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Ernest N. Jouriles

Southern Methodist University

Alison Krauss

Southern Methodist University

Kelli S. Sargent

Southern Methodist University

Jamie Nguyen

Southern Methodist University

Michele Cascardi

William Paterson University

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Ernest N. Jouriles, Alison Krauss, Kelli S. Sargent, Jamie Nguyen, Michele Cascardi, John H. Grych, and Renee McDonald

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Party Frequency, Party-safety Strategies, and Sexual Victimization Among First-year Female College Students

Ernest N. Jouriles

Department of Psychology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, USA

Alison Krauss

Department of Psychology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, USA

Kelli S. Sargent

Department of Psychology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, USA

Jamie Nguyen

Department of Psychology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, USA

Michele Cascardi

Department of Psychology, William Paterson University, Wayne, New Jersey, USA

John H. Grych

Department of Psychology, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

Renee McDonald

Department of Psychology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, USA

Abstract

Objective:

This study examined whether the use of party-safety strategies weakens the association between frequency of party attendance and sexual victimization among first-year female college students.

Participants:

First-year female college students ($n = 450$) from three universities in the United States participated in this study.

Methods:

Participants completed questionnaires on frequency of party attendance, use of party-safety strategies, and sexual victimization.

Results:

Frequency of party attendance was positively associated with sexual victimization. This association was moderated by use of party-safety strategies: frequency of party attendance was unrelated to sexual victimization when students reported greater use of party-safety strategies. However, frequency of party attendance was positively related to sexual victimization when students reported lower use of party-safety strategies.

Conclusions:

Teaching and reinforcing party-safety strategies may be helpful additions to efforts to prevent sexual victimization on college campuses.

Keywords:

College students, party safety, sexual assault, sexual violence prevention, victimization

Introduction

In the United States (US), it is common for university and college (hereafter referred to as college) students to attend parties.¹ Parties can be beneficial, providing students with opportunities for social interaction with friends and peers. However, they also present risks, including sexual victimization—defined in the current study as unwanted sexual contact, including touching and kissing. Women in their first year of college are more likely to experience nonconsensual sexual intercourse at parties than in other situations.² In addition, greater frequency of party attendance among female college students, operationalized as days per week spent partying, increases the likelihood of experiencing forced or coerced sexual acts.³ It is also noteworthy that women in their first year of college are at higher risk for sexual victimization, compared to their more senior counterparts.^{2,4} This risk appears to be particularly high during the first couple of months in college.⁴

To try to reduce risk for sexual victimization, college students sometimes use protective strategies, such as planning with friends to arrive at and leave parties together, monitoring friends' drinks and alcohol consumption, and caring for friends who become intoxicated.⁵ In the research literature on bystander intervention for sexual assault prevention, these strategies are collectively referred to as party-safety strategies.^{6,7} However, little is known about how effectively these strategies reduce risk for sexual victimization. Therefore, the current study investigates whether party-safety strategies reduce the association between frequency of party attendance and sexual victimization among women in their first year of college.

Background theory and research

Lifestyle exposure theory posits that aspects of one's routine activities can influence the probability of being victimized.⁸ Specifically, certain routine activities put people at greater risk for victimization by putting them in close proximity to settings where crimes are likely to occur and to people who are likely to commit crimes. Within this framework, frequent party attendance in college can be conceptualized as a lifestyle risk factor for sexual victimization. Alcohol use, which is common at college parties, make parties even more risky because drinking is linked to sexual victimization among female college students.⁹⁻¹³

In the literature on bystander intervention for sexual assault prevention, party-safety strategies include actions taken before or during a party to prevent sexual victimization and other undesirable outcomes.^{6,7} Theoretically, these strategies reduce one's own and one's peers' risk for sexual victimization by heightening awareness of specific circumstances at parties that might escalate to sexual assault and by promoting actions to help prevent such circumstances from occurring or escalating.¹⁴ For example, when a female college student consumes alcohol or drugs and is unable to consent to sexual contact, she may be at risk for incapacitated sexual assaults. The first year of college is associated with elevated risk of incapacitated sexual assaults for female students.¹⁰ Party-safety strategies, such as monitoring drinks and looking after friends who become intoxicated, presumably can help prevent incapacitated sexual assaults from occurring. Equipping female college students with strategies to protect themselves is one of several approaches that may reduce sexual assault, and it does not negate the importance of also developing strategies that target potential perpetrators of sexual assault.

