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Alcohol consumption among American study abroad students in Italy

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Abstract

The phenomenon of heightened alcohol consumption among American Study Abroad students is extensively documented. This is particularly noticeable in destinations like Italy, where the prevailing U.S. intoxication-oriented culture often clashes with the Italian model, which is typically characterized by moderation [1]. This article presents a mixed-methods investigation aimed at providing a detailed portrait of current drinking habits, underlying motivations, and risk perception among a sample of 45 American university students participating in Study Abroad programs in Italy.

The findings reveal an extremely high propensity for consumption (95.5%) and elevated rates of Heavy Episodic Drinking (62.8%). A critical analysis of motivations and behaviors highlights a distinct cultural separation: only 9% of students report drinking with locals, despite 7% citing ‘Italian culture’ as a justification for their drinking. This disparity is in line with Pedersen's conclusion, which links lower levels of acculturation to increased peer-based drinking [2]. The most concerning result, however, is the profound risk perception gap: 75% of respondents perceive virtually no risk to their health, and 81% see no impact on their academic performance, despite the high frequency of consumption.

In summary, the alcohol behavior of Study Abroad students in Italy does not reflect integration with the host culture; rather, it appears to be an amplified extension of the American intoxication model, often fueled by a newfound sense of freedom. The significant lack of risk awareness, coupled with the persistence of high consumption despite university warnings, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and culturally-embedded intervention frameworks within Study Abroad Programs.

Alcohol among Study Abroad students

Alcohol use among Study Abroad (SA) students has been a frequent subject of academic inquiry, and it even inspired a sarcastic U.S. article, *Do Drinking Abroad Programs Have a Studying Problem?* [3]. Eric R. Pedersen and his colleagues have published several foundational articles on this issue, consistently reporting that students exhibit an increased tendency toward alcohol use while abroad. This elevation in consumption is particularly pronounced among students studying in traditional SA locations, with Italy being one key example.

This trend is often reflected in Italian news media, particularly in local outlets from major host cities like Rome and Florence. Reports of incidents related to American students' alcohol abuse are common. For instance, as far back as 2011, the *Corriere Fiorentino* featured an article titled, “Aggredito tassista da tre americani ubriachi” (Taxi-driver attacked by three drunk

Americans, November 11, 2011). Two years later, *Toscana News* reported “Volontari della Misericordia aggrediti da americani ubriachi” (Florence: Red Cross volunteers threatened by drunk Americans, July 26, 2013). More recently, in 2023, a local article lamented, “I ragazzi americani (ubriachi) che urlano sotto le finestre: Firenze è diventata un parco giochi troppo rumoroso” (Drunk American students screaming under the windows—Florence has turned into an excessively loud playground. *Corriere Fiorentino*, October 9, 2023). This specific incident highlighted resident complaints about noise disruption, which led to the formation of a citizens' committee ironically named, *E noi quando si dorme?* (So when will we be able to sleep?).

Pedersen and colleagues' research also indicates that students who already have a propensity for heavy drinking are more inclined to participate in study abroad programs. In some cases, these students “returning from SA trips exhibited elevated levels of alcohol use and related harm” [4]. These findings align with broader U.S. statistics showing high rates of alcohol abuse among college students, where approximately 50% “engage in binge or heavy episodic drinking” [5].

In a key study focusing on SA students in Rome and Florence, Micheal Mitchell and colleagues (2016) reported that 46% of students were classified as high-risk drinkers, and 63.1% admitted to recent binge drinking behavior. This behavior was found to be cross-gender, affecting 62.7% of females and 65.4% of males.

Crucially, in the context of the present research, another finding from Pedersen's studies is significant: students who demonstrated a lower level of acculturation (i.e., those who separated themselves from the host culture) consumed more alcohol while abroad [2]. Consequently, students who primarily socialized with American peers had a greater propensity for heavy drinking. This suggests that while “going on pub crawls with peers might not facilitate cultural understanding”, other group activities more closely aligned with local norms, such as dining at a *trattoria*, visiting an *enoteca*, or engaging in a *passeggiata*, could foster better identification with Italian culture [5].

The Mitchell and colleagues' study ultimately proposed that a core objective for Study Abroad Programs (SAPs) should be “promoting culturally appropriate, safe alcohol consumption” [5]. They offered several practical recommendations for SAPs:

- Early identification of students' prior drinking behavior and expectations related to alcohol use.
- Innovative and diverse approaches to alcohol risk reduction, such as engaging students with the local Italian community to facilitate culturally appropriate drinking experiences.
- Dedicated time for in-depth discussion about alcohol use while abroad and the associated risks.
- Staff training, including for residence life personnel, incorporating education on behavior change theories and harm reduction approaches.

Research questions

The academic literature, especially the useful work of Eric R. Pedersen and colleagues, has researched the overall phenomenon of increased alcohol use among Study Abroad (SA) students. However, there remains a need for more localized studies that outline a detailed, current portrait of specific alcohol habits, motivations, and the perception of risk among American SA students in traditional host locations like Italy. The research questions are, therefore: What is the current prevalence and gender distribution of alcohol consumption patterns, including HED, among American study abroad students in Italy? To what extent do students' drinking behaviors align with the U.S. “intoxication-oriented” model [1], and how does the contrast with the host country's culture factor into their motivations for consumption? Finally, what is the students' perception of their alcohol consumption, the associated health and academic risks, and the role of the Study Abroad Program (SAP) in managing such behaviors?

