The Effects of Alcohol Consumption on Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between alcohol consumption and relationship satisfactions within interpersonal relationships. The three mediators examined were trust, jealousy, and conflict. Participants took a forty-six question survey that asked students in college who were currently in a romantic relationship. We asked them to reflect on their feelings towards their partners specifically when they were consuming alcohol. We expected to find that those with low alcohol consumption would have lower rates of jealousy, conflict, and trust issues within their relationships, due to previous research on these three mediators. However our data ended up showing that there was no significant correlation between alcohol consumption and relationship satisfaction (n.s.). The same went for alcohol consumption and all of the mediators. The Mediators all showed a significant correlation between them and relationship satisfaction respectively (p < .001). Alcohol did not play a significant role in any of our correlations.
Alcohol consumption can affect relationships in various ways. Some of them can be positive such as making a couple more relaxed in social situations and some can be negative. The idea that alcohol may result in unhappiness within a relationship seems like the logical conclusion as there are many negative effects of alcohol that could contribute to relationship dissatisfaction. Take for example this scenario at a college party a boy and a girl who have been dating for sometime have both become inebriated throughout the course of the night. They both start out having a good time and being affectionate, but as the evening continues the girl becomes upset when she sees her boyfriend talking to another girl. Even though she knows her reaction is foolish she becomes jealous. She has never had any reason not to trust him but currently she is feeling betrayed by him. Finally she reacts and accuses him of cheating on her with another girl. A conflict arises, leading the couple to argue profusely until the girl runs out into the hallway crying. Angry and confused the boy punches the wall and locks his door.

This seems a rather common scenario that could occur on college campuses at parties where alcohol is available. The couple’s expectation at the beginning of the night was not to get into a fight, but to relax and have a good time with one another. However, alcohol influences the way people view situations and the way they view themselves (Steele & Joseph, 1990). Even though people start out with the best of intentions when drinking, like the couple in our story, one cannot help but wonder why alcohol leads to problems within the relationship? To answer this question we will be examining three specific aspects of relationships; jealousy, trust, and conflict as well as looking into overall relationship satisfaction. It may be true that people tend to do more foolish things while under the
influence of alcohol which would prompt them to be dishonest with their partner about their
drunken actions later on. A study by Pendersen et al. (2009) looked at what motivated
college students to drink and found that students who had high anticipation for sexual
encounters were more likely to drink. This may suggest that high sensation-seekers that look
to drink may also look for higher risk stimulation in other areas of recreational activity, such
as sex. This is yet another example of the hopes of alcohol consumption delivering a positive
outcome. How might the story unfold if the couple had not been drinking? Would she have
gotten jealous? Would the boyfriend have been engaging in risky behavior by flirting? For
example, look at the form jealousy takes in this scenario; had the girlfriend not been
drinking she may have rationalized with herself and thought, “I have nothing to worry about,
I trust him, I know he is faithful to me, they are probably just talking”. She may have even
gone over there to join the conversation. Instead, she reacted in a highly aggressive manner
on her feelings of jealousy which then lead to conflict. Our conflict in this story is the
confrontation that arises when the girl confronts her partner. Once again, the fact that they
have been drinking cannot be discounted as a factor in their unnecessary conflict. This
conflict may lead to mistrust in the aftermath of the conflict. Also, the mistrust itself could
be responsible for the feeling of jealousy in the first place. As you can see, alcohol has the
ability to be quit influential in regard to relationship satisfaction. In fact, according to a
study done by Steele and Joseph, 1990 they explain how alcohol makes social responses
more extreme and enhances important self evaluation. In reflection of this information as
applied to the questions above it would appear that alcohol myopia had a sizeable effect on
the couple’s reactions. All three mediators appear to play a role with one another, this study
explores the connection alcohol may have on relationship satisfaction manifested through trust, jealousy, and conflict.

**Jealousy**

Jealousy is defined by White and Mullen (1989) as, “A cognitive, emotional, and behavioral response that occurs when the existence and/or quality of a person’s primary relationship is perceived as being threatened by a third party” (5). Hupka (1981) suggests that individual differences may exist in the affects alcohol has on negative emotions. Alcohol consumption could increase flirting or infidelity on the actor’s side, which would make the partner more jealous. On the perceiver's side, alcohol consumption could cloud judgment and lead to more false alarms about infidelity. The important criterion in explaining how these emotions may be caused by jealousy is that a situation must be perceived by the subject as threatening to a valued romantic relationship (White & Mullen, 1989). Perception of threat like a member of the opposite sex pursuing your partner can lead to negative emotions, which evoke a negative response such as physical aggression or verbal abuse. Aspects of alcohol myopia such as the individual’s inability to focus on multiple ideas and reasoning can lead to substantial increase in how a person might perceive a situation, resulting in unwarranted jealousy.

