



The Role of Social Identity on College Drinking Influences



Abstract

Extending our research on identity theory and its role in drinking norm influences, we focus on research conducted with a web-based survey of college students to begin to explore school-based social identities and how they develop. Starting with an analysis comparing far-campus residents and near-campus residents we are able to demonstrate that far-campus students hold less strong university identities. Normative perceptions for various groups are also measured. The degree of matching between group perceptions and identity are shown to be an important determinant to the correspondence between group norms and individual behaviors. The process of identity development is explored within the context of regulatory focus motivations.

Background

Identity theory as described by Terry and Hogg (1996) has begun to inform our understanding of the role of normative influence on college binge drinking. Using relatively simple measurement techniques, group identification has been shown to moderate the relationship between perceived drinking norms and individual drinking rates (Reed et al, 2007).

However, of equal interest are the motivations behind identity formation. The expected identity ambiguity that occurs with the transition to college evokes emotional responses and disambiguation strategies that vary by individual. With external pressures to change much greater on those who are younger and moving from home, the employed strategy to resolve the identity ambiguity are explored within the research presented to point to a new direction in the study of social influence on drinking behavior. Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) has been applied to promoting physical activity by matching messages to regulatory focus motivations ("goal orientations": prevention vs promotion orientations).

Methods

A web-based survey was conducted at San Diego State University. Undergraduates were randomly selected to receive an email invitation to the survey. Only those selected could participate. Several reminder emails were sent at 3 to 4 day intervals. A set of chance drawings were offered as incentive.

The resulting sample had the following demographics:

- N=1091
- Mean age = 22.2
- 59.5% White
- 66.7% Female
- 11.7% Fraternity/Sorority Member

Measures

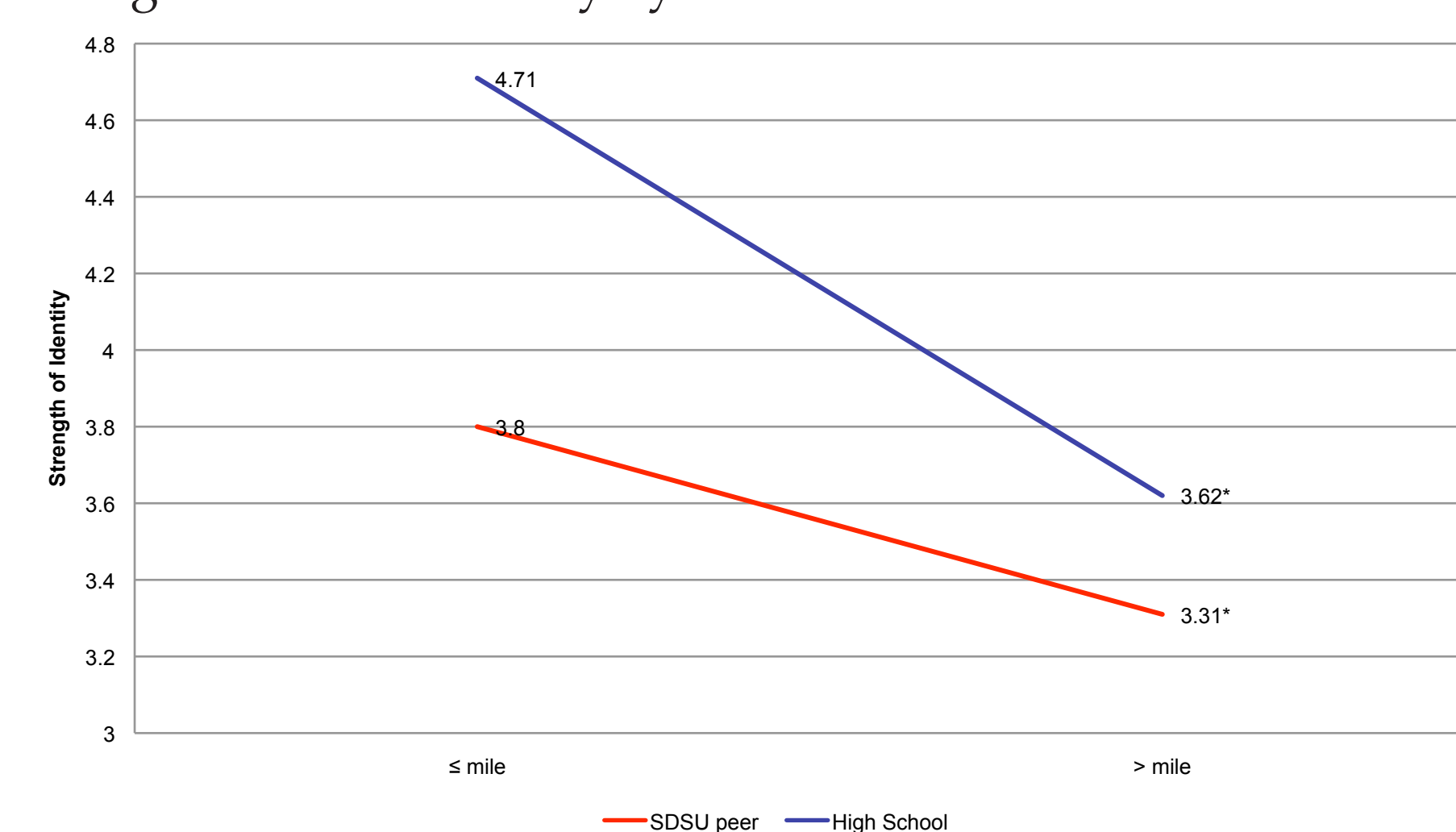
- Demographics
- Social Identity: Four item scales for each sub-group.
- Normative Assessment: Items assessing the injunctive and descriptive norms for drinking for each sub-group.
- Alcohol Consumption
- Regulatory Focus

