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**Come On... Have Another Drink!  
College Students' Perceptions of Compliance-Gaining Strategies Used for Drinking  
Alcohol**

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Abstract

This study investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of compliance-gaining strategies used to encourage alcohol consumption in friendship relationships. Three hundred sixty-five participants indicated which compliance-gaining strategies they used with friends to get them to drink alcohol, how often they used the strategy, the effectiveness of the strategy, and gender differences. The data indicated that undergraduate students perceived differences among the compliance-gaining strategies for use, frequency, and effectiveness.

Alcoholic consumption among college students is on the rise (Glassman, 2002; Mitka, 2009). Lang (1997) reported that the college environment actually influences the peer to peer encouragement of alcoholic consumption. Gfroerer, Greenblatt, and Wright (1997) found that the college students who did not live with their parents compared to college students who lived with their parents were more likely to heavily consume alcohol.

For college students, the decision to consume alcohol is motivated by interaction with friends. Clapp, Shillington, and Segars (2000) investigated the contexts in which college students binge drink and the likelihood that students will drink more when among peers. The researchers found that alcohol consumption was positively correlated with the presence of friends. Peers influence drinking behavior. Abrams, Hoptrow, Hulbert, and Frings (2006) found that people feel more comfortable and less risky to drink when in a group setting. Benton, Benton, and Downey (2006) found that students perceive drinking with friends as a protective strategy. Having friends present reduces the harm that may occur from heavy drinking. Also, Clapp, Shillington, and Segars found, that friends look after each other during heavy alcohol consumption. Friends inherently create a trusting environment. Therefore, compliance requests to drink from friends may present a situation that leaves receivers particularly vulnerable to persuasion but what strategies are being used and how frequently?

Compliance-gaining research is focused on the options that individuals make about what to communicate when attempting to persuade others to behave in a specific manner. Wheelless, Baraclough, and Stewart (1983) defined compliance-gaining as “the communicative behavior in which an agent engages so as to elicit from a target some agent-selected behavior” (p. 111). Much of the compliance-gaining research has concentrated on classifying and identifying the types of strategies employed to achieve compliance.

Investigating research on persuasion, Marwell and Schmitt (1967) developed a questionnaire to determine individuals’ tendencies to use certain strategies to get others to comply. Marwell and Schmitt identified 16 power-based compliance-gaining techniques—threat, promise, positive expertise, negative expertise, liking, pre-giving, aversive stimulation, debt, moral appeal, positive self-feeling, negative self-feeling, positive altercasting, negative altercasting, altruism, positive esteem, and negative esteem.

Previous research has not tested the use of Marwell and Schmitt’s compliance-gaining techniques used to encourage friends to drink. Conversely, Harrington (1995) examined alcohol refusal requests and found that, based on politeness theory, refusals with greater face support were received more favorably. Harrington (1997) also examined the complexity of the messages that college students use to persuade peers to drink alcohol. In an experimental situation where participants’ compliance attempts were recorded and then coded, Harrington’s hypotheses were supported. Simple offer was the most common strategy and most initial offers were simple. Most second offers were what Harrington, building from Alberts, Hecht, Miller-Rassulo, and Kirsek’s (1992) conceptualization, defined as complex. Specifically, these strategies emphasized the benefits, availability, minimization of risk, appeal to group norms, and facilitation of alcohol consumption.

Measuring the use of Marwell and Schmitt’s compliance-gaining techniques in

college drinking context is valuable. Understanding the strategies used to encourage friends to drink will inform compliance research and will be helpful in the development of campaigns for effective refusals of alcohol (Dunleavy & Campbell, 2006). Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What compliance-gaining technique(s) do college students identify as being likely to use with friends to drink alcohol?
- RQ 2: With what frequency do college students report using specific compliance-gaining technique(s) with friends to drink alcohol?
- RQ 3: What is the effectiveness of the compliance-gaining technique(s) that college students report using with friends to drink alcohol?
- RQ 4: Are there gender differences for the compliance-gaining technique(s) used with friends to drink alcohol?

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were 365 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory communication courses at a large Midwestern university. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 45 ( $M = 21.16$ ,  $SD = .96$ ). Of the 365 subjects, 164 (44.93%) were male; 34 (9%) were ages eighteen, 281 (77%) were 19-24, 27 (7%) were 25-30, and 23 (6%) were over 30. 126 (34%) were freshman, 139 (38%) were sophomore, 73 (20%) were juniors, 23 (6%) were seniors. Due to the sensitivity of asking a question about illegal drug use (it is illegal for people under the age of 21 to consume alcohol), we could not obtain information about alcohol consumption.

### *Procedure*

Participants were asked to imagine a hypothetical situation where they were trying to persuade another friend to drink alcohol. They were asked to rate the likelihood, frequency, and effectiveness of using various compliance-gaining strategies. The questionnaire took approximately thirty minutes to complete. As an incentive, participants received research credit for completing the questionnaire. An alternative assignment was available.

### *Measurement*

*Compliance-gaining strategies.* Participants were given a list of 16 compliance-gaining strategies based on Marwell and Schmitt's typology. After each strategy, a description of that strategy was provided. For example, "Aversive Stimulation – Actor continuously punishes target making cessation contingent on compliance. "You forbid Chris to talk to you and tell him/her that he/she can not talk to you until he/she drinks." The questionnaire was divided into three different sections. First, participants were asked to rate their perceptions of the likelihood that they would use specific compliance-gaining strategies. Participants rated these items on 7-point Likert-type scale from (1) *Extremely Likely* to (7) *Extremely Unlikely*. Second, participants were asked about the frequency that they would use each of the 16 compliance-gaining strategies to persuade a friend to drink alcohol. Participants rated these items on a 7-point Likert-type scale from (1) *Always* to (7) *Never*. Third, participants rated the effectiveness of each of these strategies on a 7-point Likert type scale from (1) *Extremely Effective* to (7) *Extremely Ineffective*. Cronbach alphas for each of the sections were .94, .92, and .90 respectively.

