



# The Interplay of Dating, Relationship Commitment, and Drinking Among College Students Participating in Group Drinking

## Abstract

College students tend to drink within groups of friends. However, there has been little research on the dynamics and relationships within these groups. Two basic questions are: “How does dating someone in a drinking group affect college students drinking while in that group?” and “How does relationship commitment affect their drinking?” This study suggests that being in a committed relationship decreases drinking whereas combining drinking and dating without any commitment increases drinking to harmful levels.

## Background

Drinking for most young people is a social and group activity (Harford, 1994; Harford, Wechsler, & Rohman, 1983; Lange & Voas, 2000). Even while acknowledging their importance, groups have remained largely unstudied within the college drinking literature. Within the more general alcohol literature, drinking groups have most frequently been studied either with strictly observational techniques, or through the creation of artificial groups within an artificial bar lab.

College students’ drinking groups warrant thorough investigation. Using multiple research methods, we have begun the systematic examination of what we have coined collegiate Natural Drinking Groups (NDGs) (Lange, Johnson & Reed, 2006). We define a NDG as a collection of two or more people organized to share a social activity centered on drinking who are bonded by friendship or other interpersonal relationships.

The literature suggests that the gender composition of a group affects the drinking of its members. For instance Van de Goor et al. (1990) found single-sex groups of young men drank faster than men in mixed-sex groups, though in mixed-sex groups, young women drank faster than in single-sex female groups. By asking participants about their typical drinking group structure, Senchak, Leonard and Greene (1998) found no effects of group composition on the drinking of college women, yet men in small same-sex groups drank more than men in mixed-sex groups. To our knowledge, though, no studies have tested the impact that dating someone within the NDG may have on drinkers, nor the impact that committed relationships may have on drinking behavior.

In this study, we tested the impact of dating and relationship commitment on drinking among students who participated in NDGs. NDG members almost always have preexisting social bonds. Some members may be in an intimate, committed relationship with someone in the NDG. Other members may be dating a group member without any serious commitment. Relationships may have profound effects on drinking behavior within the group.

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## Hypotheses

- We expected a main effect of relationship commitment: Overall, committed relationships would have a protective effect on risky drinking, whether drinkers’ partners were present in the NDG or not.
- We expected an interaction effect between dating and relationship commitment such that dating in the NDG would only be protective if drinkers were in a committed relationship.

## Method

This study was part of a larger online survey on alcohol and drug use conducted in the Spring of 2008 at a large university in the southwestern United States. The survey was sent to a sample of students randomly selected by the Registrar’s office. In one track of the survey, administered to 514 student drinkers, 414 students reported participation—in the past 28 days—in a group in which at least one person was drinking (i.e., an NDG).

### Sample Characteristics:

- N = 414 drinkers who reported going out with an NDG in the month prior to the survey
- Gender: 63% Female participants (n=261)
- Age: M = 22.04 (SD=3.32)
- Race: 67% were White

### Independent Variables:

- Dating within the NDG: yes / no
- In a committed relationship: yes / no
- Caveat: Independence between these two factors was not obtained, as it often happens when looking at natural categories. Among those in a committed relationship (N = 184), 59% dated someone in the NDG; among those not in a committed relationship (N = 187) only 11% dated in the NDG.

### Outcome Measures:

Drinking quantity during the night that the NDG’s gathered was computed by summing the number of drinks reported for each location that the NDG went to. Six outliers whose total number of drinks was between 31 and 60 were excluded from the analysis.

The valid values for this index ranged from 0 to 28 with 58 drinkers who declined to answer the questions related to number of drinks consumed.

The final valid sample included 350 participants.

## Results

We conducted an analysis of variance on the number of drinks consumed in the NDG with relationship commitment and dating in the NDG as independent variables, and with age and gender as covariates.

**There was a main effect of relationship commitment:** Students who were in a committed relationship (M = 5.87, SD = .38) drank significantly less than those who were not in a committed relationship (M = 8.63, SD = .61,  $F[1,292] = 14.91, p < .001$ ). There was also a

trend for students who were dating in the NDG (M = 7.92, SD = .62) to drink more than those who were not dating in the NDG (M = 6.58, SD = .36,  $F[1,292] = 3.47, p < .07$ ).

These main effects were qualified by an **interaction between dating and relationship commitment** ( $F[1,292] = 6.10, p < .02$ ; Figure 1).

Pairwise comparisons were conducted. Among students not in a committed relationship, those who were dating in the group reported heavier drinking in the NDG than those who were not dating in the group ( $F[1,292] = 6.57, p < .02$ ). Among those in committed relationships, the effect of dating someone in the NDG did not affect their drinking in the NDG ( $F[1,292] = .32, ns$ ). Also, the effect of relationship status was significant for participants who were dating in the NDG ( $F[1,292] = 13.31, p < .001$ ) but not for those not dating in the NDG ( $F[1,292] = 1.98, ns$ ).

We tested the same model on a series of variables pertaining to the NDGs to rule out the possibility that these effects could be accounted by differences in NDGs and in participants’ relations to the NDGs.