**Trust**

We are also looking at trust as a mediator in the relationship between alcohol consumption and relationship satisfaction. Trust is said to be a cornerstone of interpersonal relationships however, “there is comparatively little focus on this concept in the research literature” (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). Our study chooses to look at predictability,
dependability, and faith as specified in 1985 by Rempel, and how they pertain to trust within interpersonal relationships. The most specific and concrete aspect of trust is predictability. The predictability of a partner’s behavior is influenced by many factors including the consistency of behavior and the stability of the current social environment (Rempel, et al., 1985). Trust also involves the level of dependability which concentrates on the personality qualities of the partner which project confidence (or lack thereof) in the face of risk and potential hurt. Dependability could also be crucial to the prevention of jealousy in its relationship to trust. It is suggested that greater dependability amounts to greater levels of trust which would give the perceiver less reason to worry about infidelity. If their partner is dependable, they may be less likely to perceive a third party individual as a threat and therefore keep jealousy at bay. The last component of trust is faith. Faith focuses on the feeling of confidence in the relationship as well as the level of responsiveness and caring expected from the partner in the face of an uncertain future (2). The act of alcohol consumption may lower a partner’s ability to predict what their significant other will do, which will result in having less faith in them on a day to day basis. Likewise, at the time of alcohol consumption by the consumer, it may lower their credibility and faith in the relationship from their perspective which may allow for riskier behaviours to occur. Ultimately the lack of dependability could lead to lower relationship satisfaction. When alcohol is involved it may encourage a higher frequency of inappropriate behavior which would encourage dishonesty and ultimately a lack of trust between partners. Our study is testing whether levels of trust will be affected by alcohol in a negative manner.
Conflict

Another possible cause of low relationship satisfaction could be conflict. Conflict does not arise out of thin air, it must have a motivator. We are making the connection between our three mediators by insinuating that trust issues and high levels of jealous may contribute to conflict whether alcohol is involved or not. However, for the purpose of this study it is assumed that alcohol consumption causes a variety of behavioral and emotional affects. Such as with our above story alcohol may have been responsible for the risky decisions made by the boyfriend, this lowering of inhibitions could cause conflict to arise between the couple that would otherwise not be there. Another possible cause of increased conflict between couples while drinking can be linked to alcohol myopia which is, “a lack of foresight or discernment: a narrow view of something [while drinking]” (Hacker, 2011).

Conflict is not easily defined; in fact, one meta-analysis suggests that it can be measured in the levels of intimacy, problem solving, and hostility which are not directly conflict, but are related to it (Straus et al, 1979). Lower levels of conflict were measured in couples who rated highly on intimacy and problem solving, while couples who rated high hostility had higher levels of conflict. Findings suggest that high-intensity conflict behaviors of both a positive (intimacy and problem solving) and negative (hostility) nature are positively related to relationship satisfaction (Woodin, 2011). One might suggest that alcohol consumption may increase the likelihood of negative high-intensity conflict behaviors creating higher levels of conflict. A study by MacDonald (2000), examines this relationship to a related extent in a study where couples were placed in an intoxicated or sober condition and asked to discuss a topic of conflict. Intoxicated participants reported having more negative emotions surrounding the conflict, a more negative perception or their partner’s
feelings, and they also blamed their partner more for the incident (MacDonald, et al. 2000). This study demonstrates how conflict in intoxicated participants can be exacerbated in three ways; their perception of the issue, their lack of validation for their partners emotions, and blame. It could be suggested that alcohol consumption might directly make people more likely to argue, or it could indirectly give them more issues to argue about through irresponsible behavior. As MacDonald demonstrated, conflict is just one of the many ways in which a relationship can suffer when drinking is involved.

From this background information, we hypothesize that there will be a negative relation between alcohol consumption and relationship satisfaction and that this relation will be mediated by jealousy, conflict and mistrust.