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of alcohol consumption among Study Abroad (SA) students requires a multi-dimensional approach that considers the psychological, social, and cultural forces at play during international mobility. This study is anchored in the following theoretical frameworks:

Youth Mobility and Liminality. The Study Abroad experience can be analyzed through the lens of modern liminality [6], which describes the temporary ‘suspension’ of ordinary social life during periods of mobility. Unlike traditional rites of passage, contemporary youth mobility creates a space where students are removed from their primary social anchors (family, home university) but are not yet integrated into the host society. Within this framework, the ‘sensation of freedom’ identified by Andreoni (2012) is interpreted as a result of this transition: students navigate a ‘threshold’ where the perceived lack of surveillance leads to a temporary expansion of risky behaviors, such as alcohol consumption, often seen as a fundamental part of the ‘abroad experience’.

Social Norms and Peer Influence. According to Social Norms Theory, an individual’s behavior is heavily influenced by their perception of how peers think and act. This is particularly relevant in the ‘American bubble’ often found in host cities. Pedersen et al. (2011) have demonstrated that lower levels of acculturation, especially when students separate themselves from the host culture, are directly linked to increased peer-based drinking. In these settings, students often fall victim to ‘pluralistic ignorance’, overestimating the drinking norms of their peers and feeling pressure to conform, which leads to heightened consumption regardless of the host country’s actual environment.

Contrasting Drinking Models and Harm Reduction. This study utilizes the distinction between ‘intoxication-oriented’ cultures and ‘non-intoxication-oriented’ cultures, a paradigm developed by Aresi et al. [1] to analyze the clash between U.S. and Italian drinking habits. While the U.S. model is often associated with rebellion and intoxication, the Italian model is integrated with food and family settings where moderation is key.

Following Berry's model of acculturation, students face a choice between 'integration' (adopting the host culture's moderation) and 'separation' (maintaining home drinking habits). When integration fails, as Mitchell et al. [5] suggest, the lack of culturally appropriate drinking experiences leads to risky behaviors. Consequently, this study advocates for 'Harm Reduction frameworks' within Study Abroad Programs—moving beyond simple warnings toward active 'cultural bridging' that aligns student behavior with the safer, integrated models of the host culture.

Methodology

Mine is a mixed-methods research focused on some specific aspects related to alcohol consumption among Study Abroad Students, which combines the outcomes of a structured, anonymous survey with the results of previous research.

The students involved have been 45: 27 female, 16 male and 2 non-binary American students, engaged in a Study Abroad experience, and with a minimum of two months already spent in Italy, so that they could have a clearer perception of their study abroad experience. Their age ranged 18-23 years old. The research took place in October 2025, in the area around Florence, Italy, site of about 28 American Study Abroad Programs.

Given the qualitative depth required to explore risk perception and cultural motivations, this study adopts a case-study approach focused on the Florence/Prato hub. This allows for a 'thick description' [7] of the social dynamics within this specific international student community, prioritizing contextual insight over broad statistical generalization.

I have selected the indicative questions for the goals of my research (both open-ended and closed-ended questions were included), investigating on demographics and three main sections of drinking habits: consumption, motivations, and perception of cultural change. It first provided some notes about definitions about drinks, such as 'standard drink', 'small beer', 'glass of wine' and 'shot'.

Findings

The first objective of my research was to determine the prevalence of alcohol consumption among students during their semester abroad. The results indicated an extremely high prevalence: 43 out of 45 students reported consuming alcohol, representing 95% of the sample.

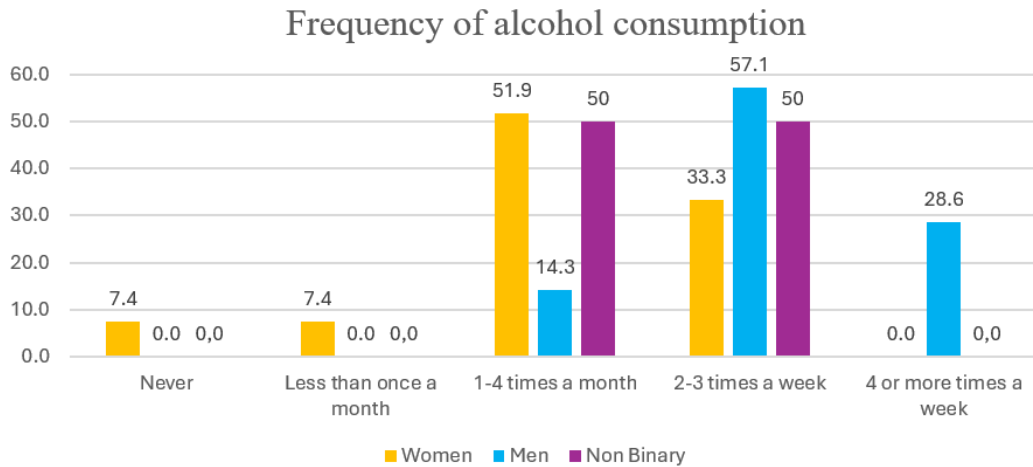
A detailed breakdown by gender indicated a particularly high rate among female participants: all women in the study (100%) reported consuming alcohol. Among male participants, only two individuals (approximately 13.3% of the male sub-sample) declared total abstinence during the period of observation.



Among those who consumed alcohol, it is noteworthy that the frequency of consumption was significantly high.