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Results

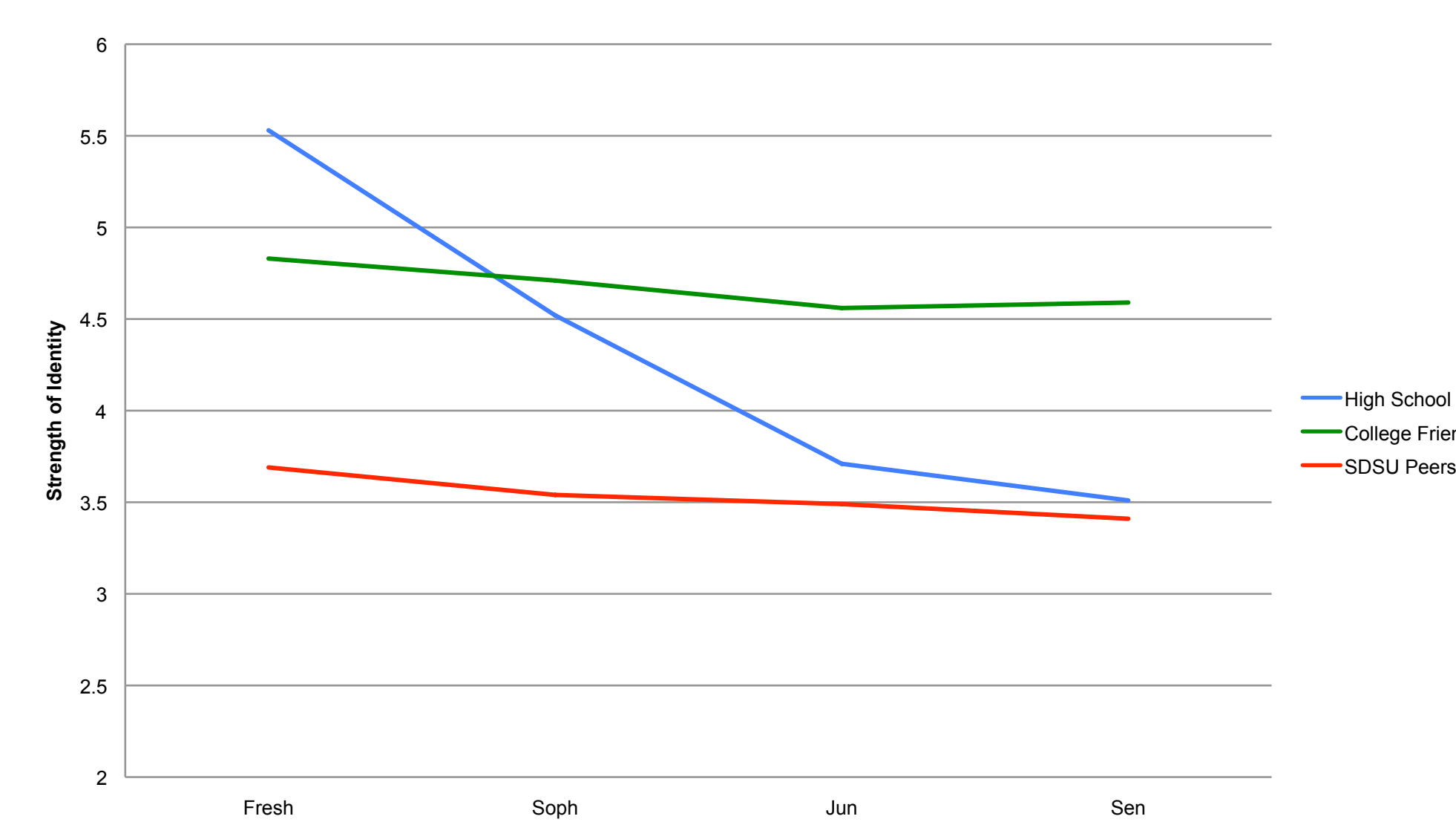
Differences are observed in school identity based upon residence status (See Figure 1). Those living near campus have higher SDSU-peer identification than those living farther than campus ($p < .05$). There is a similar pattern for High School peer identification.

