

Emerging Adults' Self-Identified Peer Crowd Affiliations, Risk Behavior, and Social–Emotional Adjustment in College

Emerging Adulthood
2017, Vol. 5(2) 143–148
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DOI: 10.1177/2167696816665055
journals.sagepub.com/home/eax



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Abstract

Although peer crowd affiliations have been studied extensively in adolescence, less is known about the crowd structure of emerging adults. The current study tested whether college students' self-reported crowd affiliations were uniquely associated with a broad range of adjustment indices. Participants were 588 emerging adults at a small liberal arts college in the Western United States ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.07$, $SD = 1.34$; range = 18–26; 411 women). Exploratory factor analysis revealed that the peer crowds examined were best described by four underlying crowd dimensions (i.e., *social*, *athletic*, *scholastic*, and *counterculture*). Regression analyses showed that *scholastic* and *athletic* affiliations predicted social–emotional adjustment and low-risk-related behaviors. *Social* and *counterculture* identification predicted risk-related behaviors. However, while *social* affiliation predicted social–emotional adjustment, affiliation with the *counterculture* crowd predicted high levels of loneliness and low belongingness. The results highlight the importance of crowd affiliations in emerging adulthood and their implications for college students' adjustment.

Keywords

peers, college, risk-taking, adjustment, loneliness

The primary goal of this study was to examine whether emerging adults' self-reported peer crowd affiliations were associated with important aspects of their adjustment to college—emotional connection to peers and the campus community and engagement in risk-taking behaviors. We looked to emerging adults' crowd affiliations as a potentially important explanatory variable, given that self-identification with peer subgroups or crowds has been identified as a critical factor in shaping adolescents' emotional, behavioral, and academic adjustment (Cross & Fletcher, 2009). Adolescents' self-reported crowd affiliations are associated with their social activities, friendships, romantic relationships, sense of acceptance, belonging, and identity. They are also important indicators of health risk behaviors (Mackey & La Greca, 2008) as well as social–emotional functioning (Prinstein & La Greca, 2002).

A few studies have examined the relationship between peer crowd affiliations in college and students' risk-taking behavior using labels common in adolescence. Stapleton, Turrisi, and Hillhouse (2008) showed that peer crowd identification predicted rates of artificial tanning over and above gender and skin type, with “populars” reporting higher rates of usage than other students. Sessa (2007) found that students who identified as “populars,” “deviants,” and “jocks” drank more than other students.

Two studies (Ashmore, Del Boca, & Beebe, 2002; Ashmore, Griffo, Green, & Moreno, 2007) identified peer crowd affiliations unique to college. They used common adolescent labels

as a starting point and then asked participants to confirm which crowds were present in college and to add labels for crowds which they thought were missing from the list. Results showed that the crowd structure was best conceptualized along two primary dimensions—party oriented versus academically oriented. The researchers did not, however, explore whether college students' self-reported affiliations with party-oriented versus academically oriented peer crowds were associated with their adjustment. Accordingly, we sought to extend current understanding of the relation between self-reported peer crowd affiliations unique to emerging adults and a broad range of adjustment indices.

The present study was designed to address two primary objectives. First, following the procedure outlined by Delsing, ter Bogt, Engels, and Meeus (2007), we used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to determine the structure underlying college students' crowd identifications. We anticipated that the crowd dimensions would organize around the main themes of collegiate life—academic, social, and athletic pursuits. We also anticipated that we would find a crowd dimension organized

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around deviant lifestyles. Research with adolescents, using similar methods, has demonstrated positive correlations among self-identified crowds (e.g., Mackey & La Greca, 2008), so we did not expect to find orthogonal dimensions. Second, we sought to examine the implications of students' self-reported crowd affiliations. We examined predictive associations between crowd identification and adjustment variables that included indices of social-emotional adjustment (i.e., loneliness and campus belongingness) and risk behavior. We hypothesized that *scholastic* and *athletic* crowd affiliations would be associated with social-emotional adjustment and low-risk behavior. In contrast, we hypothesized that *social* identification would be associated with both social-emotional adjustment and engagement in risk behaviors. Finally, we hypothesized that affiliation with crowds organized around deviant lifestyles would predict low social-emotional adjustment and high-risk behaviors. Given our interest in understanding how emerging adults' perceived affiliations affected their adjustment, the study relied on self-report measures to assess students' peer crowd identifications. Self-report and peer-report measures of crowd affiliations are congruent and relate similarly to adolescents' adjustment (Urberg, Tolson, & Halliday-Sher, 2000). We also asked students to indicate their level of affiliation with a variety of crowds (rather than selecting a single crowd), given evidence that, starting in adolescence, individuals tend to identify with multiple crowds (Delsing, ter Bogt, Engels, & Meeus, 2007).