Dating and relationship commitment had no significant effects on group size, number of drinkers in

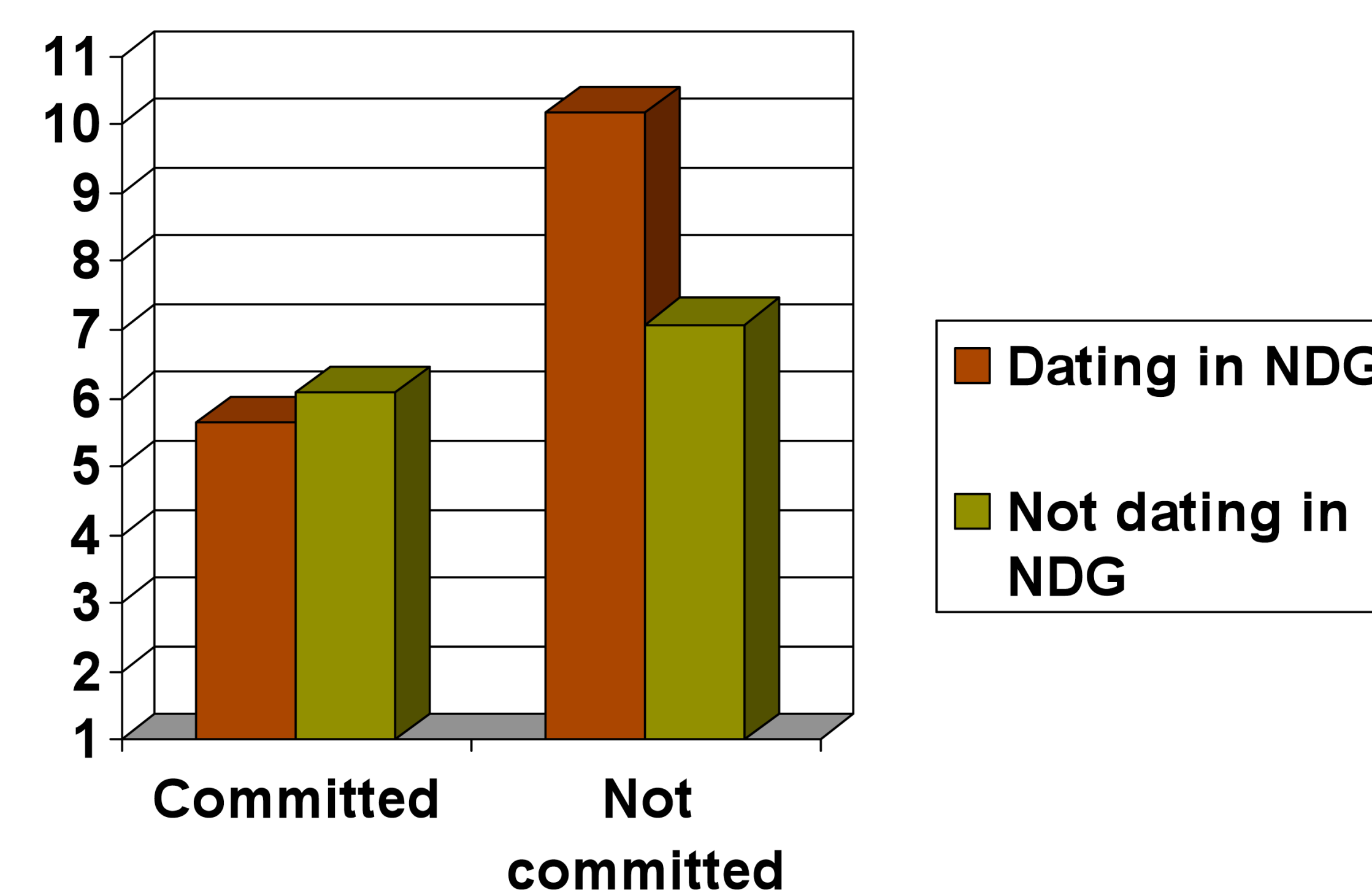


Figure 1. Number of Drinks Consumed in the NDG.

the group, participants’ identification and bond to the group. Thus, those who were in a committed relationship or not, and those who were dating someone in the NDG vs. not dating in the NDG, reported on drinking groups that were equal in sizes, proportion of drinkers in the NDG and that elicited the same levels of identification and bond from participants.

Lastly we conducted another analysis of variance on the number of drinks consumed in the NDG in which gender was entered as a third independent variable rather than a covariate. The goal was to test whether the interaction between dating and relation-

ship commitment differed for men and women. This three-way interaction was not significant ( $F[1,289] = 1.14, ns$ ), indicating that gender did not qualify the interaction presented in Figure 1 and the 2-way interaction remained significant in the model ( $F[1,289] = 4.35, p < .04$ ).

## Conclusion

The lack of independence between dating in the NDG and relationship commitment requires caution when trying to interpret the main effect of a single factor such as relationship commitment. This should be less of a problem when interpreting the interaction, in particular when examining the significance of dating in NDGs for those in a non-committed relationship. Yet, such interaction would need to be replicated on larger samples.

For students who were not in committed relationships, dating in NDGs increased drinking to potentially harmful levels within those groups compared to drinkers who were not dating someone in their NDG.

Dating in the NDG or being in a committed relationship did not affect the size of the NDGs, the proportion of drinkers in the NDGs, or the identification and bond to those groups. Thus these group-related factors could not mediate the effect of dating and relationship commitment on drinking.

These results suggest that prevention efforts should 1) reinforce the role of partners in committed relationships as agents of safer drinking, 2) address the increased risks associated with combining casual dating and group drinking.

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