Safety-planning strategies also have been examined in other research literatures. For example, having a specific safety plan for dates (e.g., a transportation plan if one wants to leave a date and informing a friend of a date location) is associated with reduced risk for severe sexual assault.¹⁵ Likewise, the use of alcohol-related protective strategies (e.g., eating before drinking, alternating alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages) can mitigate the likelihood of adverse consequences experienced during and after a period of drinking.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ In short, theory and research suggest that the use of safety-planning strategies might help reduce risk for sexual victimization, but little empirical research has examined the role of party-safety strategies in relation to party attendance and risk for sexual victimization.

Current study

The current study examines how party-safety strategies may influence the relation between frequency of party attendance and sexual victimization among first-year female college students. The use of party-safety strategies was examined during the first two months of college, a time when female students are at particularly high risk for experiencing sexual victimization.⁴ It was hypothesized that: (1) frequency of attending parties will be positively related to sexual victimization, and (2) greater use of party-safety strategies will weaken the association between the frequency of party attendance and sexual victimization.

Method

Participants

Participants were first-year undergraduate students who identified as female and who had been on campus for approximately 4 weeks prior to study participation. The sample was recruited from three US universities ($n = 450$), all of which were medium-sized, four-year institutions; one private university in the South, one public university in the Northeast, and one private university in the Midwest. The sample was predominantly White ($n = 297$, 66.0%), and non-Hispanic ($n = 370$, 82.2%); 11.3% identified as Asian ($n = 51$), 9.3% as Black ($n = 42$), 6.2% as "More than one race" ($n = 28$), 0.7% as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ($n = 3$), and 0.2% as American Indian/Alaska Native ($n = 1$). Approximately 6% reported "Unknown or Not Listed" ($n = 32$); three participants did not report their race. On average, students were 18.08 years old ($SD = 0.28$; range 18-19 years).

Procedures and measures

Data were collected as part of a sexual assault prevention study conducted across the three universities. Institutional Review Boards at each of the universities approved all procedures, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Questionnaires completed at the baseline assessment were used in the current research, and they were completed in a monitored research lab, dormitory, or university common space. Students received course credit (alternatives to research participation were also available to students who wished to receive course credit, but who did not want to participate in research) or a \$10 gift card for participating.

Frequency of party attendance

Participants responded to the question, “How frequently do you go to parties?” on a 4-point scale from 0 = *Rarely* to 3 = *More than once a week*. Similar single-item measures of party attendance have been demonstrated to relate to sexual victimization³ and assault perpetration.¹⁹

Sexual victimization

Participants completed the sexual abuse subscale of the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (CADRI).²⁰ The sexual abuse subscale includes four items: “They kissed me when I didn’t want them to,” “They touched me sexually when I didn’t want them to,” “They forced me to have sex when I didn’t want to,” and “They threatened me in an attempt to have sex with me.” Participants indicated how often they experienced each of these in the *past 2 months* on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 = *Never* to 4 = *Four or more times*. The four items were summed to form a total score, with a possible range of 0-16. In previous research, a factor analysis of the CADRI confirmed five distinct factors measuring different types of abuse (i.e., threatening, verbal/emotional, relational, physical, and sexual).²¹ In addition, as predicted by theory, previous research has found correlations between the sexual abuse subscale of the CADRI and other measures of violence victimization.²² Omega—a generally more accurate measure of internal consistency than Cronbach’s alpha, especially for skewed data—in the current sample was $\Omega = .80$.²³