Figure 1. Peer Identity by Residence



A change over time is observed for High School Peer identification, with a steady decline over the class standing variable (Figure 2).

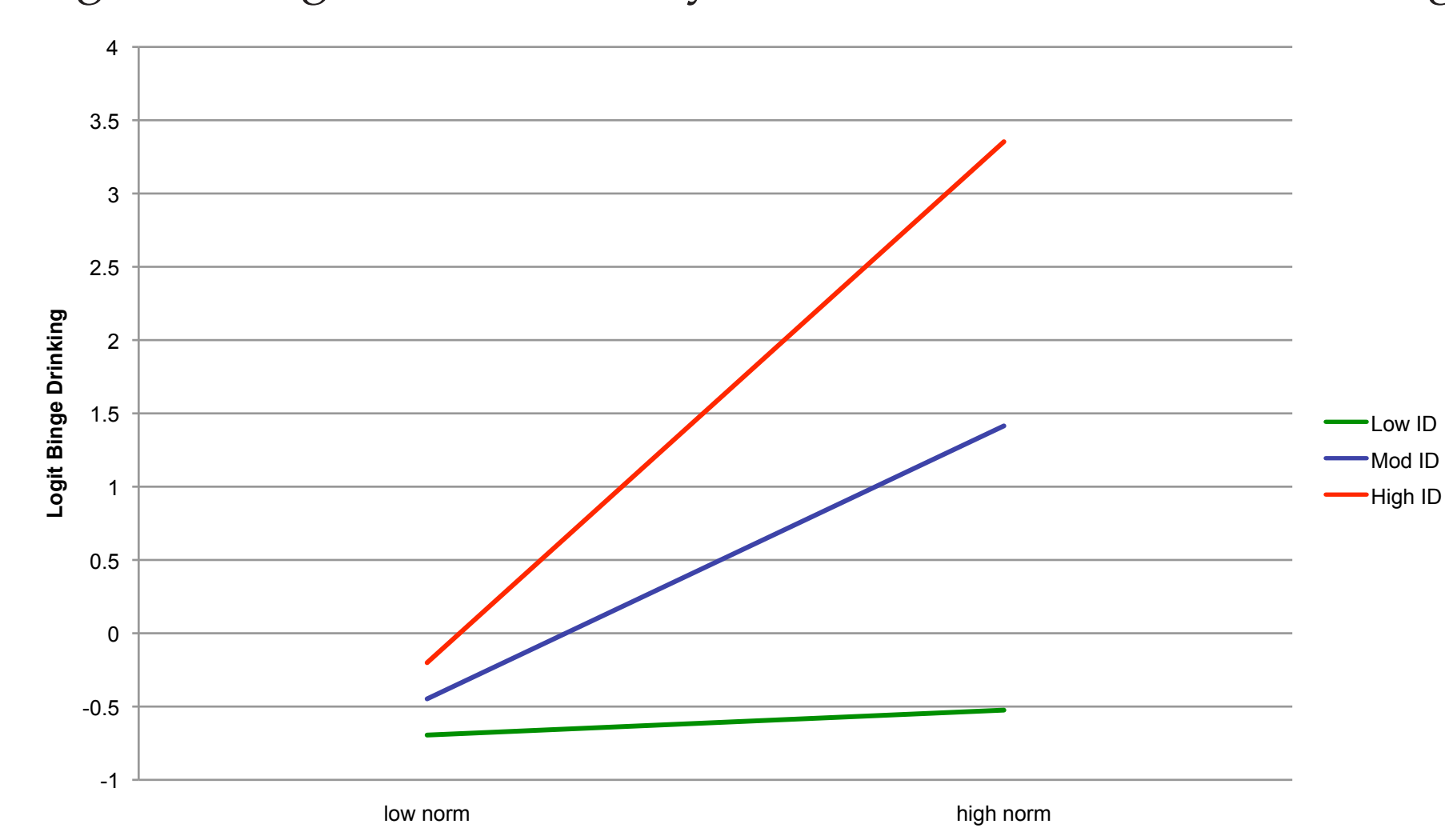
Figure 2. Peer Identity by Class Standing



High School Peer identification moderates the relationship between High School Peer Normative assessment and alcohol consumption. This relationship demonstrates again that social identity appears to be an important component to the relevance of peer norms on drinking (See Figure 3).

