

Exploring the Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Alcohol Use Among Adolescents

Karina Gonzalez, MSW – Department of Social Work
Research Advisor: Erica Lizano

Abstract

Substance use among adolescents continues to be a public health issue that desperately needs to be addressed. Youth are significantly impacted by substance use, with estimates indicating 70% of youth having engaged in alcohol use by the end of high school (Fisher et al., 2017). The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and alcohol use among adolescents. The study findings suggest that there is a statistically significant relationship between self-esteem and alcohol use, with those reporting higher self-esteem being more likely to have never engaged in alcohol use.

Introduction

Significance of the Study

- Alcohol is the most prevalent substance used among young people in the United States, with experimentation in early adolescence being a firm predictor of future alcohol use in adulthood (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021; Riquelme et al., 2018).
- Adolescent drinking typically begins at an early age, with 15% of youth initiating alcohol use before the age of 13 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration [SAMHSA], 2021).
- Excessive drinking has accounted for approximately more than 3,500 deaths and 210,000 years of probable life lost among those under the age of 21 (CDC, 2021).
- The estimated cost for underage drinking in the United States is \$24 billion, with roughly 119,000 emergency room visits (CDC, 2021).

Research Question

What is the relationship between self-esteem and alcohol use among adolescents?

Hypothesis

The researcher hypothesized that low levels of self-esteem would be associated with high levels of alcohol use among adolescents compared to those with high levels of self-esteem.



Literature Review

Self-Esteem Among Adolescents

- Researchers found greater sensation seeking behavior and rebelliousness to be linked with a 50% greater likelihood of having low self-esteem (McClure et al., 2010).
- Literature indicates that youth who experience low self-esteem maintain a higher likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviors (Lee et al., 2018).

Alcohol Use Among Adolescents

- In a 2019 national survey, among adolescents, more than 7 million youth/young adults between the ages of 12 and 20 reported alcohol use, and 4 million reported binge drinking in the past 30 days. An additional one million reported heavy alcohol use (SAMHSA, 2021).

Self-Esteem and Alcohol Use Among Youth

- Recent research identifies low self-esteem as a significant risk factor for substance use initiation among youth (Lee et al., 2018).
- In his research exploring the role of self-esteem on alcohol use, Glozah (2014) found a negative association on self-esteem and alcohol use with low self-esteem linked to higher levels of alcohol use among adolescents.
- Study results indicate there to be high rates of substance use disorders and lower self-esteem among homeless runaway youth (Maccio & Schuler, 2012).

Gaps in Research

- Gaps in the existing research on the relationship between self-esteem and alcohol use among adolescents include studies with small sample sizes. Therefore, findings are not generalizable to other populations, such as youth residing in other areas of the United States (Fisher et al., 2017; Glozah, 2014; Lockhart et al., 2018; Maccio & Shuler, 2012).
- Another limitation in the current research on the relationship between self-esteem and alcohol use among adolescents includes the use of a nonexperimental methodology as it does not allow for the control of extraneous variables (Riquelme et al., 2018).
- Most of the previous research studies on the relationship between self-esteem and alcohol use in youth have utilized cross-sectional designs, preventing researchers from drawing definitive conclusions about intraindividual changes in psychosocial vulnerability (Riquelme et al., 2018).

Methods

The present study is a cross-sectional study that uses secondary data from the Monitoring the Future’s 2018 surveys of eighth and 10th- grade students. The sample includes $N=29,980$ students selected from a nationally representative sample of youth in the contiguous United States.

