

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN
IN ROMANIA. SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES,
PREDICTORS AND MODERATORS

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Abstract

This present study aims to examine the individual and social factors, the predictors and moderators of alcohol consumption during COVID-19 lockdown in Romania. In a community sample of 262 participants, we found gender and age differences on the alcohol consumption during the first two months of the outbreak. In addition, we also found that gender, age, and social influence positively predicted alcohol consumption during the lockdown. The research also explored the moderating role of age and gender in predicting the alcohol consumption during COVID-19 lockdown. The results revealed that only gender moderates the link between social influence and alcohol consumption during the outbreak. These results have practical implications by suggesting the need of designing prevention actions or interventions for this at-risk group.

Cuvinte-cheie: consum de alcool, COVID-19, România, carantina, predictor, moderator.

Keywords: alcohol consumption, COVID-19, Romania, lockdown, predictor, moderator.

1. INTRODUCTION

On the 11th of March 2020 The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a pandemic (WHO, 2020). Many countries, including Romania, took increasingly stricter measures directed to stop or slow the infection rate across the population. Although, the Romanian government reported the three first cases of COVID-19 on the 28th of February 2020, the national lockdown was instituted on the 16th of March, when Romania was already in the third infection scenario with 168 cases of confirmed COVID-19 (Romanian Health Minister, 2020). The national lockdown supposed measures as shutting down the schools, universities, closing places as bars, pubs, restaurants, shopping malls, theaters and cinema, and gyms. In other words, all commercial, retail business and industries were shut down. The Romanian government recommended

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measures as staying at home, self-quarantined and/ or restricted movement during the lockdown.

The pandemic situation is a crisis with effects on the physical and mental health as well with economic and social effects. Studies reported that the early stages of pandemic and outbreak as well as the later ones have elicited negative emotions as anxiety, fear or concern (Ahorsu *et al.*, 2020, Wang *et al.*, 2020). During this period, people are forced to find ways to adapt to this new reality characterized by fear of infection, job lost or even death. One of the possible ways to cope with this new, unknown and uncertain reality is to use psychoactive substance such as alcohol. Alcohol and other psychoactive substances inhibit the nervous systems, which make people at that moment to have a lower level of anxiety or stress and to feel relief (Abrahao, Salinas, & Lovinger, 2017). In addition, because many countries have reported rises of alcohol sales during the COVID-19 lockdown (Eurocare 2020, Nielson, 2020), it was suggested that alcohol (mis)use may be one of the major public health concern during this period, as well as one of the long-term consequence of the pandemic. Romanian media also reported rises in alcohol sales (Romania Europa Libera, Stirile ProTV). However, there are also media which reported a decrease in alcohol consumption (EVZ, 2020; Adama, 2020). This may be caused by the shut down of restaurants, in coffee shops, pubs and bars.

Previous research has suggested that during dramatic events, such as economic crises or natural disasters, people tend to drink more alcohol, to have more and more frequently episodes of heavy drinking (Abrahao *et al.*, 2013; Flory *et al.*, 2009; Mucci *et al.*, 2016; North *et al.*, 2011). This behavioral pattern can be explained by both the Stress and Coping Theory and the Self-Medication Hypothesis. The former suggests that life stressors which can be caused by dramatic events lead to alienation, distress, usage of avoidance coping, and all of these in turn could lead to substance misuse (Kaplan 1996), while the second posits that adults may use alcohol and other psychoactive substance for relieving the psychological suffering (Khantzian, 1997). Moreover, this type of drinking, to cope with the psychological distress elicited by events or moments with high level of stress correlates with the risk of developing alcohol related problems (Cooper *et al.*, 2016). During COVID-19 pandemic, people may experience high level of stress and uncertainty (Taylor, 2019), high level of infection fear, fear of dying, anxiety, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, irritability, depressive symptoms and high emotional disturbance (for a review see, Brooks *et al.*, 2020). Thus, those who experience high level of stress may be most likely to use alcohol in order to cope with the present situation.