Method

Participants

Participants were 588 college students ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.07$; $SD = 1.34$, range = 18–26). The majority of participants were female (70.1%). The ethnic breakdown of the sample (assessed via open-ended self-report) was 4.6% African American, 20.5% Asian American, 8.4% Latino, 58.9% White, and 7.6% other. Twenty-four percent were first-year students, 28.7% were second year, 18.9% were third year, and 28.5% were fourth year.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a small liberal arts college in an urban city in the Western United States via e-mail and social media. The students on this campus are racially and ethnically diverse and the majority are from lower middle- to middle-class backgrounds (71% receive financial aid and 21% are Federal Pell Grant recipients). Nineteen percent of the students are first-generation college students. Participants completed an anonymous online Qualtrics survey in exchange for extra credit and the opportunity to win 1 of 28 US\$25 gift cards.

Measures

We measured the following variables: (1) *risk behaviors* (adapted from the Reckless Behavior Questionnaire, Teese & Bradley, 2008; e.g., "Had intercourse with a nonexclusive partner," $\alpha = .83$ for sexual risk, $\alpha = .74$ for drug risk, $\alpha = .70$ for

academic risk, and $\alpha = .66$ for alcohol risk), (2) *loneliness* (University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) Loneliness Scale, Russell, 1996; e.g., "How often do you feel isolated from others?" $\alpha = .93$), (3) *college belongingness* (Asher & Weeks, 2014; e.g., "I feel welcome at this school"; $\alpha = .90$), and (4) *peer crowd affiliations*. We assessed students' self-reported peer crowd affiliations using a two-step procedure. First, following Brown's Social Type Interview Procedure (Brown, 1989), we conducted focus groups to identify crowds present at the college. The participants in the focus groups were students from research methods classes in the social sciences. Next, we adapted the Peer Crowd Questionnaire (La Greca & Harrison, 2005) to reflect the 16 crowds identified by the focus groups. Participants were asked to indicate how strongly they affiliated with each of the peer crowds (e.g., "How strongly do you affiliate with the 'partier' crowd?"). For all survey instruments, participants responded using a 5-point Likert-type scale.

Results

Factor Analysis

An EFA with oblique (Promax) rotation was conducted to determine whether the peer crowd groups represented a smaller subset of meaningful dimensions. Three criteria were used to determine the number of factors to retain: eigenvalues larger than one, visual inspection of the scree plot, and parallel analysis. Four factors had eigenvalues larger than 1. Visual inspection of the scree plot showed that there were four factors above the curve's inflection point (i.e., where the curve begins to level off). Finally, we used parallel analysis following the procedure and SPSS (Version 23.0) syntax outlined by O'Connor (2000). Parallel analyses were conducted twice, first using the random data generation approach and then using the raw data permutation approach. In both approaches, we generated 1,000 data sets and specified our confidence interval at the 95th percentile. Using both approaches, the results showed that four of the eigenvalues in our data set were larger than their corresponding 95th percentile eigenvalues. All three tests converged on the conclusion that a four-factor solution best represented the data (see Table 1).

Factor 1 was defined by positive loadings of the "partier," "popular," and "greek" crowds and the negative loading of the "loner" crowd and was labeled *social*. Factor 2 was defined by positive loadings of the "athlete" and "jock" crowds and was labeled *athletic*. Factor 3 was defined by positive loadings of the "elite," "leader," "ethnic," "academic," "foreign exchange," and "performing arts" crowds and was labeled *scholastic*. Factor 4 was defined by positive loadings of the "druggystoner," "slacker," and "hipster" crowds and was labeled *counterculture*. One item, "goth," was removed due to a factor loading below .30 (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999). For each participant, we generated summary *social*, *athletic*, *scholastic*, and *counterculture* scores by averaging their affiliation ratings on the crowds that made up each dimension. For instance, participants' *athletic* score was the

Table 1. Exploratory Factor Analysis on the Crowd Affiliation Items.

Crowd	1. Social	2. Athletic	3. Scholastic	4. Counterculture
Partier	.85			
Popular	.69			
Greek	.60			
Loner	-.32			
Jock		.96		
Athlete		.74		
Elite			.63	
Leader			.59	
Ethnic			.48	
Academic			.43	
Foreign exchange			.43	
Performing arts			.38	
Druggystoner				.69
Slacker				.56
Hipster				.52
Eigenvalue	3.55	1.98	1.66	1.42
Variance explained	22.16%	12.38%	10.36%	8.84%

Note. N = 588. Only items with loadings >.30 are shown. Structured matrix derived with principal axis factoring extraction, promax rotation with Kaiser normalization.

average of their self-reported affiliation with the “athlete” and “jock” crowds. Prior to computing participants’ composite score on the *social* dimension, “loner” was reverse scored, so that higher scores on this item would reflect stronger identification with the *social* dimension of collegiate life. The four composite scores were used in the subsequent analyses.

