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Methods of “Fake ID” Obtainment and Use in Underage College Students

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Abstract

Fake IDs are highly prevalent among underage college students, and are strongly associated with heavy drinking. However it is not currently known how exactly fake IDs are most commonly obtained and used, and how often individuals are caught. Such information could aid law enforcement and school personnel in their enforcement responsibilities, and might further elucidate the extent and means by which students “make ethical compromises” to gain illegal access to alcohol. A cross-sectional online survey of 1,098 underage students at a large Midwestern university indicated that comparable to previous findings, 21.0% reported possessing a fake ID (which was strongly associated with past-month frequent heavy drinking; $OR=4.84$, 95% $CI=3.41-6.86$). Of those with fake IDs, 93.5% reported having used them, and 29.1% reported having been caught. Greek (i.e., Fraternity/Sorority) members were more likely than others to obtain them through a Greek organization ($OR=8.02$, 95% $CI=1.81-35.54$). Also, men were more likely than women to buy ($OR=2.74$, 95% $CI=1.57-4.77$), yet less likely to be given them ($OR=0.53$, 95% $CI=0.31-0.90$). Future studies might examine whether and how fake ID capture reduces (or exacerbates) drinking over time.

Keywords

false identification; alcohol access; underage; heavy drinking

1. Introduction

False identification (fake ID) is one of a number of ways that underage individuals obtain alcohol in the United States (Wagenaar, Toomey, Murray, Short, Wolfson & Jones-Webb, 1996). Fake IDs are highly prevalent among underage college students (with fake ID possession rates growing from 12.5% prior to college to 32.2% at the end of students' second year at one large state university campus; Martinez, Rutledge & Sher, 2007).

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Contributors

Author Martinez wrote the first draft of the manuscript and conducted the statistical analyses. Author Sher provided critical intellectual review of all the work and provided statistical consultation. Both authors contributed to and approved of the final submission.

Conflict of Interest

Both authors Martinez and Sher declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Moreover, they have been hypothesized to be one of the most common methods of alcohol obtainment for underage students (Fabian, Toomey, Lenk & Erickson, 2008).

Students possessing a fake ID have been found to be more likely than their peers to use alcohol (Durkin, Wolfe & Phillips, 1996; Martinez, et al., 2007). This association appears to strengthen over time as students approach (yet do not reach) the legal drinking age (e.g., pre-college fake ID possession was found to predict first-semester heavy drinking [$\beta=.26$], and sophomore fall fake ID possession was found to predict next-semester heavy drinking [$\beta=.46$]; Martinez et al., 2007). Of note, underage drinking is extremely problematic and is associated with many minor and serious consequences, (Hingson, Zha & Weitzman, 2009). Additionally, beyond facilitating illegal access to alcohol, it has been argued that “by choosing to use fake IDs, students make ethical compromises that erode respect for the law” (Amethyst Initiative website, 2008). From this perspective, getting and using a fake ID is problematic not only because it increases alcohol use (and related consequences) but because it represents a larger moral hazard by potentially inuring individuals to legal proscriptions on a range of behavior.

Although it is known that some group affiliations such as membership in a college fraternal or sororal (i.e., “Greek”) organization increase the likelihood of obtaining fake IDs (Martinez, et al., 2007), it is not currently known how exactly fake IDs are most commonly obtained and used (e.g., whether it is most often the case that fake IDs are used to gain entry to bars/clubs, or to buy alcohol at off-premise retail outlets), and how often individuals are caught deploying them. Also, it is not known whether and how specific methods of fake ID obtainment and use are associated with heavy drinking. From a prevention science perspective, knowledge of specific processes involved in alcohol access and subsequent use can potentially aid in the development and efficiency of interventions (Coie, Watt, West, Hawkins, Asarnow, Markman, et al., 1993). For example, data that describe fake ID obtainment and use could aid law enforcement efforts by providing information about where and how students are most likely to commit these legal infractions. Such data might also further elucidate the extent and means by which students “make ethical compromises.” Thus, we surveyed 1,098 students on the specifics of their fake ID obtainment and use.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board at a large Midwestern university, we offered course credit for participating in a (cross-sectional) online survey to students enrolled in introductory psychology. Of note, the introductory psychology course had the highest enrollment of all undergraduate courses at the university and, with respect to demographic characteristics such as sex and race, was quite representative of the university as a whole (University Registrar, 2006). A total of 1,143 students consented to take the online survey and received credit. For the present analyses, students were excluded if they were of (or over) the legal drinking age of 21 ($n=45$); thus, 1,098 students were ascertained for the analyses. These students averaged 18.60 ($SD=.64$) years old and were 56.3% female and 88.3% White/non-Hispanic.