Among personal factors affecting the (mis)use of alcohol during adversity times, social demographic variables and perceived stress have been suggested to have an important influence. On the other hand, social influence was suggested to be an important predictor of alcohol consumption.

There are some gender's differences relevant to the general (mis)use of alcohol, as well as for the (mis)use of alcohol during the COVID-19 outbreak. Previous research has shown that men drink more than women (Keefe & NewComb,

1996; OECD, 2018). In addition, it was suggested that culture and socio-economic country situation may influence drinking patterns. Small differences between men's and women's alcohol consumption level was found in North Europe, while in Eastern-Europe countries were significant differences on alcohol consumption, men drinking more than women. In addition, some research has suggested that men tend to drink more than women in economic stressful situations (de Goeij *et al.*, 2015, Brown and Richman, 2012). However, a recent study showed that during COVID-19 pandemic, American women drank more than men to cope with the pandemic related-stress (Brooks *et al.*, 2020; Rodriquez, Litt & Stewart, 2020), while other two studies suggested no significant gender difference (Chodkiewicz *et al.*, 2020; Wardell *et al.*, 2020). Contrary to the results of Brooks and colleagues (2020) and Rodriquez and colleagues (2020), Dawson, Grant and Ruan (2005) found that even if women experience more stress comparing to men, they drink less alcohol comparing to men in stressful situations. This is in accord with Rehm and colleagues (2020) prediction, that men will drink more during the COVID-19 lockdown. From the above presented studies, we can observe that the results related to gender and alcohol (mis)use during stressful situations are mixed, suggesting the need of conducting more studies for shedding the light on this link.

Age is another important demographic variable for alcohol (mis)use during stressful situations. Previous research has reported that drinking patterns vary depending on age and alcohol consumption level is increasing by age (McKee *et al.*, 2000; OECD, 2015). In addition, a recent poll showed that adults and middle age Canadians drunk 25% more alcohol during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 44% of them reported that the reason for this increase is due to the perceived stress experienced in these times (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2020).

Perceived stress is another individual factor which influences alcohol consumption. Previous research has reported mixed results on this factor. On the one hand, there are studies which suggested that in times with high level of stress people are drinking more (Jennison, 1992; Stockwell, 1985). On the other hand, other studies reported no link between alcohol use and stress (Akers & Dwyer, 1988). However, studies which have assessed the link between alcohol use and stress during COVID-19 pandemic reported a positive association between stress and drinking behavior (Rodriquez *et al.*, 2020; Wardell *et al.*, 2020).

Most research on alcohol use and social influence was carried out with adolescent samples. In general, it was suggested that adolescents drink more when they are accompanied, when they want to join a group, or when they need/want to respect a social norm (Colder & Chassin, 1999; for a review see, Leung, Toumbourou, & Hemphill, 2014). In addition, the same pattern is valid for emerging adults (Quinn & Fromme, 2011; Varela & Pritchard, 2011). Furthermore, in the context of COVID-19 lockdown, it was studied the effect of living alone on alcohol (mis)use. Living alone during pandemic supposes restricted access to social support, which in turn may cause greater stress. Wardell and colleagues (2020) found that living alone was the only predictor of high level of solitary drinking.

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

Few studies have examined the link between individual and social factors and alcohol consumption during COVID-19 lockdown. Moreover, it appears that so far the results on gender and perceived stress as individual factors and alcohol consumption show different association patterns. In addition, there is no research on the impact of social influence on alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown. Furthermore, no moderation analysis was performed for the link between social factors and alcohol consumption. This crisis is different compared to all the other people have experienced in the last decades. Its impact on medical, social and societal, economic, religious and cultural level is experienced. Thus, it is of great interest to understand the dynamics between the use of alcohol and different personal and social variables in this challenging time.

More precisely, the present study is built on the emerging research showing that the COVID-19 outbreak is impacting both psychological distress and alcohol consumption, by examining (a) the alcohol consumption differences at individual and social factors, (b) the predictive role of individual and social factors on alcohol consumption and (c) the possible moderators of the link between social factors and alcohol consumption.