## Results

The first research question looked at the likelihood that college students would use each of the compliance-gaining techniques to persuade a friend to drink alcohol. Results revealed that three compliance-gaining techniques were classified as “extremely likely” to be used. First, college students reported using “Negative Self-Feeling”, which is defined as “You will feel worse about yourself if you do not comply. For instance, you tell Chris that she/he will feel excluded or indifferent if he/she does not drink.” Two hundred thirty one or 63.3 % of the participants reported that they would most likely use this technique ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = .48$ ). Second, “Positive Self-Feeling – You will feel better about yourself if you comply. For instance, you tell Chris that she/he will feel included or part-of-the-gang if he/she does drink” ( $M = 1.68$ ,  $SD = .46$ ). Lastly, “Positive Expertise – If you comply you will be rewarded because of “the nature of things. For instance, you tell Chris that Italians believe that dinking wine is good for lowering cholesterol. So, drinking is good for Chris” was the third most likely used technique ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ).

The second research question looked at the frequency of how often participants used a certain compliance-gaining technique. Findings revealed two frequently strategies. First, debt ( $M = 1.56$ ,  $SD = .46$ ), which is a situation where the other individual should comply because of past favors. “You point out that you have sacrificed and saved up money to drink at the bar and he/she owes it to you to be your drinking buddy.” Second, negative expertise ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = .72$ ), which was defined as, “if you do not comply you will be punished because of ‘the nature of things. “You point out to Chris that others will not find Chris sociable or friendly if Chris does not drink.”

The third research question explored what compliance-gaining strategies college students perceived as effective. The highest rated strategy was threat ( $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = .14$ ), which states “if you do not comply I will punish you”. The second highest was negative self-feeling ( $M = 1.34$ ,  $SD = .56$ ), which states “You will feel worse about yourself if you do not comply.” An example of this is, “You tell Chris that she/he will feel excluded or indifferent if he/she does not drink.” The third highest rated strategy was negative esteem ( $M = 1.47$ ,  $SD = .34$ ), which occurs when “people you value will think worse of you if you do not comply” or “You tell Chris that everyone at the bar will be very disappointed (in him) if does not drink.”

The fourth research question looked at differences between men and women. A *t*-test was conducted between men and women. The only compliance-gaining technique that differed was altruism, which is “I need your compliance very badly, so do it for me” or “You tell Chris that you really want very badly for him/her to be more social and that you wish he/she would drink more as a favor to you.” Results revealed that males perceived this technique as more effective and used it more frequently than females [ $M = 1.47$ ,  $t(351) = 8.76$ ,  $p < .03$ ].

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the compliance-gaining strategies that college students perceive using to encourage a friend to drink alcohol. Perceptions of frequency and effectiveness were also examined. Also, this study looked at the differences between males’ and females’ perceptions on compliance-gaining and drinking

alcohol. The results indicated that there are certain strategies that college students view as effective and certain ones that are not effective.

First, college students reported that negative self-feeling was a strategy that they would be most likely to use to persuade a friend to drink alcohol. Second, college students reported using debt the most frequently, which is a situation where the other individual should comply because of past favors. Third, threat was perceived as the most effective. Fourth, the compliance-gaining technique which men found to be more effective than women was altruism. Why isn't the strategy students perceive as most effective what they would be most likely to use? Threats are often an effective persuasion strategy but, as Gass and Seiter (2007) noted, persuaders realize that threats damage relationships and thus one might expect that this strategy would be unlikely in the context of friends.

Our results appear to be similar to two of Harrington, (1997) and Alberts, Hecht, Miller-Rassulo, and Kirsek's (1992) complex offer strategies. The negative self-feeling and positive self feeling strategies seem consistent with appeal to group norms. While positive expertise is conceptually similar to minimization of risk.

All in all, college students definitely perceive differences among the compliance-gaining strategies for use, frequency, and effectiveness in the context of asking a friend to drink alcohol. Findings indicated that college students perceive drinking with their friends as a distinctive type of interaction and results supported previous implications (Benton, Benton, & Downey, 2006). Understanding more about these strategies will help to realize more about college drinking behaviors, ways to prevent drinking, and ways to resist drinking.

As with any study, there are certain limitations that must be addressed. Burleson et. al (1988) were concerned about item selection lists as a data collection procedure. They reported that participants tended to select strategies that were the most socially appropriate. But the results of the current study seem counter to this potential threat to the validity of the data. Negative feeling was the most likely strategy to be used by participants which does not seem to be the most socially desirable response. We trust that responses were honest. The questionnaire design of the study provided responses that participants selected rather than creating responses. Other studies have encouraged the use of experimental situations in order to reduce the effect of priming participants to particular strategies (Harrington, 1997). Also, drinking behavior was not questioned in this study. Hence, there might have been several non-drinkers or heavy drinkers in the study, but we expect that the sample approximated a typical cross section of college students.

Future studies investigating college students' perceptions of drinking should also incorporate more variables that look at persuasion and persuasive messages. Moreover, future research should look at other variables related to college drinking, such as perceptions of smoking and/or binge drinking. Future research should also focus on the consequences of obtaining compliance for drinking. Overall, alcoholic consumption among college students is important to investigate given the related risks.

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