A detailed gender comparison highlights distinct patterns: while 52% of female participants reported consuming alcoholic beverages 1 to 4 times per month, 57% of male participants reported drinking significantly more often, specifically 2 to 3 times per week.

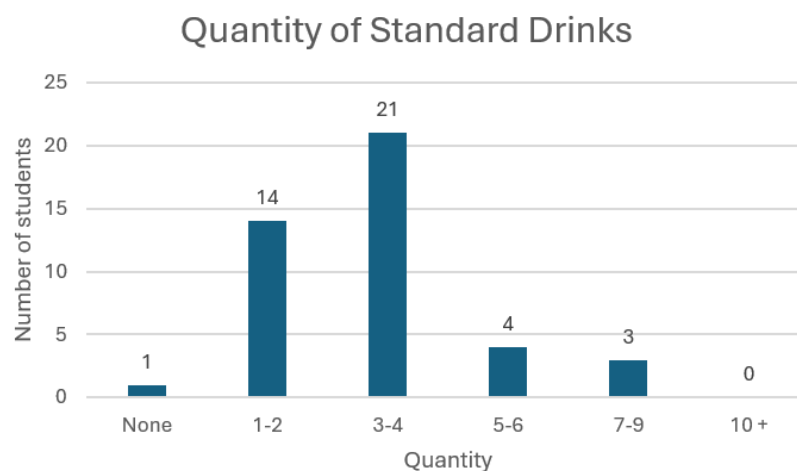
Furthermore, an additional 25% of the total sample reported drinking 4 or more times per week, underscoring a substantial incidence of high-frequency alcohol use during the study abroad period.



A further important aspect of this analysis concerned the quantity of drinks consumed during a typical drinking day.

To quantify consumption, the Standard Drink (SD) was defined as one small beer (33 cl), one glass of wine (15 cl), or one spirit shot (4 cl).

The results indicated that the quantity of SDs consumed by students on a drinking day generally ranged between 1 and 9. Notably, there was a higher concentration of responses, with the majority of students reporting consumption in the range of 3 to 4 Standard Drinks per drinking occasion.



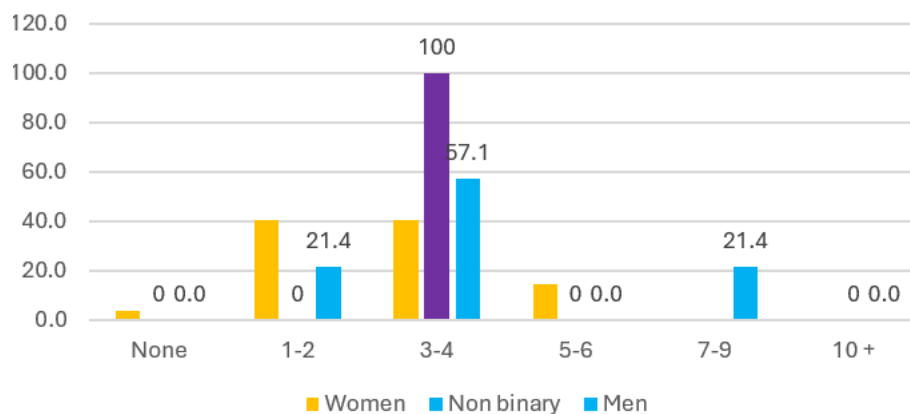
A gender-specific analysis of the quantity of Standard Drinks (SDs) consumed per drinking occasion revealed distinct patterns.

Among female participants, 81% reported consuming between 1 and 4 SDs. This segment was nearly equally distributed, with eleven women drinking 1–4 SDs and eleven women drinking 2–4 SDs. Furthermore, 15% of women consumed 5 to 6 SDs per occasion.

Male participants demonstrated a tendency towards higher consumption levels, indicative of increased rates of Heavy Episodic Drinking (HED). While 79% of men consumed between 1 and 4 SDs (of which 57% consumed 2–4 SDs), the remaining 21% reported consuming 7 or more SDs per drinking occasion.