3. METHOD

3.1. PARTICIPANTS

The initial sample consisted of 263 participants. One participant was excluded because he did not meet the inclusion criteria – being 18 or older for participating in the present study. Thus, the final sample consisted of 262 (75% women), age ranges between 18 to 77 years ($M = 27.21$, $SD = 9.28$), more than half of participants (58%) living in the urban areas. 70% of participants were involved in a romantic relationship (33.6% involved in a non-marital romantic relationship; 7.6% were engaged and 29% were married), while 30% were single at the moment of the study. Related to the education level, half of participants graduated with a high school diploma, 43% of them graduated with a bachelor or master's degree, while 7% graduated from middle or primary school. Almost half of participants (43%) were employed, 40% were students, 9% were unemployed due to COVID-19 pandemic, 7% were unemployed, while 1% were retired.

3.2. MEASURES

Socio-demographic questions. This section includes socio-demographic questions such as gender, age, level of education (with six response options: primary school, 10 mandatory classes, professional school, high school, bachelor, and master), partner relationship status (with four response options: single, involved in

a committed relationship, engaged, married), professional status (with four response options: student, employed, unemployed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, unemployed, retired), living area (with two response answers: urban and rural areas).

Perceived stress. A Romanian translation of Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1994) to assess the stress in the last 2 months, when the national lockdown was implemented by the Romanian government was used. PSS is a self-reporting scale which contains 9 items on a 5-Likert point scale. Reliability was assessed and Cronbach's Alpha value was .72.

Social influence. This scale was developed by the study's authors to assess the influence of friends or family members on participants for drinking alcohol in the last two months of COVID-19 lockdown. This scale consists of 3 items ("When I speak with other people (telephone, video, audio) and they drink."; "When people I speak to encourage me to drink"; "When persons I am living with offer me a drink"), assessed on a 6-Likert point scale (1 – not at all, 5 – very much, 6 – not applicable). We assessed the reliability and Cronbach's Alpha was .78.

Alcohol consumption. The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) (Babor & Grant, 1989) adapted to the Romanian population by Vraști (1997) was used to assess the (mis)use of alcohol during the COVID-19 lockdown. This test consists of 10 items grouped in four dimensions: (a) alcohol consumption (items 1 to 3), (b) consumption behavior (items 4 to 6); (c) psychological consequences of alcohol consumption (items 7 and 8) and (d) harms caused by alcohol consumption (items 9 and 10). For the purpose of this study, we used for analyses only the first factor – alcohol consumption. The Cronbach's Alpha was .74.

3.3. PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited through social networks, more precisely through Facebook. To do so, we posted the announcement for the study together with the link where the questionnaires could be filled out. The potential participants were provided with the information related to the research main objectives and inclusion criteria: being 18 years old or older. All participants signed an informed consent form to participating in the study and they were provided with an email address where they could send their possible thoughts about the study.

In order to reach the study aims, when filling in the scales for this study, participants were asked to think of their feelings, emotions and behaviors of the first two months when the lockdown because of COVID-19 was implemented by the Romanian government. The data collection was run between May 3rd and May 11th, but the majority of participants filled in the questionnaires between May 3rd and 5th. On May 15th the Romanian government changed from emergency state (which supposed lockdown) to alert state (which supposes more relaxing measures such as opening the terraces, the schools, or gyms).

4. RESULTS

The results are organized in three sections: (a) in the first section, we will present the differences on individual and social factors related to the first two months of COVID-19 lockdown alcohol consumption; (b) in the second section, we will present the associations and the predictive role of individual and social factors on first two months of COVID-19 lockdown alcohol consumption; (c) the possible moderating role of age and gender on the link between social influence and alcohol consumption in the first two months of COVID-19 lockdown will be presented in the third section.

In the following, we will present the results related to the first aim.

