

Alcohol Motives and Professional Identity Development in Business Students

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between alcohol motives and the development of professional identity among undergraduate business students. Professional identity emerges prior to workforce entry and is shaped by socialization processes, peer norms, and institutional expectations (Ashforth et al., 2021; Jackson, 2017). Drawing on social identity theory, which explains how group belonging and perceived legitimacy influence behavior and self-concept (Bliuc et al., 2011), this research examines whether alcohol related motives are associated with perceptions of professionalism, employability, and comfort in career-relevant settings. Alcohol use functions as a visible social behavior through which belonging and social fit are negotiated in emerging adulthood (MacLean, 2016; Brooks et al., 2015), yet its role in pre-professional identity formation within business education remains underexplored. Data were collected through an IRB approved survey administered in a college of business at a public university in the Middle Tennessee region. The instrument incorporates selected items from the Young Adult Alcohol Motives Scale to measure coping, social, enhancement, and interpersonal comfort motives, alongside original measures of professional identity, perceived career readiness, and professional image management. By integrating professional identity theory with social identity theory and research on alcohol motives, the study extends talent development and professional socialization scholarship into the pre-employment stage. The findings are expected to have practical implications for management education, leadership development, and organizational onboarding by improving understanding of how Generation Z business students navigate social norms as they construct a professional self.

Keywords: Professional identity development, Gen Z, Employability, Business students, Career readiness