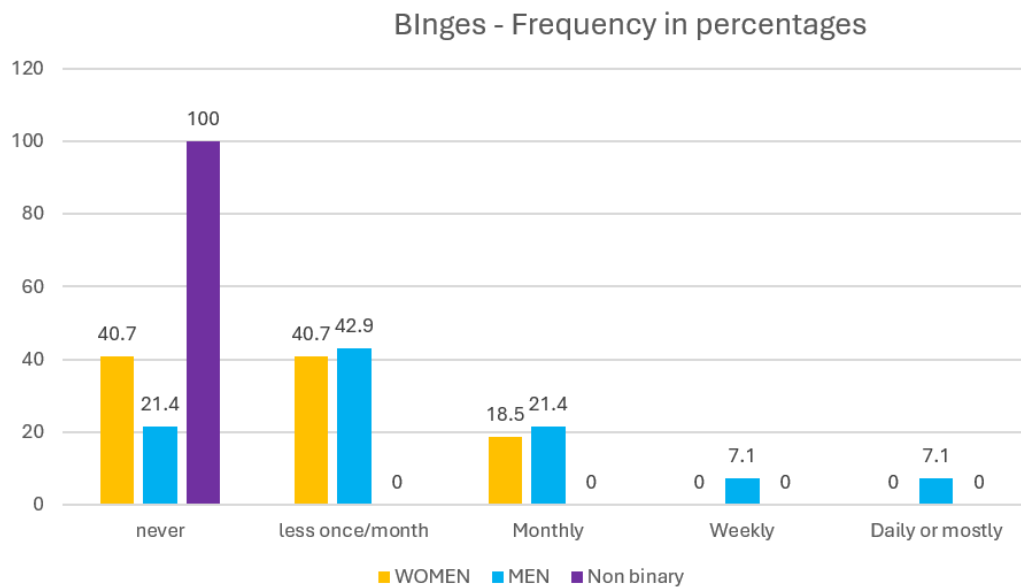
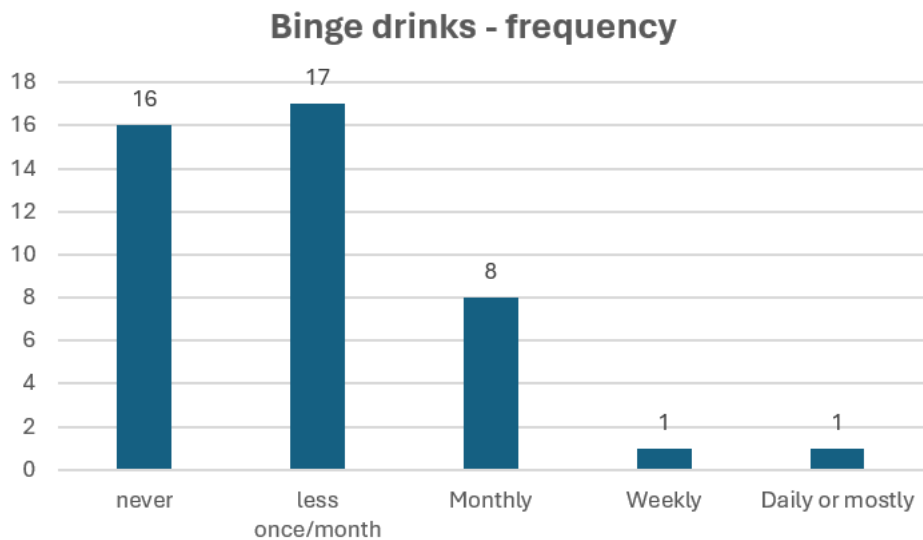
Overall, considering all participants including non-binary individuals, the data show that approximately 56% of students consumed 3 or more SDs per drinking occasion.

Quantity of Standard Drinks - Percentages

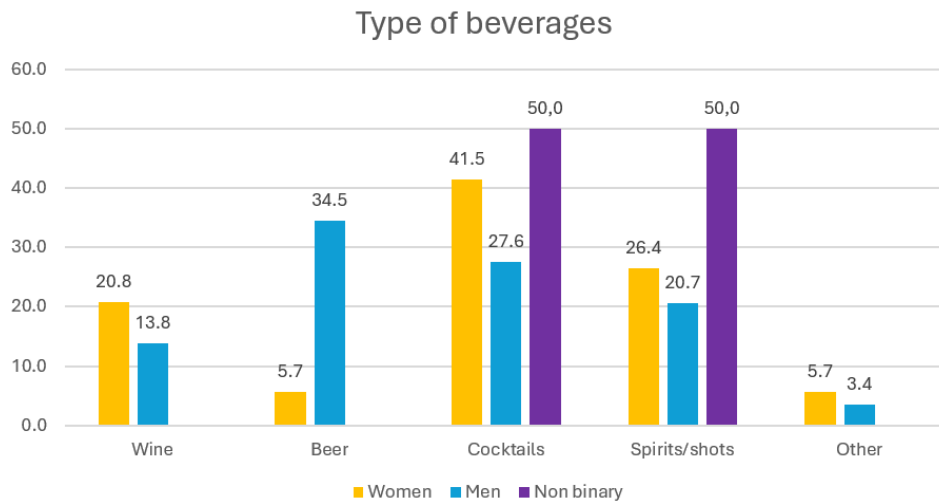


Directly related to the consumption frequency and the quantity, my study assessed binge drinking (Heavy Episodic Drinking). Overall, 63% of the interviewees declared to have had binges. Analysis by gender revealed that 41% of the women had a binge less than once a month, with 18% doing so monthly. Among men, the rates were higher: only 11% reported never

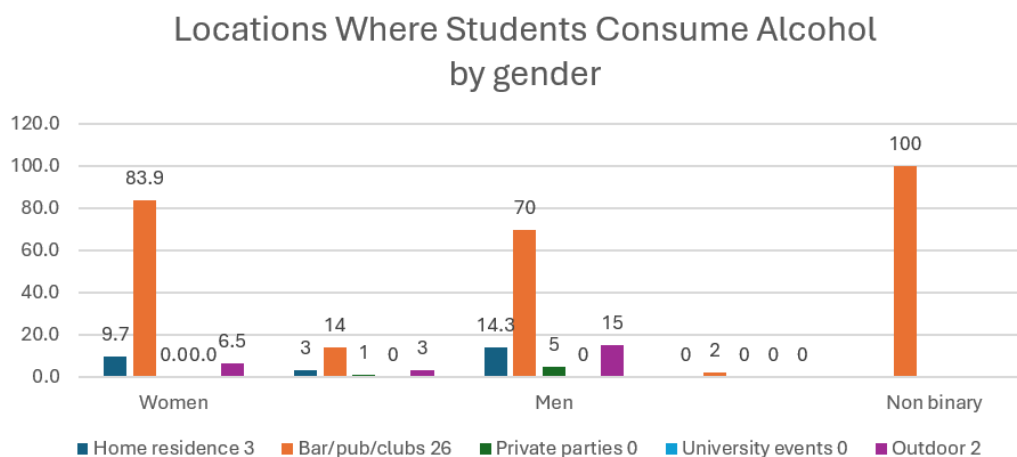
having binged. 43% of men binged less than once a month, 11% monthly, and a notable 14% reported weekly or near-daily bingeing.