An independent *t*-test was conducted to compare whatever there are differences between (a) women and men; (b) emerging adults (18–29 years old) and adults (over 29 years old); (c) persons with a high and low level of perceived stress in the first two months of COVID-19 lockdown; and (d) persons with a high and low level of social influence in the first two months of COVID-19 lockdown on the alcohol consumption. The groups for low and high levels of perceived stress and social influence were computed based on the median of each variable (perceived stress and social influence).

Means and independent *t*-test results are presented in Table no. 1. As can be seen, in the two months of COVID-19 lockdown (March 16th – May 15th), men drank more alcohol than women, adults drank more alcohol than emerging adults and people with a high level of social influence drank more than those with a low level of social influence. However, participants with a high level of perceived stress did not drink more alcohol compared to those with a low level of perceived stress in the first two months of COVID-19 lockdown.

Table no. 1

Descriptive statistics and independent *t*-test results of individual and environment factors and alcohol consumption in the last two months of COVID-19 lockdown

		Alcohol consumption M(SD)	<i>t</i>
Gender	Male	2.37 (1.03)	-5.67**
	Female M	1.76 (.65)	
Age	Emerging adults	1.92 (.70)	-3.07*
	Adults	2.16 (1.00)	
Perceived stress	Low	1.88 (.81)	-.56
	High	1.94 (.81)	
Social environment influence	Low	1.43 (.54)	-6.85**
	High	2.12 (.81)	

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

In the following, we will present the associations and the predictive role of individual and social factors on first two months of COVID-19 lockdown alcohol consumption.

Correlations for all measures are presented in Table no. 2. Age was significantly positive correlated with alcohol consumption ($r=.19$, $p<.05$), and no significant association was either found with other measures. Perceived stress was significantly correlated with none of variables, while social influence was found to be significantly positive associated with alcohol consumption ($r=.28$, $p<.001$), but no significant association was found with the other variables.

Table no. 2

Correlations between all study measures

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Age	-			
2. Perceived stress	-.00	-		
3. Social environment influence	-.01	-.04	-	
4. Alcohol consumption	.19*	-.02	.28**	-

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

In order to test whether individual and social factors would predict alcohol consumption during COVID-19 lockdown, we conducted regression analyses. For the model, we used only the variables which were found to significantly correlate with the criteria variable. We added to the model gender.

For testing whether gender, age, social influence would predict alcohol consumption during the Romanian COVID-19 lockdown, we conducted multiple regression analysis with gender, age and social influence entered simultaneous as predictors of alcohol consumption during COVID-19 lockdown. The results of the regression indicated that these three variables explained 22% of alcohol consumption during COVID-19 outbreak variance ($F(3, 261) = 25.51$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .22$).

In order to test if gender and age would moderate the link between social environment influence and alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown, firstly we created new variables based on the multiplications between social influence and each possible moderator (age and gender). Second, we ran two linear regression analyses for each moderator. For example, we ran one linear regression with alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown (as dependent variable), gender, the interaction between gender and independent variable (social influence) and social influence as independent variables. The same procedure was used in case of age as possible moderator.

In the case of age, we found no significant results ($b = .009$, $p > .05$). In the case of gender, we found no significant results for the effect of gender on alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown ($b = -.29$, $p > .05$), but we found significant results for the effect of social influence and alcohol consumption during

the COVID-19 lockdown ($b = -.31, p < .05$), as well as for the interaction effect of social influence and gender ($b = .46, p < .001$). In the following, we tested one model, alcohol consumption being the criteria, while social influence being the predictor, and gender the moderator.

Gender was added as moderator for the regression analysis of social influence and alcohol consumption. Gender, social influence and their interaction term accounted for a significant proportion of the variance of alcohol consumption, $F(3) = 27.47, p < .001, R^2 = .24, b = .46, t(258) = 3.96, p = .001$. The results related to the conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator showed that there is a significant effect of social influence on alcohol consumption during COVID-19 lockdown for both groups (b women = .15, $p < .001$, CI: .0705; .2330, and b men = .62, $p < .001$, CI: .4022; .8384). However, as it can be also seen from Figure no. 1, men with high social influence had the higher level of alcohol consumption during COVID-19 lockdown.