Party-safety strategies

Participants completed the Party Safety subscale of the Bystander Behavior (For Friends) Scale (BBS).⁶ Based on a previous factor analysis of the BBS that confirmed its 4-factor structure,⁷ an 8-item version of the Party Safety subscale was utilized. Sample items include *I talked with a friend about going to parties together, staying together, and leaving together* and *If a friend had too much to drink, I asked them if they needed help getting home from the party*. Scores were a count of the number of party-safety strategies reported to have been used in the *past 2 months*, with a possible range of 0 to 8. Previous research has found scores on the Party Safety subscale to relate to measures of constructs theoretically associated with such behavior, such as responsibility to stop violence and intent to help others.⁶ In the current sample, $\Omega = .70$.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and Kendall-tau correlation coefficients are listed in Table 1. In the total sample ($n = 450$), 15.0% of participants reported at least one incident of sexual victimization within the past two months ($n = 67$): 11.2% reported unwanted kissing ($n = 50$), 9.2% reported unwanted touching ($n = 41$), 0.2% reported threats in an attempt to have sex ($n = 1$), and 1.8% reported forced sex ($n = 8$).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and Kendall-tau correlations among study variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Party attendance	-			1.14 (1.14)
2. Party-safety strategies	.44**	-		4.98 (2.61)
3. Sexual victimization	.09*	.10*	-	0.38 (1.12)

Note. Party attendance scores ranged from 0-3, party-safety strategy scores ranged from 0-8, and sexual victimization scores ranged from 0-7.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

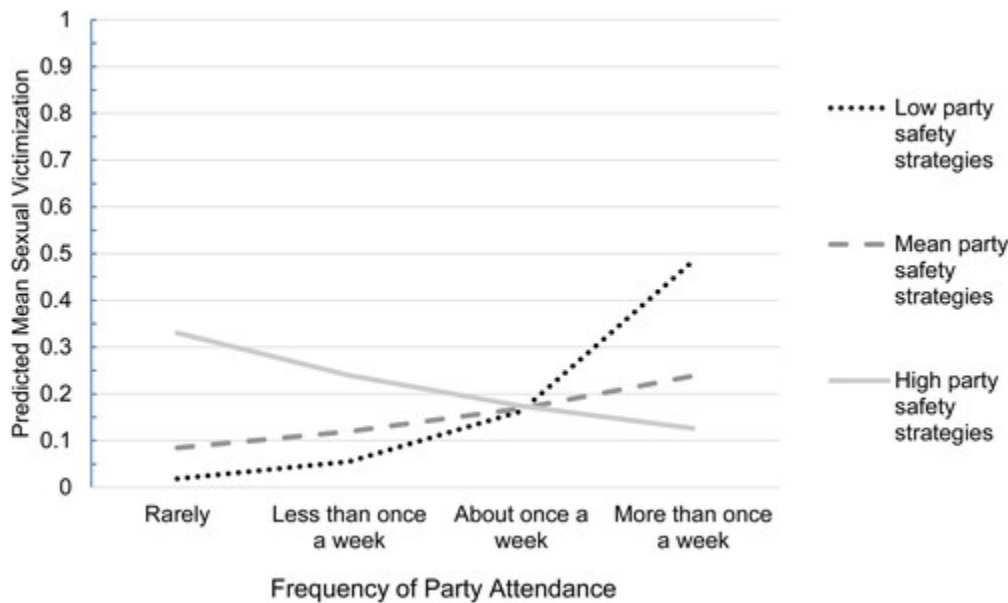
Over 40% of participants reported attending parties “about once a week” or more, and 95.3% reported using one or more party-safety strategies. The most commonly reported party-safety strategy was *I talked with a friend about going to parties together, staying together, and leaving together*, which was reported by 83.8% of the sample ($n = 377$). The next most commonly reported party-safety strategy was *I asked a friend who seemed upset if they were okay or needed help*, which was reported by 74.2% of the sample ($n = 334$).