An analysis of beverage preference revealed distinct gender differences. Among women, the most preferred beverages were cocktails (41%), followed by spirits (shots, 26%) and wine (21%). Men, however, predominantly favored beer (35%), followed by cocktails (28%) and spirits (21%).



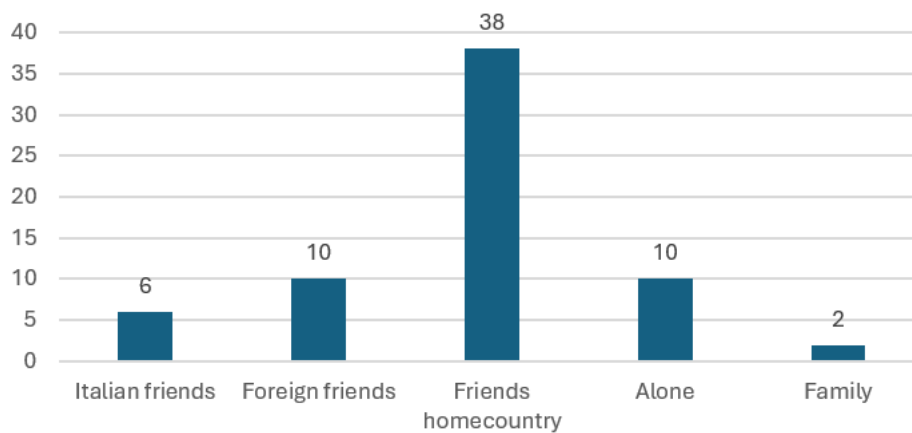
The primary locations where students consume alcohol are pubs or clubs, which includes Italian bars (78%). A concerning finding is the presence of the students' residence among drinking locations. Since these are typically designated 'dry' residences where alcohol is strictly forbidden, the fact that more than 9% of students reported drinking there suggests a breach of program rules.



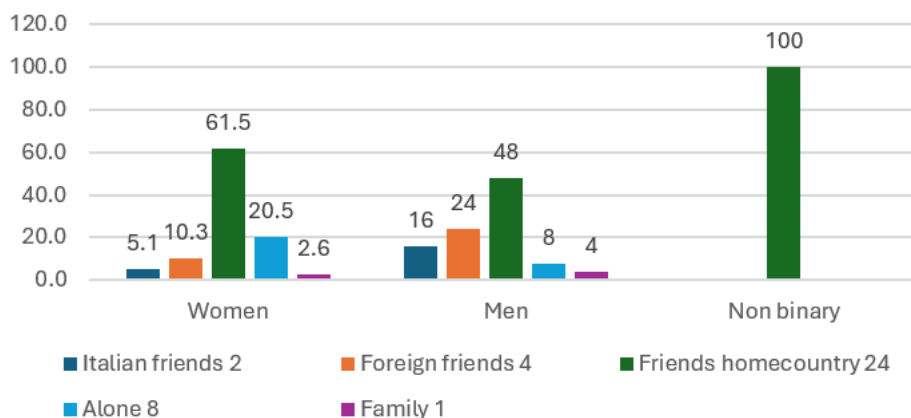
Regarding drinking companionship, the results were consistent with patterns of low acculturation observed in other studies: 57% of students consumed alcohol with American friends, compared to 15% with other foreigners. Only 9% reported drinking with Italians, which suggests the hypothesized role of alcohol as a social facilitator for cross-cultural

integration is largely unfounded. Furthermore, the finding that 15% of students reported drinking alone is a significant concern, as this frequency of solitary drinking is often an indicator of problematic alcohol use.

Composition of Student Drinking Company



Composition of Student Drinking Company by gender



To assess the underlying motives for alcohol consumption, students primarily recognized social (10%) and recreational (12%) motivations.

Notably, 8% of students explicitly stated they drink because it is “Part of Italian culture.” This specific motivation, however, contradicts the behavioral findings of this study, which show that students predominantly drink in pubs/clubs and primarily with American peers or other foreigners, rather than in contexts traditionally associated with Italian drinking culture.

Furthermore, the motivation to drink for stress reduction showed limited influence. Only a negligible 3% of students expressed agreement with this statement, while 12% actively disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting this is not a primary driver for consumption within this population.