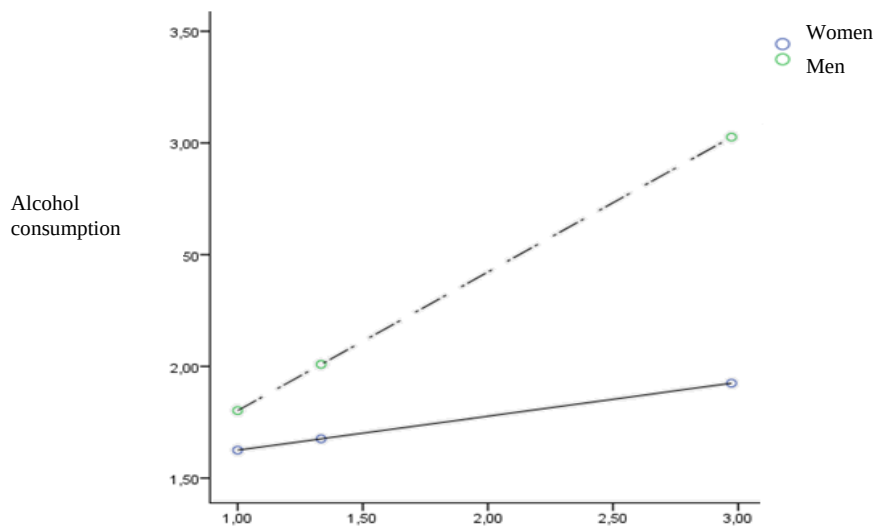


Figure no. 1. The interactive effect of gender and social influence on alcohol consumption during COVID-19 lockdown.

5. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to (a) assess the differences on individual and social factors related to the alcohol consumption; (b) examine the associations and the predictive role of individual and social factors on alcohol consumption; (c) explore the possible moderating role of age and gender on the link between social influence and alcohol consumption in the first two months of COVID-19 lockdown in a Romanian community sample.

Thus, our results provide preliminary evidence on individual differences (gender and age) and social (social influence) factors and alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 outbreak. More precisely, we found that men drank more alcohol compared to women, and adults and middle aged participants drank more than emerging adults. Previous research on gender differences of alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 outbreak have reported mixed results. Specifically, Rodriquez and colleagues (2020) found that women drank more alcohol during the COVID-19 outbreak for coping with psychological distress triggered by the pandemic, while Chodkiewicz and colleagues (2020) and Wardell and colleagues (2020) found no significant effect of gender in the grades of alcohol behavior or coping motives in either the initial stage of the pandemic or during of it. However, Rehm and colleagues (2020) predicted that men will drink more during the pandemic. Our results are consistent with this prediction. One possible explanation for these mixed results is related to the tested hypotheses. Rodriquez and colleagues (2020) assessed gender differences on alcohol consumption level as a modality to cope with psychological distress triggered by the pandemic, Chodkiewicz and colleagues (2020) assessed gender differences at general level of alcohol consumption in an early stage of lockdown, while Wardell and colleagues (2020) assessed gender differences and coping motives and changes in alcohol consumption in the initial stage of lockdown. It can be seen that these studies (including ours) assessed different facets of alcohol consumption during the lockdown, thus additional research with more diverse samples (socio-demographic and cultural background) will be needed to further elucidate the links between individual factors and alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results related to age are consistent with previous studies. Chodkiewicz and colleagues (2020) also found that older participants drank more than the younger ones. This may be because bars, pubs, coffees were shut down and classes were suspended/ or online. This may have prevented them or letting them without the opportunity to meet and drink. Moreover, emerging adults may have experienced less stress, less financial or family issues comparing to adults and middle aged adults, which in turn may lead them to drink less.

Thus, our findings on gender and age differences suggest that future studies on alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 outbreak should focus on the specific needs of men and adults and middle age adults.