Although there is ample research on two of out of our three mediators and their link to relationship satisfaction, very little has been done to examine the influence alcohol consumption may directly have on relationship satisfaction. Even if the link is weak between alcohol consumption and relationship satisfaction, the link appears to be present, yet complicated. The Core Institute found that 84% of college students reported drinking within the last year (Author N/A, 2011). The same study also reported that 54% of students said that they did not engage in binge drinking, but drank responsibly. It is possible there is a threshold of alcohol consumption below which alcohol consumption it has little effect on relationship satisfaction and above which it has a negative effect. Issues such as aggression, lack of trust, extreme jealousy, and high levels of conflict may be more common among only among individuals who abuse alcohol on a regular basis.
To test our hypothesis, 70 participants completed an online survey designed to measure our three mediators as well as relationship satisfaction. After doing research we adopted the method of using a survey compiled of other reliable surveys that we had found. These were separate surveys, but we brought parts of each together in sub survey format to create a 47 question survey (including demographics).

**Method**

*Participants*

The collected participants were Hanover College students ($n = 70$) who were currently in romantic relationships and who partook in alcohol consumption for recreational use. We looked at gender, year in school and length of relationship as well. We had 15 males and 55 females who completed our survey.

*Materials*

For our experiment the main material was a forty-six question survey that was administered through an invitation e-mail. The e-mail provided a link that would then directed the participant to the survey on GoogleDocs. The survey was a combination of subscales from previous studies. There were four demographic questions that inquired after the participant’s gender, age, length of relationship, and year in school. There was a four question scale designed to measure frequency and quantity of alcohol consumed based on the Wechsler et al. (2002) alcohol scale. There were thirty-eight questions designed to measure intensity and frequency of the three mediators: jealousy, trust, and conflict along with a seven question scale designed to measure relationship satisfaction based on Burn’s (n.d.) Relationship Satisfaction Scale, which asked questions such as ("I am satisfied with
the communication and openness within my relationship." This was combined with the three mediators within the survey.

Jealousy was measured using a 12 question jealousy scale based on White’s (1981) jealousy scale. The twelve items we used were based around cognitive, (e.g. "I suspect that my partner is seeing someone of the opposite sex"), emotional (e.g., "I get angry when my partner comments on how great a particular member of the opposite sex looks"), and behavioral characteristics, (e.g., "I frequently question my partner about previous romantic relationships he/she has had"). Conflict was measured using a 10 question conflict scale based on Straus’s (1979) conflict tactics scale. The ten item's were based on negotiation, (e.g. "I respect my partner's feelings"), psychological aggression, (e.g., "I have done something to spite my partner"), physical assault, (e.g., "I have slapped my partner"), sexual coercion, (e.g., "I have used threats to make my partner have sex with me"), and physical injury, (e.g., "My partner has been cut or bled because of me"). Trust was measured using a 9-item scale based on Rempel’s et. al. (1985) trust scale. The items were based on three categories:, predictability,(e.g., "I am never certain that my partner won’t do something that I dislike or that will embarrass me"), dependability, (e.g., "My partner has proven to be trustworthy and I am willing to let him or her engage in activities which other partners find too threatening") and faith, (e.g., "Though times may change and the future is uncertain, I know my partner will always be ready and willing to offer me strength and support."). All of these 38 questions were measured using a six-point Likert scale with the endpoints "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree". We also had a comment box at the end of the survey so the participants could describe in their own words how they felt within their relationships, as well as their experiences with drinking alcohol with their significant other
and anything else they wanted to say about the survey (see Appendix A). After the participants submitted their answers, they were shown a debriefing form.

Procedure

Participants received an e-mail from us asking them to participate in our study; the survey was given a separate name and called “College Experiences”, so as not to give away our hypothesis. In the e-mail there was a link to our anonymous survey. Once the participant got to the survey website, they were given informed consent for which they clicked a link that indicated their informed consent. Then, they were asked if they were in a relationship. If they answered "no", they were directed out of the study. If they answered "yes", then they were allowed to proceed and complete the survey.

Results

We used a mediation analysis to test whether the relationship between two variables, alcohol and relationship satisfaction, could be explained by one of three mediators: mistrust, jealousy, and conflict.