There is apparently a difference in the regulatory focus of those (males) in fraternities compared with those who are

Figure 3. High School Identity X Perceived Norms on Drinking

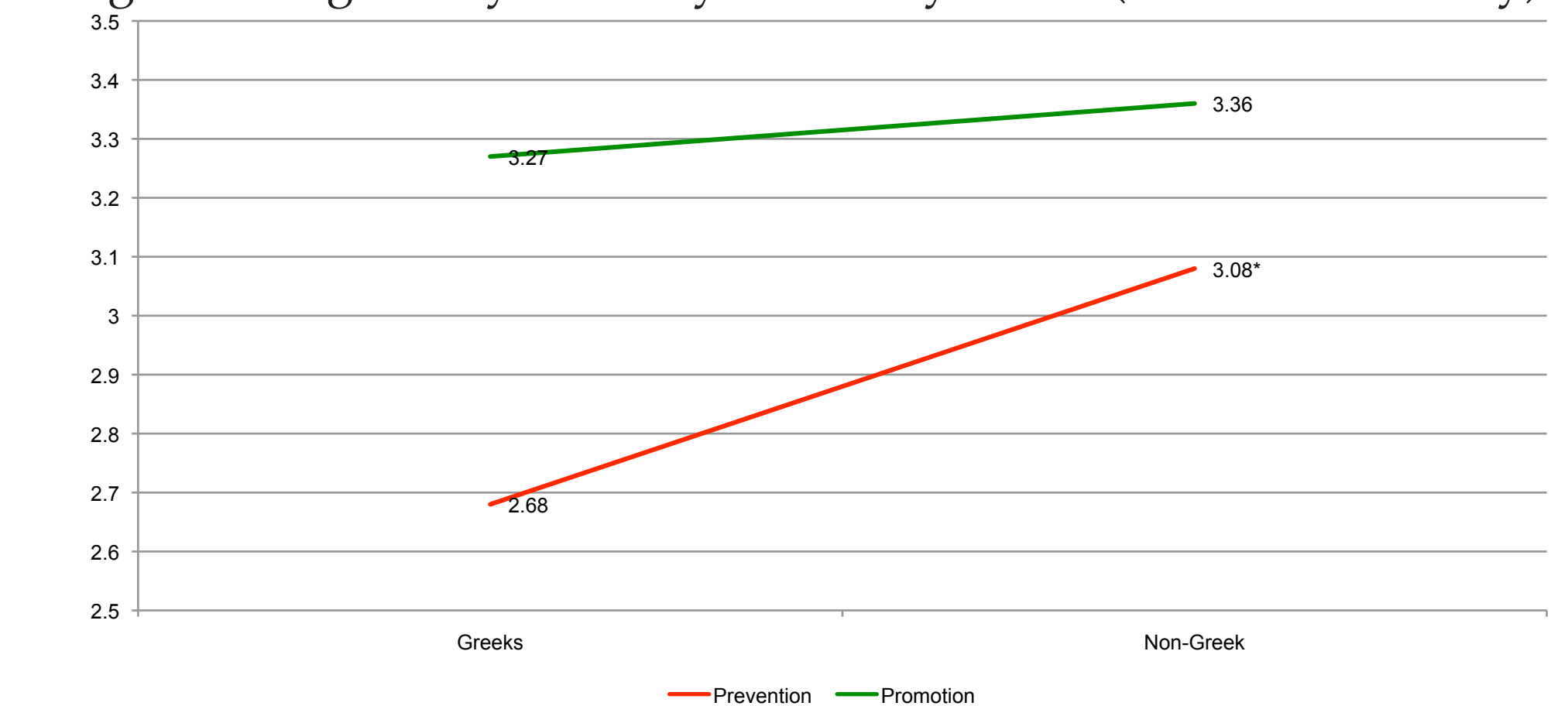


not. Fraternity members appear to have lower *prevention* focus (see Figure 4).

Conclusion

We have replicated our earlier finding (e.g., Reed et al, 2007) that social identity is a moderating factor in the relationship between perceived norms and behavior. This research also demonstrates that demographic (class standing) and situational (campus proximity) predict different levels

Figure 4. Regulatory Focus by Fraternity Status (White Males Only)



of identification with sub-groups. The demonstration of this identity variability indicates that change processes should be explored. Regulatory Focus theory seeks to describe the styles employed by individuals to accommodate change. Thus, that there are differences in styles by those who have chosen to join a highly structured and defined (high risk) subgroup may be a clue to the processes involved.

Table 1. Examples of regulatory focus features

Prevention	Promotion
Cautious	Risky behavior
Avoid Losses	Maximize Gains
Vigilance	Eagerness
Regret Mistakes	Avoid Missed Opportunities
Concern for Rejection	Concern for being Ignored

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