As hypothesized, frequency of party attendance was positively associated with sexual victimization (Hypothesis 1). Party-safety strategies were also positively associated with sexual victimization.

The moderating effect of party-safety strategies on the relation between party attendance and sexual victimization was examined using a negative binomial regression with a log link. This approach is recommended when the variable modeled (i.e., sexual victimization) is zero-inflated, meaning most participants did not experience sexual victimization (approximately 85% of the participants in the current sample did not report experiencing sexual victimization).²⁴ Frequency of party attendance, party-safety strategies, and their interaction were the predictor variables. Because prior research has identified several campus-level factors associated with the prevalence of sexual victimization,^{25,26} two dummy codes were also included to control for the effect of university on victimization.

Results indicated a moderator effect for party-safety strategies, $b = -0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .004$, $OR = 0.88$. In follow-up analyses to interpret the nature of the interaction, party-safety strategies were centered at the mean (moderate use), one standard deviation above the mean (high use), and one standard deviation below the mean (low use). At low and moderate use of party-safety strategies, party attendance was positively related to sexual victimization, $b = 0.31$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .003$, $OR = 1.37$ at moderate levels; $b = 0.68$, $SE = 0.20$, $p = .001$, $OR = 1.98$ at low levels. At high use of party-safety strategies, party attendance was not related to sexual victimization, $b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.12$, $p = .86$, $OR = 0.98$ (see Figure 1). Students with low or average use of party-safety strategies were at markedly increased risk for sexual victimization (odds ratios [OR] from 1.37 to 1.98) compared to those with high use ($OR = .98$).

Figure 1. Moderating effect of party frequency on the relation between party attendance and sexual victimization among first-year female college students. Because negative binomial regression produces log transformed predicted values, scores for the figure were exponentially transformed to reflect the original scale of sexual victimization.



Sexual victimization also differed across the universities, with students at the northeastern university reporting higher sexual victimization than students at the southern and midwestern universities: $b = 0.84$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .001$, $OR = 2.32$ for southern vs. northeastern; $b = 0.96$, $SE = 0.24$, $p < .001$, $OR = 2.61$ for midwestern vs. northeastern. The southern and midwestern universities did not differ in reported sexual victimization, $b = -0.12$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = .62$, $OR = 0.89$.

Discussion

As hypothesized, frequency of party attendance was positively associated with sexual victimization among first-year female college students. However, greater use of party-safety strategies was associated with a weaker relation between frequency of party attendance and sexual victimization. For students reporting the highest use of these strategies, frequency of party attendance was unrelated to sexual victimization. Although the findings need to be interpreted cautiously due to the correlational nature of the data, they are consistent with theory and research suggesting that college parties are high-risk settings for sexual assault^{2,3,5,27}, and that the use of protective strategies may help prevent sexual assaults from occurring.^{5,15}

Almost all the students in the current sample used at least one party-safety strategy (95.3%), with discussing attendance and departure of parties the most commonly used strategy. Students who attended parties frequently and who used more party-safety strategies appeared to be at reduced risk for sexual victimization, compared to those who attended parties frequently but used fewer party-safety strategies. A potential clinical implication of these findings is that sexual victimization rates might be reduced by teaching and encouraging students to look after themselves and each other at parties. Party-safety strategies could be incorporated into bystander intervention programs designed to prevent sexual assault, as well as harm reduction programs for alcohol use. This has already begun for some of these programs.²⁸⁻³⁰ Including party-safety strategies in bystander intervention programs seems natural, because such strategies are already included in comprehensive conceptual frameworks of bystander intervention behavior.³¹ Unfortunately, it is not clear how effectively party-safety strategies are taught and promoted in university-based bystander intervention programs, because empirical evaluations of such programs typically do not examine program effects on specific types of bystander behavior but rather evaluate program effects on measures that aggregate different types of bystander behavior.³²⁻³⁴ It therefore remains unclear whether current bystander intervention programs lead to increases in the use of party-safety strategies.