Measures

- Self-Esteem (Independent Variable)**
 - Self-esteem among participants was assessed using three questions:
 - “On the whole, I'm satisfied with myself”
 - “Sometimes I think that I am no good at all”
 - “I feel I do not have much to be proud of.”
- Alcohol Use (Dependent Variable)**
 - Alcohol use among participants was assessed using the following questions:
 - “On how many occasions (if any) have you had alcoholic beverages to drink - more than just a few sips . . . in your lifetime?”
 - “On how many occasions (if any) have you been drunk or very high from drinking alcoholic beverages . . . during the last 12 months?”
 - “When (if ever) did you first try an alcoholic beverage -- more than just a few sips?”
 - “During the last 12 months, how often (if ever) have you used alcohol in each of the following places? At friends' houses”.
- Socio-demographic Variables**
 - The five socio-demographic items of the study included
 - Age
 - Sex
 - Race/Ethnicity
 - Living Location
 - Grade

SELF-ESTEEM



Results

Chi-Square Tests

The variables studied (i.e., self-satisfaction, negative self belief (I am no good), and low-self pride) all had significant relationships to lifetime alcohol use, frequency of drunk occasions in the last 12 months, grade level of first-time alcohol use, and frequency of drinking at friends’ houses ($p<0.05$). Youth who reported no previous history of drinking alcohol were more likely to agree with the statement, “On the whole, I'm satisfied with myself” and disagree with the statements, “Sometimes I think that I am no good at all” and “I feel I do not have much to be proud of.”

Table 1

Chi-Square Test Results of the Relationship Between Self-satisfaction and Number of Drunk

Occasions in the Last 12 Months

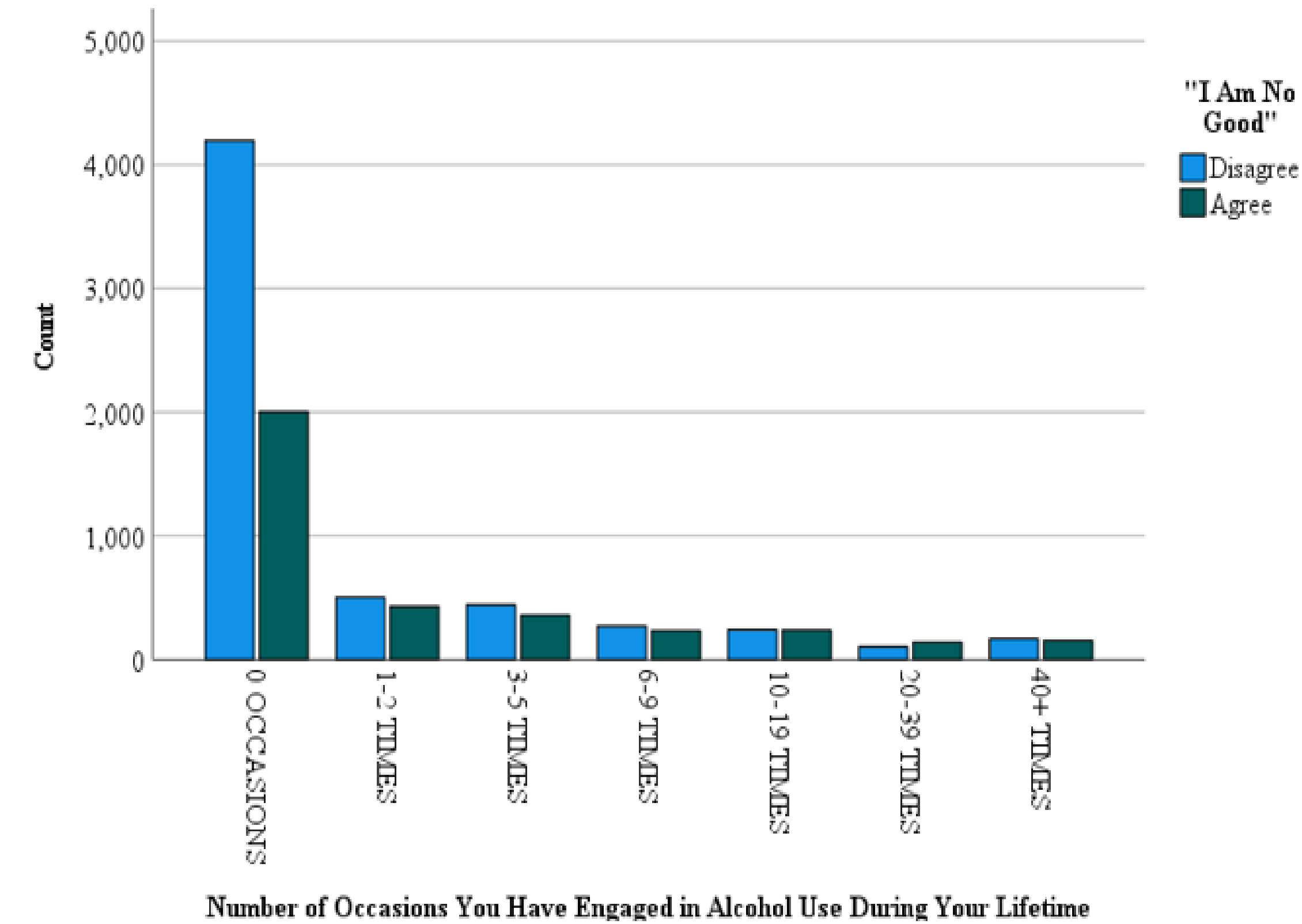
Number of Occasions You Have Been Drunk in the Last 12 Months *	Self-satisfaction			
	Disagree		Agree	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
0 occasions	1,786	22.9	6,016	77.1
1-2 times	249	30.6	566	69.4
3-5 times	78	31.5	170	68.5
6-9 times	35	28.5	88	71.5
10-19 times	28	29.2	68	70.8
20-39 times	10	27.8	26	72.2
40 + times	8	33.3	16	66.7
* $p < 0.05$				