2.2 Measures

We assessed *fake ID possession* by asking students whether they had a “fake ID or someone else’s ID for the purpose of purchasing alcohol or entering a bar or club.” For those that reported having a fake ID, we assessed *fake ID obtainment* by asking them where they got their fake ID/s (we asked them to check all that applied): Bought it (from someone, through the internet, or at a retail outlet), A relative gave it to me, Another person (not a relative)

gave it to me, I got one through my fraternity/sorority. We also assessed *fake ID use* by asking students whether they ever used their fake ID. Then we asked fake ID users to check all the places that they had ever used their fake IDs: Entering bars, buying alcohol at retail outlets, Entering clubs. We dichotomously assessed whether or not students used their fake IDs at more than one of these venues. We also dichotomously assessed whether students had “*ever been caught attempting to buy alcohol or enter a bar or club, by using a fake ID.*”

We dichotomously assessed *past-month frequent heavy drinking* by asking students whether or not they drank 5 or more (males) or 4 or more (females) drinks containing any kind of alcohol in within a two-hour period as often as once a week or more in the past 30 days. Additionally, we dichotomously assessed sex and Greek membership as demographic control variables.

3. Results and Discussion

This study yielded a high fake ID possession rate at 21.0%, comparable to findings from an earlier cohort (Martinez, et al., 2007). Similar to national studies (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman & Schulenberg, 2007), heavy drinking was quite widespread in these students, as 43.0% reported past-month frequent heavy drinking. Also similar to findings elsewhere (Martinez, et al., 2007), fake ID possession was strongly associated with past-month frequent heavy drinking ($OR=4.84$, 95% $CI=3.41-6.86$).

Table 1 shows descriptive data on the method of obtainment and use of fake IDs, in those 230 students reporting that they had a fake ID. It appears that students most commonly buy fake IDs or are given fake IDs by non-relatives, and it is generally less common to obtain fake IDs through Greek organizations (though Table 2 indicates that Greeks are more likely than non-Greeks to report obtaining their fake IDs through a Greek organization). With regard to fake ID use, it appears that the overwhelming majority have used their fake ID/s at least once (with all Greek male fake ID holders reporting having used it). Almost one-third of individuals who had had a fake ID reported having been caught while using it. (Note that conditioning reports of “getting caught” on reports of actually having used the fake ID yield the same results for all subsequent findings in this study, again, since most individuals who report having a fake ID also report having used it).

Table 2 shows group differences based on sex, Greek status, and past-month frequent heavy drinking. For example, the table shows that men are more likely to buy fake IDs, and women are more likely to be given fake IDs, or to get them through Greek organizations. Additionally, men are more likely than women to use fake IDs to buy alcohol at retail outlets, and men are more likely to report having been caught while using a fake ID. Also, using a fake ID to enter bars and using it at more than one venue is associated with past-month frequent heavy drinking.

Again, these findings are congruent with separate findings indicating that college students who report having a fake ID are much more likely than others to drink heavily, putting them at risk for myriad problems (Hingson, Heeren, Winter & Wechsler, 2005; Hingson, Zha & Weitzman, 2009). Importantly though, findings from this study also suggest that most individuals who have fake IDs use them, and it appears that some aspects of fake ID use relate to heavy drinking. Additionally, it appears that different methods of fake ID obtainment and use are exercised differentially as a function of sex and Greek membership status, and this information can aid law enforcement, school policies, and larger public health pursuits in the community.