One surprising result concerns the perceived stress. We did not find significant differences between persons with a high level of perceived stress and low level of perceived stress on alcohol consumption. Previous studies carried out found that persons with a higher level of distress during the Covid-19 outbreak drank more alcohol (Rodriquez *et. al*, 2020). A possible explanation for the non-significant differences on this personal factor may be caused by participants' perceived stress mean. In average, participants reported a low of perceived stress during the outbreak. This may be caused by the fact that participants filled in the questionnaires with a couple of days before the lockdown was lifted, so it is possible that their

level of perceived stress was influenced by this. However, even if we used the median, a central tendency index, previous suggested and used for creating two groups and testing groups differences (Field, 2005), most probably, we did not find differences between the two groups because of participants' average low level of perceived stress.

Our results suggest that people with high level of social influence drank more compared to persons with low level of social influence. This result is consistent with the previous research on peer influence on alcohol consumption and parents role model in drinking behaviors (Leung, Toumbourou, & Hemphill, 2014; Quinn & Fromme, 2011; Varela & Pritchard, 2011). We suspect that in these challenging times, drinking together may have been a form of connectedness because of social isolation and physical distancing. However, we do not know how many drinks participants with high level of social influence had, if there are differences between participants with high and low level of social influence and if the drinking episodes had a negative impact on mental health or overall functioning.

In addition, we also tested the predictive role of individual and social factors on alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 outbreak. We find that gender, age and social influence explain 22% of alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 outbreak. Our results are consistent with previous results on alcohol consumption during COVID-19 lockdown. Rodriquez and colleagues (2020) also reported that gender and age are important predictors of alcohol (mis)use during this period. Additional to these individual factors, they also found that COVID-19 distress was an important alcohol (mis)use predictor.

Furthermore, we also examined the moderating role of age and gender. The results revealed that age does not moderate the link between social influence and alcohol consumption during COVID-19 outbreak, while gender does. The link between social influence and alcohol consumption was significant for both, women and men, however, for men the link was stronger. In other words, men with high level of social influence drank more. These findings contribute to the literature of COVID-19 effects on human functionality, by provide preliminary information for a at-risk group. We suppose that men drink more for coping with psychological, economic and social challenges. Previous studies have shown that drinking in order to cope with life dramatic events is associated with more problematic drinking behaviors such as alcohol addiction (Cooper *et al.*, 2016). Thus, practitioners, governmental or non-governmental organizations may want to take into account the possible effects of coping reasons on alcohol consumption when designing prevention actions or interventions for this at-risk group.

Despite its strengths, the present study has also limitations. Foremost among these is related to the temporal relationships. We did not assess the alcohol consumption before the outbreak. Thus, we do not know if and how the drinking patterns change by time, during and because of the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, we did not assess the number of drinks and the psychological or mental health related-effects of drinking in contexts of social influence. Furthermore, we did not

assess the reasons for which people drink during this period. Future studies should assess these issues for providing a better understanding of this complex situation.

In conclusion, we added new knowledge on COVID-19 outbreak impact on people life, by providing (a) differences on individual and social factors at alcohol consumption level; (b) associations and the predictive role of gender, age and social influence on alcohol consumption; and (c) the contexts under which the associations between individual factors and social factors (social influence) and alcohol consumption are valid.

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REZUMAT

Obiectivul principal al articolului de față a fost de a examina factorii individuali și de mediu, predictorii și moderatorii consumului de alcool pe parcursul carantinei instituite din cauza pandemiei de COVID-19. Utilizând un eșantion de 262 de participanți, din comunitate (75% femei, $M = 27,21$, $SD = 9,28$), am găsit diferențe la nivelul vârstei și genului în ceea ce privește consumul de alcool pe parcursul primelor două luni de carantină. În plus, rezultatele au arătat că genul, vârsta și anturajul prezic pozitiv consumul de alcool pe parcursul carantinei. În cadrul acestui studiu, au mai fost analizate și posibilul rol moderator al genului și al vârstei pentru prezicerea consumului de alcool pe parcursul carantinei. Rezultatele au arătat că doar genul moderează legătură dintre anturaj și consumul de alcool în timpul carantinei instituite din cauza pandemiei de COVID-19.