

# PROBLEMATIC DRINKING HABITS AND DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS IN COLLEGE STUDENTS: A STUDY THROUGH THE LENS OF TEXT MESSAGE ANALYSIS

Claire Mink

## INTRODUCTION

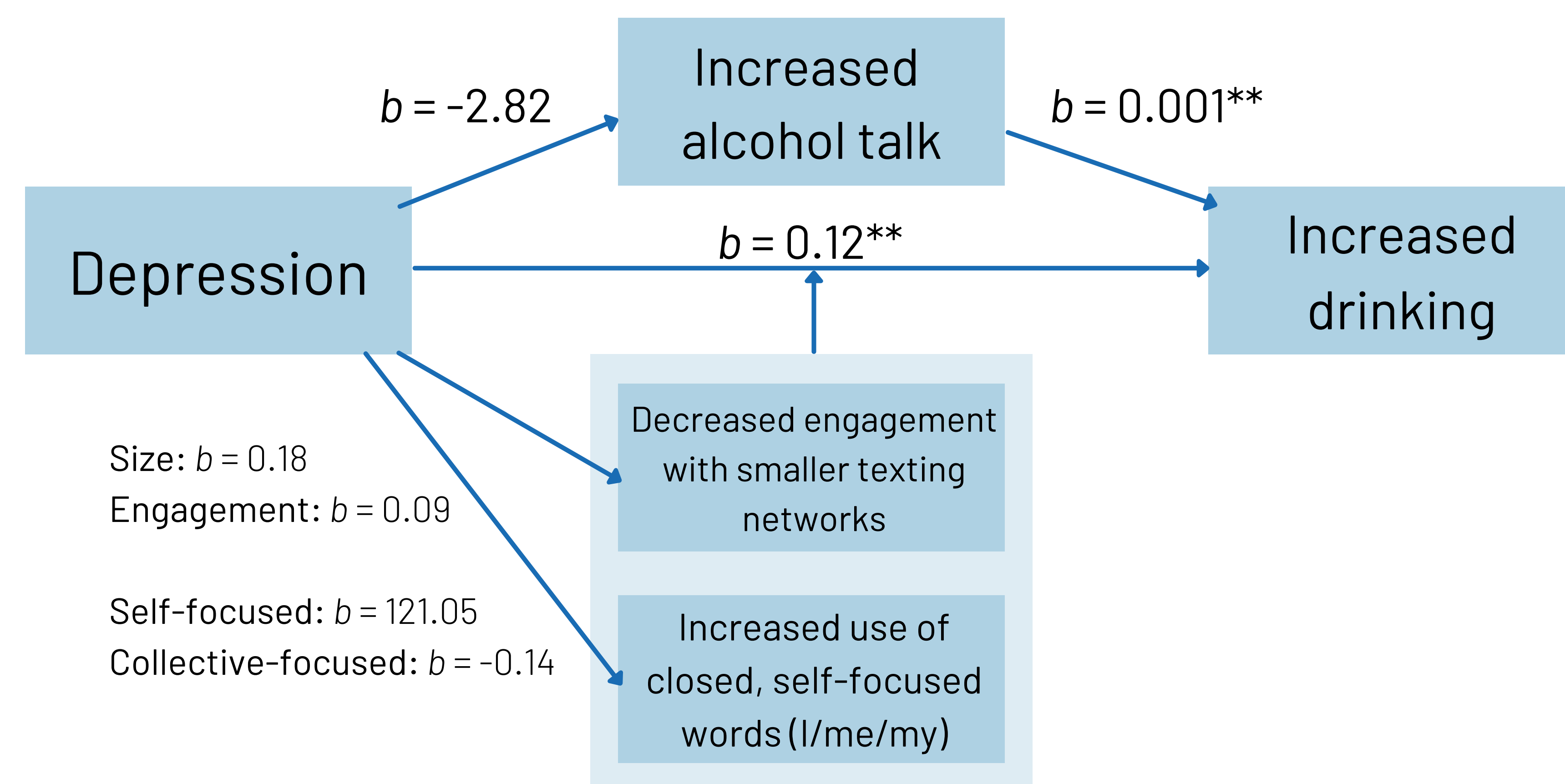
- College students are at risk for heavy drinking habits as well as depressive symptoms (Grant, 1997; Lipson & Eisenberg et al., 2018).
- Individuals may be motivated to drink to cope with negative affect (Cooper et al., 1995).
- Self medication theory supports the higher risk for young people (Frohlich et al., 2018).
- Both depressive symptoms and alcohol use habits can be studied through the unique lens of text analysis (Jensen & Hussong, 2019; Seabrook et al., 2018).
- The current study seeks to understand depression, drinking, and the link between the two via online isolation linguistic choices.

## METHODS

- $N = 267$  college students (40.8% male, 56.82% white) participated in the Real Life Experiences of University Students (REAL-U) study (Hussong et al., 2021).
- Students completed surveys measuring depressive symptoms and alcohol use problems.
- Students were invited to download the texts from their cell phones sent and received during a two week period
- The Linguistic Inquiry Word Count program measured social and mental isolation.

## RESULTS

Results indicated that while depression and drinking habits are significantly associated, as well as alcohol problems and alcohol talk, the overall mediation was not significant. Depression was not significantly associated with isolation. Furthermore, isolation – both social and mental – did not appear to moderate the relationship between depression and drinking.



Note:  $p^* < 0.05$ ;  $p^{**} < 0.01$

Despite insignificant findings, gender and participation in Greek life were significantly associated with higher alcohol problems such that boys and Greek affiliates were likely to drink more. Alcohol talk was also significantly associated with Greek life – but not depression, age, or gender.

## DISCUSSION

- Drinking to cope may not be a primary motivation even in depressed students because of the unique salience of drinking opportunities in college culture.
- Texting their peers may negatively reinforce depressed students' behaviors by allowing them to stay connected while physically isolated.
- A lack of insight into group text messages and a potential issue with Greek life classification.
- Future directions point toward what mechanisms might relate depression and drinking habits.
- If depressed students do not isolate digitally, this may turn our attention to problematic Internet/phone use instead.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was made possible by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse awarded to Daniel J. Bauer (1R01DA034636-01A1). Special thanks to Dr. Andrea Hussong and Rachel Petrie for their support as advisors to this project.

**Email:** [cemink@live.unc.edu](mailto:cemink@live.unc.edu)  
**Lab Website:** [www.fjcolab.org](http://www.fjcolab.org)