend to explore sexual or romantic relationships. When these relations do not occur as a male expects, they may subconsciously endorse these attitudes to cope with rejection. The study quotes Brannon in his piece, "Looking at the Male Role" to explain that fitting into the traditional male role includes beliefs that men "should be tough, be independent, act as provider and protector,

¹⁰ Corprew, Charles S., I.,II and Mitchell, Avery D. 2014. "Keeping it Frat: Exploring the Interaction among Fraternity Membership, Disinhibition, and Hypermasculinity on Sexually Aggressive Attitudes in College-Aged Males." *Journal of College Student Development* 55 (6) (09): 548-562.
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¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

and be resistant to femininity”.¹³ With many young impressionable male students who may be faced with the same obstacles, this mindset would naturally thrive in a community such as a fraternity. Coprew’s study also quotes Kilmartin’s work, “The Masculine Self”, to highlight that affiliating with all-male groups encourages “their values to remain unchallenged”¹⁴ which could lead to the continuation of misinformation and threatening decisions.

When illegal acts such as underage drinking, hazing, and sexual assault are expected in large institutions such as fraternities, it is extremely difficult for the majority to recognize its harms. The exclusivity and status of being in a frat is highly alluring to college males who have recently gained independence from their households and this generates a competitive nature in which many males feel compelled to participate. The euphemism “challenge” is often used to excuse binge drinking and hookups to create a positive buzz about the traditions that are commonly practiced within frats.¹⁵ In addition, the lack of responsibility or repercussions faced further romanticizes Greek life. Some universities have attempted to implement sexual assault prevention mandates or require sober monitors at every event to lessen the consequences that usually arise from fraternities.¹⁶ Although there have been some strategies to eliminate this stereotype, and even a push to abolish Greek life entirely, the consequences that arise from fraternities and college parties continue to headline news articles yearly because an individual's decision to indulge in similar settings is not just limited to the institution itself.

¹³ Coprew, Charles S., I., II and Mitchell, Avery D. 2014. "Keeping it Frat: Exploring the Interaction among Fraternity Membership, Disinhibition, and Hypermasculinity on Sexually Aggressive Attitudes in College-Aged Males." *Journal of College Student Development* 55 (6) (09): 548-562.
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¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Cohen, Kate. “Opinion | It’s Time to Abolish College Fraternities.” The Washington Post, November 1, 2021.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/11/01/its-time-abolish-college-fraternities/>.

¹⁶ Ibid

Solving the issue of college drinking using short-term approaches can be beneficial but an individual's willingness to drink the amount or frequency that they do is shaped by their values established before entering the college drinking scene. Exposure to alcohol use in college is often introduced to an individual at a young age. Whether they be intentional or accidental, alcohol use in movies is shown repeatedly to most minors, if not, it has already been shown to a majority of peers the minor is surrounded with. In Karen Kaplan's article reporting a study published by Journal Pediatrics, "Movies with Drinking Need R Rating", they examined the relationship between exposure to alcohol in film and current alcohol usage. A sample of 882 middle school students was used to track their "alcohol initiation and progression".¹⁷ The study hypothesized and proved that the amount of exposure to alcohol-related content on screen would affect the likelihood of future alcohol use. By the age of 15, 86% of the participants have reported having tried alcohol and 21% were drinking weekly.¹⁸ Statistics also showed that those who watched the most amount of on-screen alcohol content than the fewest were likely to drink twice as much. Kristina M. Jackson also conducted a study, "Exposure to Alcohol Content in Movies and Initiation of Early Drinking Milestones", and came to a similar conclusion as Kaplan. Jackson's data collection included both peer and parental variables. The results showed that while exposure to the alcohol content in film with parents had no significant indicator of increased drinking odds, exposure to the alcohol content in film with friends distinctly showed a rise in the potential to drink.¹⁹ Therefore, a minor's willingness to drink is usually swayed by their peers or role models of similar ages. The relevance of this source to our digital age allows

¹⁷ Kaplan, Karen. "Movies with Drinking Need R Rating, Study Says; Teens Who See Alcohol Used in Films are More Likely to Imbibe and have Related Troubles, Researchers Say." Los Angeles Times, Apr 19, 2015. <https://login.libproxy.newschool.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/movies-with-drinking-need-r-rating-study-says/docview/1674063845/se-2>.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Jackson M Kristina, Janssen, Tim, Nancy P Barnett, Michelle L Rogers, Kerri L Hayes, and James Sargent. "Exposure to Alcohol Content in Movies and Initiation of Early Drinking Milestones." Essay. In *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 42, 42:184–94. Wiley Blackwell, n.d.

for the study to consider social media influences. Jackson concluded that media figures tend to be viewed as “powerful role models due to their high visibility and their larger-than-life status”²⁰ which young individuals turn to for social guidance. Underaged youth who are inspired to try alcohol are statistically at a greater risk of continued alcohol and substance use as well as binge drinking. From 1998 to 2003, 83% of box office hits depicted scenes of alcohol consumption, and 57% of these movies are rated G or PG.²¹ Inevitably, films exert strong influences on individuals which Jackson and Kaplan propose to lessen by putting R ratings on all movies with any alcohol-related content.

Alcohol-induced consequences will continue if depictions of alcohol dependency in film continue to support this glorified perception of the college experience. The romanticization of college drinking is portrayed with unrealistic expectations and little to no fatal repercussions. Evidently, films have an unwavering influence on young impressionable individuals and because the inescapable idea of drinking has been introduced to children at such a young age, exposure to such narratives will only normalize and increase the odds of alcohol use. As Jackson and Kaplan stated, films that include alcohol-related content should require heavier restrictions to censor children from potentially harmful habits. Additionally, institutions such as fraternities that are known to entrench themselves in college party culture reinforce hypermasculinity and promote underage drinking; often excused as tradition. While abolishing Greek life may reduce the practice of hazing, binge drinking, and sexual assault, this short-term resolution will not completely eliminate the issue as this culture has been promoted in films for generations. Not

²⁰ Jackson M Kristina, Janssen, Tim, Nancy P Barnett, Michelle L Rogers, Kerri L Hayes, and James Sargent. “Exposure to Alcohol Content in Movies and Initiation of Early Drinking Milestones.” Essay. In *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 42, 42:184–94. Wiley Blackwell, n.d.

²¹ Kaplan, Karen. "Movies with Drinking Need R Rating, Study Says; Teens Who See Alcohol Used in Films are More Likely to Imbibe and have Related Troubles, Researchers Say." Los Angeles Times, Apr 19, 2015. <https://login.libproxy.newschool.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/movies-with-drinking-need-r-rating-study-says/docview/1674063845/se-2>.

only should educational institutions require stronger controls on on-campus events but films should have more restricted ratings to prevent premature exposure to alcohol. Many gravitate towards college drinking subconsciously because the current method to resolve these issues is insufficient. Alcohol and substance abuse can be a destructive path that individuals should be continuously aware of and the prevention of potentially fatal accidents begins with acknowledging the flaws in our system.

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