Motivation for drinking	Group	Total (N)	% Disagree (SD + D combined)	% Neutral (N)	% Agree (A + SA combined)
Socializing	Women	13	53.80%	0.00%	46.20%
	Men	20	0.00%	45.00%	55.00%
	Non binary	4	0.00%	50.00%	50.00%
Reducing study stress	Women	19	89.50%	5.30%	5.30%
	Men	13	38.50%	38.50%	23.00%
	Non binary	0	n/a	n/a	n/a
Part of Italian culture	Women	22	31.80%	59.10%	9.10%
	Men	17	11.80%	11.80%	76.40%
	Non binary	3	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Feeling more comfortable	Women	22	72.70%	22.70%	4.60%
	Men	12	16.70%	41.70%	41.60%
	Non binary	4	25.00%	50.00%	25.00%
For fun	Women	18	38.90%	38.90%	22.20%
	Men	19	0.00%	36.80%	63.20%
	Non binary	6	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%

The Discrepancy Between Rhetoric and Practice

A critical finding of this study is the stark contradiction between students’ stated motivations and their actual social behaviors, a phenomenon that highlights a failure in the acculturation process. While 8% of respondents explicitly justify their alcohol consumption as being ‘Part

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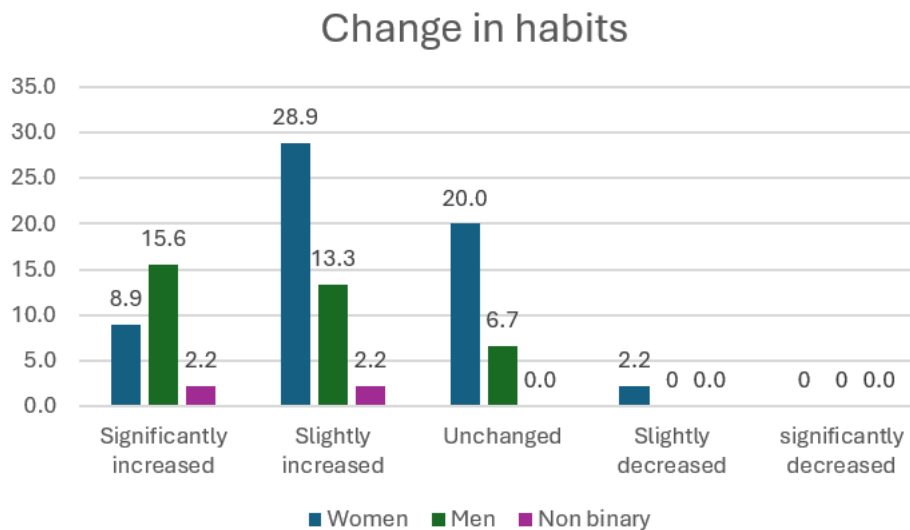
of Italian culture’ the behavioral data reveals a different reality: only 9% of students report drinking with locals, whereas the vast majority (72%) consume alcohol exclusively within the ‘American bubble’ of their compatriots.

This discrepancy suggests that ‘Italian culture’ is often utilized as a rhetorical alibi to legitimize high-frequency drinking, rather than being the result of a genuine engagement with local Mediterranean norms. Drawing on Berry’s (1997) [8] model of acculturation, this pattern exemplifies a ‘Separation’ strategy: students adopt the physical setting of the host country but maintain the social norms and ‘intoxication-oriented’ models of their home culture [1]. The fact that students primarily frequent pubs and clubs (locations associated with Anglo-American nightlife) further confirms that their drinking habits are an amplified extension of U.S. college behaviors rather than an integration into the Italian *stile di vita* (lifestyle).

This ‘cultural disconnect’ is precisely where the risk lies: by misinterpreting binge drinking as a form of ‘local immersion’, students neutralize their perception of risk, effectively shielding themselves from the academic and health warnings provided by their Study Abroad Programs.

Perception

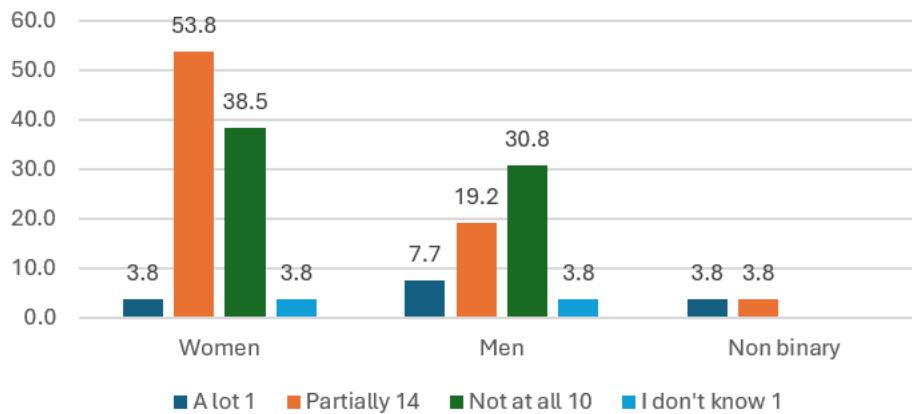
The subsequent section of the survey assessed students' perceived change in their alcohol consumption habits since the semester began. Regarding the trajectory of their drinking, 71% of the students indicated that their habit had slightly or strongly increased. Conversely, 27% reported that their habit remained unchanged, with only one student reporting a decrease.



The subsequent question inquired about the extent to which Italian culture influenced drinking habits.