Multiple Regression Analyses

Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations for the main study variables are presented in Table 2. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to uncover the unique contributions of the crowd affiliation variables in predicting students’ risk-taking behavior (Table 3) and social-emotional adjustment (Table 4). The variance inflation factor for each predictor did not exceed 1.5, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern (Stevens, 1992).

For exploratory purposes, all models described in this article were first conducted with gender and race/ethnicity entered as covariates and as potential moderator variables. We did not find evidence for a strong link between either gender or race/ethnicity and adjustment. Moreover, our analyses failed to reveal any significant Gender × Predictor or Race/Ethnicity × Predictor interactions. The final models include gender and race/ethnicity as covariates. However, they do not include Gender × Predictor or Race/Ethnicity × Predictor interactions.

Total model statistics. The total models were statistically significant. The amount of variance explained by the predictors in accounting for the risk-taking variables was as follows: drug risk ($R^2 = .41, p < .001$), academic risk ($R^2 = .07, p < .001$),

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between the Crowd Affiliation Variables and Indices of Adjustment.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Social	—									
2. Athletic	.31**	—								
3. Scholastic	.23**	.18**	—							
4. Counterculture	.30**	.15*	.22**	—						
5. Drug risk	.29**	.02	-.09*	.56**	—					
6. Alcohol risk	.38**	.20**	-.04	.28**	.45**	—				
7. Sex risk	.32**	.14*	.05	.30**	.40**	.42**	—			
8. Academic risk	.03	-.01	-.03	.26**	.27**	.19**	.42**	—		
9. Loneliness	-.38**	-.22**	-.23	-.03	.03	-.04	-.05	.10*	—	
10. Belongingness	.33**	.16**	.22	-.04	-.05	.01	.08	-.03	-.55**	—
M (SD)	2.85 (0.91)	2.17 (1.27)	1.93 (0.83)	2.58 (0.74)	1.65 (0.86)	1.35 (0.49)	1.56 (0.96)	2.22 (0.86)	2.37 (0.60)	3.85 (0.90)
Actual range	1-4.55	1-5	1-4.50	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-4.53	1-5

Note. N = 588. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Table 3. Regression Analyses Predicting Risk-Taking Behavior From the Crowd Affiliation Variables.

Predictors	Drug Risk		Academic Risk		Alcohol Risk		Sex Risk	
	β	sr^2	β	sr^2	β	sr^2	β	sr^2
Gender	-.02	.00	-.06	.00	.01	.00	-.03	.00
Asian	-.04	.00	.09	.01	-.02	.00	-.03	.00
Latino	.01	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Other	.02	.00	.10*	.01	-.06	.00	-.01	.00
Social	.20***	.03	-.02	.00	.33***	.09	.25***	.05
Athletic	-.12**	.01	-.03	.00	.08	.01	.00	.00
Scholastic	-.23***	.04	-.09*	.01	-.18***	.03	-.06	.00
Counterculture	.58***	.26	.28***	.06	.22***	.04	.24***	.05

Note. $N = 588$. All values represent standardized beta weights, sr^2 is the squared semipartial correlation coefficient, the percentage of variance accounted for uniquely by the parameter. Gender was coded as 0 = males, 1 = females. Race/ethnicity was collapsed into a four-category variable: Caucasian, Asian, Latino, and Other. The race/ethnicity groups were dummy coded (0, 1: reference = Caucasian) for entry in the regression analyses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Regression Analyses Predicting Social-Emotional Adjustment From the Crowd Affiliation Variables.

Predictors	Loneliness		Belongingness	
	β	sr^2	β	sr^2
Gender	-.05	.00	.10*	.01
Asian	.02	.00	-.05	.00
Latino	-.01	.00	.01	.00
Other	.08	.01	-.05	.00
Social	-.34***	.07	.30***	.07
Athletic	-.13**	.01	.07	.00
Scholastic	-.14**	.02	.23***	.04
Counterculture	.10*	.01	-.18***	.03

Note. $N = 588$. All values represent standardized beta weights, sr^2 is the squared semipartial correlation coefficient, the percentage of variance accounted for uniquely by the parameter. Gender was coded as 0 = males, 1 = females. Race/ethnicity was collapsed into a four-category variable: Caucasian, Asian, Latino, and Other. The race/ethnicity groups were dummy coded (0, 1: reference = Caucasian) for entry in the regression analyses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

alcohol risk ($R^2 = .21, p < .001$), and sex risk ($R^2 = .15, p < .001$).