A limitation of this study is that these findings might not be generalized to non-college youths, whose alcohol use and problems differ slightly from their college-attending peers

(Dawson, Brant, Stinson & Chou, 2004; Slutske, 2005). Additionally, although almost one-third of individuals reported “getting caught,” there is no assessment of what the outcomes and/or consequences were. It might be helpful to investigate whether or how any such consequences might reduce (or exacerbate) drinking over time. Such a study might be of some service as we continue to ask difficult questions regarding how policies (e.g., the minimum legal drinking age [MLDA] law, other underage-relevant drinking laws, server liability laws) might best serve and protect young adults.

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Table 1

Percentages of fake ID obtainment and use, in total and by subgroups

Variables	Total (n=230)						Subgroups			
	Men (n=97)		Women (n=133)				Men (n=97)		Women (n=133)	
	Greek (n=55)	Non-Greek (n=42)	Greek (n=78)	Non-Greek (n=55)	%	%	%	%	%	%
Fake ID obtainment ^a										
Bought	36.4	43.6	57.1	26.9	25.5					
Given by relative	24.2	16.4	19.1	33.3	23.6					
Given by non-relative	45.0	41.8	28.6	50.0	54.6					
Through Greek Org.	9.1	5.5	2.4	20.5	1.8					
Fake ID use										
Ever Used	93.5	100.0	92.9	92.3	89.1					
Used to enter bars	85.7	89.1	78.6	89.7	81.8					
Used to buy retail alcohol	62.8	69.1	81.0	53.9	54.6					
Used to enter clubs	68.8	67.3	71.4	75.6	58.2					
Used at more than one	76.6	80.0	76.2	79.5	69.1					
Got caught using Fake ID	29.1	37.0	38.1	23.1	23.1					

^aNote: Some individuals endorsed more than one method of obtainment for separate fake IDs such that percentages add to over 100. Sex: Women=0, Men=1; Greek Membership: 0=Non-Greek, 1=Greek; All Fake ID-related variables: 0=No, 1=Yes.

Table 2

Sex-, Greek-, and Drinking-related subgroup differences as a function of Fake ID obtainment and use variables, $n=222-230$

Variable	Sex (Adjusting for Greek)		Greek (Adjusting for Sex)		Past-month heavy drinking (Adjusting for Sex and Greek)	
	OR	(95% CI)	OR	(95% CI)	OR	(95% CI)
Fake ID obtainment						
Bought	2.74**	(1.57, 4.77)	0.80	(0.46, 1.40)	1.26	(0.63, 2.50)
Given by relative	0.51*	(0.27, 0.98)	1.28	(0.69, 2.39)	0.72	(0.36, 1.47)
Given by non-relative	0.53*	(0.31, 0.90)	1.13	(0.67, 1.93)	0.98	(0.52, 1.83)
Through Greek Org.	0.29*	(0.09, 0.90)	8.02**	(1.81, 35.54)	3.42	(0.74, 15.84)
Fake ID use						
Ever Used	3.19	(0.87, 11.68)	2.23	(0.76, 6.56)	2.90	(0.95, 8.85)
Used to enter bars	0.87	(0.41, 1.83)	2.07	(0.98, 4.36)	2.63*	(1.17, 5.94)
Used to buy retail alcohol	2.44**	(1.38, 4.30)	0.78	(0.45, 1.37)	1.50	(0.79, 2.85)
Used to enter clubs	1.04	(0.59, 1.83)	1.47	(0.84, 2.57)	1.27	(0.65, 2.47)
Used at more than one	1.21	(0.65, 2.26)	1.52	(0.82, 2.81)	2.01*	(1.003, 4.04)
Got caught using Fake ID	2.00*	(1.12, 3.57)	0.98	(0.54, 1.76)	1.04	(0.51, 2.12)

Note: Sex: Women=0, Men=1; Greek Membership: 0=Non-Greek, 1=Greek; All other variables: 0=No, 1=Yes.

* $p < .05$