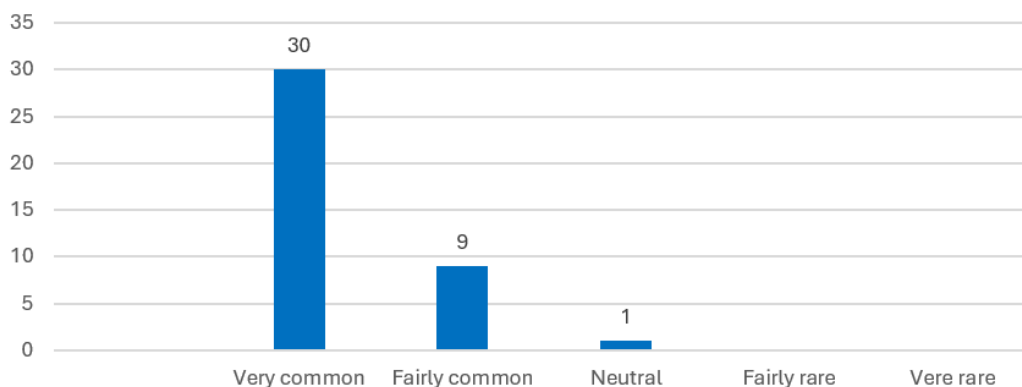
A majority of students (54%) reported that the local culture had an influence on their consumption. However, they largely specified that this influence was only partial (45%). This perspective stands in contrast to the 41% of the sample who stated that the local culture had no influence at all. This finding underscores the need for further investigation into how students define and attribute ‘cultural influence’ on their personal consumption patterns, especially considering the behavioral data regarding consumption locations and drinking peers.

Perception of host culture influence - percentage



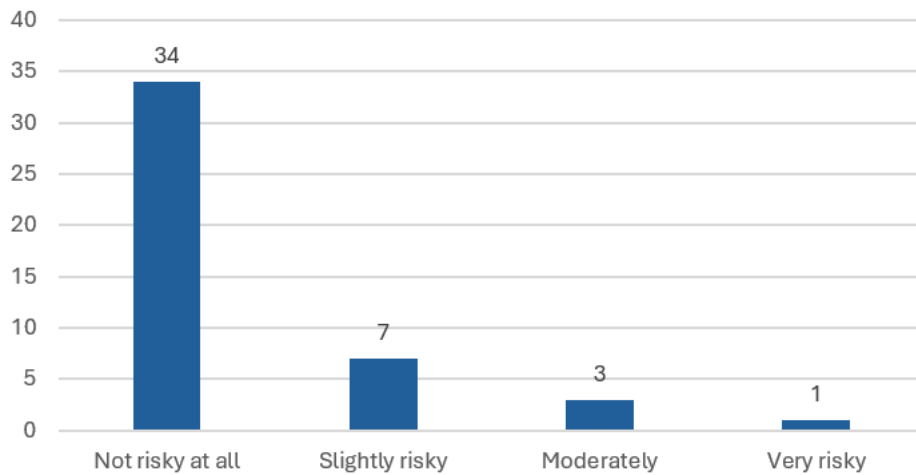
Next question examined the perceived social norms surrounding alcohol consumption among students abroad. The findings indicated a strong consensus: all but one student reported that alcohol use is common and accepted. Critically, no student perceived alcohol consumption to be stigmatized within their study abroad environment. [chart 16]

Perceived Acceptance of Alcohol Consumption Among Students



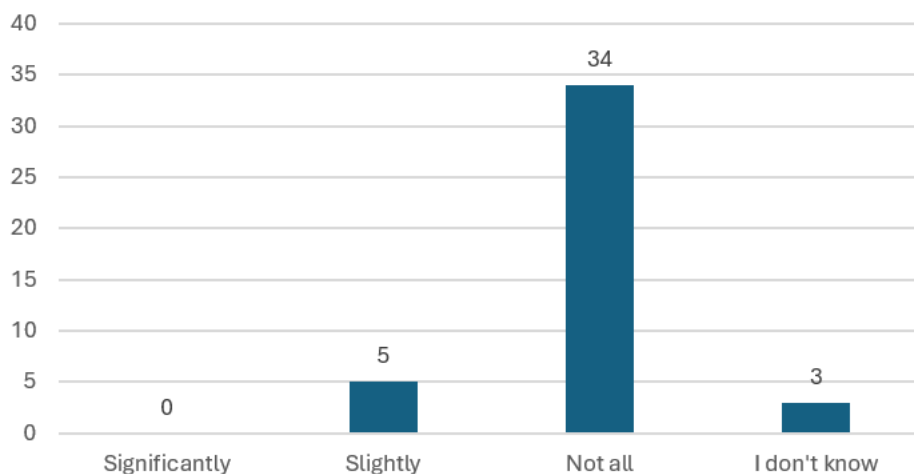
Finally, the question concerning the perceived health risks associated with alcohol consumption revealed a significant lack of awareness: 75% of students reported seeing no risk related to their health. Only 15% of students acknowledged a slight risk, with a single student reporting that their alcohol habit was very risky.

Risk perception



In parallel with the perceived lack of health risk, students showed minimal concern regarding academic performance. A significant majority (81%) reported that alcohol consumption had no impact on their studies. Only a small minority of students (12%) acknowledged that it might have a slight influence.