Figure 1

Bar Graph of the Relationship Between Negative Self-belief (I am no Good) and Lifetime Alcohol

Use



Discussion

Study Findings

- The present study found that adolescents with high self-esteem were less likely to have engaged in alcohol use, indicating a significant relationship between self-esteem and alcohol use in youth.

Implications

- The present study findings can be utilized to develop evidence-informed treatments when servicing youth with self-esteem issues and substance use disorders.
- Policy changes at the school district level should consider the implementation of self-esteem curriculums at school sites.

Strengths

- A strength that should be acknowledged is the large, nationally representative sample of eighth- and 10th- grade students. The large sample size of the study and the use of a random sampling method improves the study finding’s generalizability as it provides a close representation of the target population and helps reduce sampling bias.
- The present study’s contribution to the field of social welfare should also be noted as a strength as it addresses the needs of youth by influencing appropriate delivery of services.

Limitations

- The study is cross-sectional, which limits the ability to infer causality between self-esteem and alcohol use.
- The study does not consider other environmental factors that may influence alcohol use among adolescents, such as family dynamics, parenting styles, and peer influences.
- As the study is a secondary analysis of the data from the Monitoring the Future’s (MFT) 2018 self-reported surveys, the study is susceptible to recall bias.
- The study was limited only to youth who identified as Black, White, or Hispanic.

Future Direction

- Future studies can build on the current study by using longitudinal designs to allow for the testing of casual relationships.
- Researchers should consider moderating variables that might impact the relationship between self-esteem and alcohol use (e.g., family dynamics, parenting styles, and peer influences).
- Future studies should expand their racial composition to include participants that identify with other races, such as Native American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and more.
- Researchers should consider implementing strategies that help reduce recall bias (e.g., improving survey questions).

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to Dr. Erica Lizano for her never-ending support and guidance through this research journey. Thank you to my boyfriend for his patience and encouragement throughout these past two years. To my loving sister, thank you for always believing in me, even during the most challenging and stressful times. I would like to thank my incredible brothers for inspiring me every single day through their own commitments and dedications. Lastly, thank you to my parents who have sacrificed so much of their life for my siblings and me. They are the ultimate reason I get to pursue a higher education and career, and for that I am forever grateful.