

Modern Pop Culture and its Psychological Influences on College Culture's Drug and Alcohol Use

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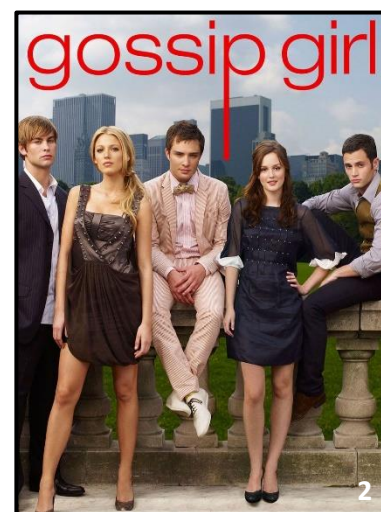
As I stared at the TV screen, dozens of red solo cups were passed around like candy bars among the crowd of teenagers. Brightly colored streamers and balloons lined the walls and ceilings. Once the music got louder, the crowd of young college students got more excited and



energetic, jumping, singing, and dancing around. To me, college looked like it was going to be one big party. I always dreamed of what going off to college would be like. Would I constantly have to study? It didn't look like it at least. Thanks to modern pop culture, I was (sort of) given a picture of what college culture was going to look like.

Pop culture can appear in many different forms: movies, TV shows, music, advertisements, and social media are a few examples. These platforms can be powerful and influential with the messages they evoke towards students. Pop culture has romanticized the use of alcohol and drugs to look like something enjoyable to participate in while in college. This gives the concept of college an enticing picture. Students can be assured knowing that their college experience won't just be about studying and taking tests.

According to the movie "22 Jump Street", students can earn their popularity and form friendships in college by binge-drinking alcohol and doing drugs at frat parties. "Gossip Girl" encourages underage drinking and drug use since it will give someone a higher status in their class. Otherwise, you won't fit in or have a good time. Other TV shows like Netflix's original "Take Your Pills" addresses students taking Adderall to help increase their mental focus, which is great for studying, pulling all-nighters, and getting assignments done efficiently. Popular



songs like “Can’t Feel my Face” by “The Weeknd” references the use of cocaine, while “I Love College” by Asher Roth proudly sings about drinking beer, smoking weed, and doing it all over again for fun. These songs are regularly played at college parties for their catchy lyrics and upbeat tunes.

The power behind modern pop culture lies in the psychological influence it has. Movies, TV, and advertisements are extremely easy ways to influence college students into thinking alcohol and drugs are acceptable to partake in because they are easily accessible to see and portrayed in a positive light. They show people drinking or smoking and pair it with enjoyable



activities. It’s rare to see any alcohol ads on TV featuring sad, depressed people. This says to the viewer that alcohol will make them happy and allow them to have a good time. As mentioned before, “22 Jump Street” portrays college as a place to party and

have fun by drinking and doing drugs. If a viewer is seeing someone drink alcohol or do drugs and they’re enjoying themselves, a positive correlation is made in their mind. The more often these influential messages are shown, the stronger the correlation becomes.

Social media plays an even bigger psychological role in influencing college culture. Several young adults and students in this generation show off their daily lives to others on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. It isn’t uncommon among college students to be scrolling through their social media accounts and spotting a peer drinking or smoking while out at a college party. Social media serves as a great platform for positive reinforcement of these behaviors. A simple click of a button “likes” a person’s post, reinforcing their drinking and smoking behaviors and encouraging them to do it more.



Also, when someone is exposed to posts of their peers drinking, partying, and doing drugs, it activates a powerful system called the Mirror Neuron Effect. Mirror neurons are neurons that fire

in the brain when a person perceives or views an action and decides to act on it themselves. Humans are social beings who want to connect with others, so when we see a peer having fun and with a drink in their hand, it makes us want to do the same thing as them.

What modern pop culture *doesn't* advertise, address, or confront, are the life-threatening health consequences drinking and doing drugs can impose. So how does pop culture do it? How are they able to influence so many students, even entire college campuses, to partake in something that can be dangerous or even deadly? They know what college students want; students want to destress, relax, have fun, fit in, and forget about their problems. Pop culture feeds them the solutions to these problems. By displaying movies and songs about drinking and drug use positively, college students are drawn to them and the substances advertised. If a movie only shows college students using alcohol and drugs and enjoying themselves, why would these students not want to get involved? They see a potential solution and go for it. However, the unfortunate reality about alcohol and drug use is they aren't always about having a good time and relaxing; there can be serious consequences.

Alcohol and drug use have many severe negative effects on college students, especially to those who believe college is only about having fun. In reality, alcohol consumption and drug use can kill and destroy. Each year, students die from alcohol poisoning. Students become victims of alcohol-related sexual assaults and rapes. Many students report facing academic disasters such as



missing their assignments, experiencing memory loss, performing poorly on tests, and failing out of classes. Alcohol and drug use have been linked to anxiety and depression, thoughts of suicide, property damage, physical violence, vandalism, and severe medical problems. Some students can't give up their drinking or drug habits, so they become dangerously addicted,

forced to seek help through counseling. None of these negative impacts are addressed in the pop culture college students are exposed to every day. They are regularly being fooled into thinking their college experience will be one big party rather than a special opportunity to continue their education, find their passionate career goals, and become successful in it.

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