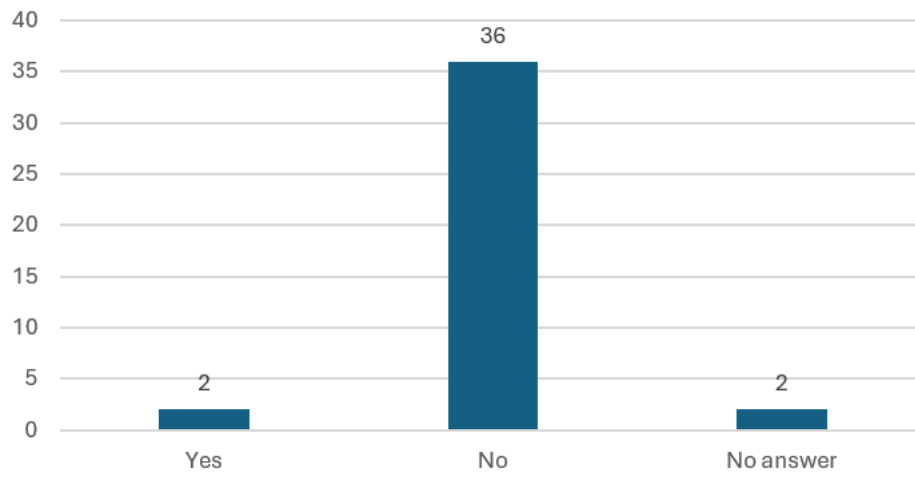
Academic impact



The subsequent open-ended question inquired about any self-reported negative consequences (health, social, or legal) experienced while drunk. A significant majority of students (92%)

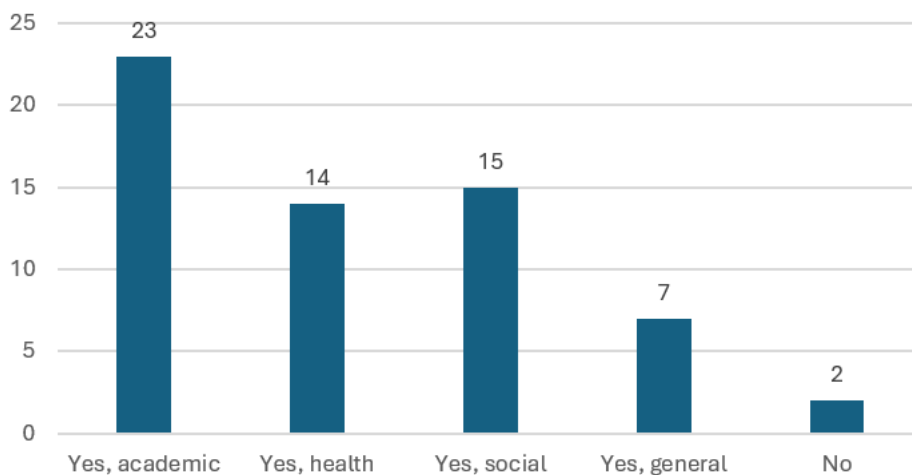
reported no issues; only three students reported a negative consequence. Of those, only one provided a description, specifying the incident as being “attacked by locals”.

Issues when drunk



Last question was about the warning and advice received by their universities. All students except 2 declared to have received it, a sign that the university did its work.

University support



Conclusion

A primary observation stemming from this research is that the cohort of students surveyed, with an average age of 19, maintains high levels of alcohol consumption regardless of gender, despite being significantly below the legal drinking age in their home country. When analyzed through the framework of modern liminality [6], this behavior can be interpreted as a result of the ‘liminal’ status of being abroad—a transitional state where students exist in a ‘threshold’ zone, suspended between their home identity and a temporary host identity. This suspension often leads to a perceived immunity from social and academic consequences, as the usual structures of restraint are temporarily lifted. This is vividly evidenced by the profound risk perception gap found in the data: despite a 95.5% prevalence of consumption and elevated Heavy Episodic Drinking (62.8%), 75% of students perceive no health risks and 81% see no impact on their academic performance.

This trend persists despite preparatory information provided by universities, suggesting a limited efficacy of current measures in curbing consumption. Anchoring these findings in Social Norms Theory, it becomes clear that students' behavior is heavily dictated by ‘perceived norms’ within their immediate peer group (the so called ‘American bubble’) rather than the actual ‘injunctive norms’ of the host Italian culture. This reinforces the idea that the role of the Study Abroad Program is fundamental and probably requires a strategic shift. Rather than acting as a mere logistical facilitator, the SAP must function as a central pedagogical anchor, actively bridging the gap between the students’ home habits and the host country’s reality. This necessity stems from the fact that institutional guidance is the primary force capable of disrupting the self-reinforcing social cycles that students establish upon arrival. Consequently, SAPs have the responsibility to implement proactive, culturally-embedded ‘Harm Reduction frameworks’ that challenge the psychological ‘sensation of freedom’ [9] which, as a defining trait of the liminal experience [6], currently drives excessive behaviors. The effectiveness of these programs depends on the SAP’s ability to facilitate a true acculturation process, moving students away from a ‘separation’ strategy (where 72% drink only with compatriots) toward integration’. By explicitly deconstructing the discrepancy between the US intoxication-

oriented model and the Italian non-intoxication-oriented model [1], SAPs can frame alcohol use not as a rebellious escape, but as an integrated component of the host culture's social fabric. Addressing this disconnect is essential for fostering genuine acculturation rather than providing a mere justification for increased consumption [10].

While this study provides essential insights, it is limited by its specific geographic focus in the Florence area and its reliance on self-reported data from a sample of 45 students. Future research should therefore investigate the longitudinal impact of these behaviors and the extent to which varying university disciplinary responses and institutional frameworks can effectively utilize Social Norms marketing and Harm Reduction to mitigate risky patterns. Such data is crucial for ensuring the study abroad experience remains a transformative period of growth rather than a risky 'liminal' detour, aligning student behavior with the authentic cultural engagement they seek to achieve.

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