It is also noteworthy that 15.0% of the first-year female college students in the current sample reported sexual victimization during the past two months. These findings are consistent with other data indicating that sexual victimization of college women is widespread,³⁵ and the first months in college may be especially problematic.⁴ Perpetrators, of course, are responsible for committing the sexual assaults, and efforts need to be directed toward sexual assault prevention programs that effectively deter perpetrators. However, imminent safety needs, as well as comprehensive programs for preventing sexual assault on college campuses, likely require a multi-faceted approach, and the current findings imply that there are things first-year female college students can do to help protect themselves and their peers while efforts are underway to develop more robust violence prevention programs.

This study's findings need to be interpreted in light of several limitations. It is possible, for example, that unmeasured third variables explain the observed moderator effect. Future research should consider such variables, including alcohol use, peer norms, and frequency of casual sex. Another limitation of the current study pertains to the measurement of key variables. A more comprehensive measure of party attendance, such as one that differentiates among types of parties attended (e.g., fraternity vs. university sponsored) and the availability of alcohol at parties, would likely inform the findings of the current research. The measure of party-safety strategies captured the breadth of students' use of party-safety behaviors, rather than the frequency. To better understand how party-safety strategies may mitigate the risk of sexual victimization, researchers should consider the relative merits of assessing the frequency versus the breadth of strategies used.

Aspects of the sample also bear consideration. Female students were sampled very early in their college careers because there is evidence that they are at higher risk for sexual victimization at this time, as compared to other times.⁴ It is unclear, however, whether the findings generalize to other times in college, when the risk for sexual victimization is lower and when students have accrued more time and experience in college. It is also unclear if all of the behaviors and experiences reported on by college students in this study (party attendance, party-safety behaviors, sexual victimizations) actually occurred after they arrived on campus. That is, it is possible that some students were remembering and reporting on incidents that happened prior to coming to campus. In addition, although the study was conducted across three universities, these three were not representative of all US universities, and attempts were not made to ensure a representative sample of first-year female college students from each of the universities. Thus, it is not clear whether the associations observed in the current research extend to first-year female college students in general.

In the current study, sexual victimization was defined as unwanted sexual contact, including touching and kissing. This is consistent with the definition used by many other researchers who have studied campus sexual violence.³⁵ It is also consistent with legal definitions for sexual assault in certain states (e.g., Wisconsin).³⁶ It is important, however, to recognize that definitions of sexual victimization and assault vary across researchers and states. Related to this point, the sexual victimization experiences reported by students in the current sample were primarily unwanted kissing and unwanted touching. Such experiences can still be harmful, but they may not be deemed sexual assault on certain campuses. It should be considered when interpreting the current results that party-safety strategies may help to prevent certain types of sexual acts, such as unwanted kissing and unwanted touching, but not others. Additional research is needed to evaluate that question.

In conclusion, sexual victimization of female college students is common, and college campuses likely need a multi-faceted approach to prevent such violence. The findings of the current study suggest that teaching and reinforcing the use of party-safety strategies may be helpful in this endeavor. They also point to additional avenues for research to better elucidate the role of party-safety strategies. For example, it is not clear whether the current findings would replicate in different samples or with different methods for measuring the constructs of interest. Similarly, it is not clear what effects current bystander intervention programs might have on students' use of party-safety strategies, or if there are possible unintended side effects of universities promoting

party-safety strategies among first-year college students, such as increasing underage drinking.³⁷ Although the current findings suggest first-year female college students' use of party-safety strategies is desirable, additional research on such strategies and their use is warranted.

Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report. The authors confirm that the research presented in this article met the ethical guidelines, including adherence to the legal requirements, of the United States and received approval from the Institutional Review Boards of Southern Methodist University, William Paterson University, and Marquette University.

Additional information

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