The predictors also accounted for a significant proportion of variance in explaining the social-emotional variables: loneliness ($R^2 = .13, p < .001$) and college belongingness ($R^2 = .14, p < .001$).

Drug risk. *Social* and *counterculture* crowd affiliations positively predicted drug-related risk-taking behaviors, whereas *scholastic* and *athletic* crowd affiliations negatively predicted drug-related risk-taking behaviors.

Academic risk. *Counterculture* crowd affiliation positively predicted academic-related risk-taking behaviors, whereas *scholastic* crowd affiliation negatively predicted academic-related risk-taking behaviors.

Alcohol risk. *Social* and *counterculture* crowd affiliations positively predicted alcohol-related risk-taking behaviors, whereas *scholastic* crowd affiliation negatively predicted alcohol-related risk-taking behaviors.

Sex risk. *Social* and *counterculture* crowd affiliations positively predicted sex-related risk-taking behaviors

Social-emotional adjustment. *Counterculture* crowd affiliation positively predicted loneliness, whereas *social*, *athletic*, and *scholastic* crowd affiliations negatively predicted loneliness. *Social* and *scholastic* crowd affiliations positively predicted college belongingness, whereas *counterculture* affiliation negatively predicted college belongingness.

Discussion

Results of the study revealed that, in emerging adulthood, self-identified peer crowd affiliations play a role in predicting students' adjustment to college. Students' patterns of peer group identification were best conceptualized by four underlying dimensions that we labeled *social*, *athletic*, *scholastic*, and *counterculture*. These dimensions capture the main areas of focus on college campuses in North America: (1) social life; (2) sports and fitness; and (3) intellectual, cultural, political, and environmental pursuits. Also identified was a dimension which reflects culturally and behaviorally deviant lifestyles. *Social* affiliation predicted social-emotional adjustment and risk-taking behaviors. In contrast, scholastically affiliated emerging adults felt connected socially, reported low levels of loneliness, and avoided risk-taking behaviors. *Counterculture* affiliation was set apart by its association with low social-emotional adjustment and high risk-taking behaviors. *Athletic* affiliation did not figure as prominently in explaining students' adjustment, it only incrementally predicted low loneliness and low drug use, and this likely reflects the position of athletics on this campus. On an National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division III campus, sports are not students' primary commitments and their identities are tied to

other aspects of collegiate life. We predict that identification with this type of crowd will be more important at schools with elite athletic programs.

Considerable resources have been devoted to addressing college students' health-compromising behaviors, emotional well-being, and campus connectedness. School administrators concerned about students' adjustment will likely benefit from understanding the peer subgroups that students identify with. Consistent with this view, research has demonstrated the effectiveness of antismoking campaigns that differentially target adolescents based on their identification with mainstream (i.e., "elites," "academics") versus nonmainstream (i.e., "deviants," "counterculture") crowds (Moran, Murphy, & Sussman, 2012).

Despite its contributions, this study was not without its limitations. First, all of the measures relied on self-report instruments and were collected at a single time point. Additionally, the participants in our study were from a small liberal arts college and, as such, the findings might not generalize to emerging adults in other types of college environments. It is also noteworthy that the majority of our participants were female. Although the gender composition of our sample reflects the gender imbalance on this campus, and at most undergraduate institutions, a different picture of the crowd dimensions important in emerging adulthood might emerge with a more gender-balanced sample, or on a campus where there are more males than females (such as Caltech or Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)). Future research should explore emerging adults' crowd affiliations in a broader range of college environments using longitudinal designs and a multi-informant approach. We predict that, even with these improvements in methodology, crowd affiliation will remain a significant predictor of social-emotional and behavioral adjustment in emerging adulthood, just as it has proven to in adolescence. We also predict that, while campus-specific and region-specific variation in crowd labels will undoubtedly be identified (such as MIT's "hackers" or Cal Poly's "surfer nerds"), they will organize themselves around the underlying crowd structure that we identified.

Authors' Note

The authors express appreciation to Keli Butame, Jesse Fischer, Sloane Fisher, Elizabeth Kosin, Rachael Lim, Julia Newell, and Kimberly Orpinela for their assistance in measure development and recruitment.

Authors' Contribution

Andrea Hopmeyer contributed to conception and design, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation; drafted the manuscript; critically revised the manuscript; gave final approval; and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy. Tal Medovoy contributed to conception and design, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation; drafted the manuscript; critically revised the manuscript; gave final approval; and agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported in part by a fellowship to the second author from the Ford Research Mentor's Endowment.

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