To create a composite score for each of those variables, we had reverse scored questions on each topic that were rephrased in the opposite light of the original question, and then computed the mean of the items. The Cronbach's alpha for trust when we reverse scored questions 12 and 16 came to $\alpha = 0.83$. Jealousy did not have any reverse-phrased items and had $\alpha = 0.85$. For our last mediator, conflict, we reverse-scored two items for an $\alpha = 0.66$. We also looked at the relationship satisfaction items and found that we needed to reverse score three of those variables, for an $\alpha = 0.83$. We also computed alcohol
consumption into one measure by combining the frequency that subjects drank alcohol with the amount of alcohol they drank each time.

After Cronbach's alphas were computed, we then moved onto the mediation analysis. As previously stated, this is a computation that will explain how much the relationship between two variables can be explained by a third variable known as the mediator. Alcohol consumption and relationship satisfaction were not significantly related according to a linear regression, $\beta = .003, (n.s.)$. (Figure 1) shows a scatter plot of this relationship, with the dots colored by length of relationship. Most of our respondents scored about 3.5 on relationship satisfaction, which indicated that our sample did not include many unsatisfied couples. Alcohol consumption was concentrated at the low end, with fewer than 20 drinks in the last two weeks being the norm. These two facts lead us to speculate that our sample may have overlooked dissatisfied couples and those who drank heavily, making it difficult for us to test our hypothesis. The length of relationship coloring indicates that we had several longer-duration couples at the high end of relationship satisfaction. This suggests that longer couples tended to be more satisfied. Most of our sample, however, had not been in a relationship for long, most dots are blue. There was also no significant relation between alcohol consumption and any of the three mediators jealousy ($\beta = .001$), trust ($\beta = -.001$), or conflict ($\beta = .003$) according to linear regressions. However, there were statistically significant relations between the three mediators and relationship satisfaction: with jealousy ($\beta = -.46, p < .001$), trust ($\beta = 0.76, p < .001$), and conflict ($\beta = -0.89, p < .001$). This shows that all of these mediators are important in predicting relationship satisfaction. Our hypothesis was not supported because of the mediation.
analysis not being statistically significant in regards to alcohol, relationship satisfaction and the three mediators.

Figure 1: The effects of alcohol consumption on relationship satisfaction

Discussion

Our hypothesis was that higher levels of alcohol would be found with lower levels of relationship satisfaction and that this relationship would be mediated by trust, jealousy, and conflict. While we did not find statistically significant results for this, we did find statistically significant results for the three mediators being important to relationship satisfaction. This can suggest that higher levels of mistrust, jealousy, and conflict can be
harmful to a relationship. In previous research of conflict and relationship satisfaction one study showed that conflict, specifically hostility, showed lower relationship satisfaction in both men and women (Wooden 2011). Another article specific to jealousy showed that negative maintenance qualities such as jealousy are indicators of lower relationship satisfaction within low-quality relationships (Goodboy 2010). These two articles show that these two mediators, jealousy and conflict do have a significant impact on relationship satisfaction. Our study also shows this. When it comes to mistrust there are not very many articles on this topic and how it relates to relationship satisfaction. In this way we have contributed to the knowledge of mistrust being harmful to relationship satisfaction. This makes sense because if you do not have trust within a relationship you can expect that your relationship satisfaction would also decrease.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

One limitation was that our sample did not have very many couples who had long relationships. Couples in shorter relationships could have less investment in their relationship, meaning that these couples could get out of an unhappy relationship more easily than more invested couples. By using a college sample instead of a more invested older sample where married couples would be included, we may have restricted our sample to happier couples. This leads us to a future direction for our study where more invested couples could be sampled. Another limitation to our survey was that alcohol consumption was measured by self report. Also all of our questions were directed towards heterosexual couples(e.g., " I suspect that my partner is secretly seeing someone of the opposite sex"), so any couples who were in a homosexual relationship may have found the question format hard to understand or biased. A future direction for this could be to include questions that
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would not exclude homosexual couples. Another limitation that we encountered was that of the two-week time frame for our measure of alcohol consumption. Also for future direction we may want to consider that there could be a tipping point for alcohol consumption where it starts to negatively impact relationships. Not many of our participants were heavy drinkers. More participants who consume alcohol on a regular basis and in higher frequencies may enable us to test whether alcohol consumption had a negative effect on relationship satisfaction only after some high level of consumption is reached.

It is still important to research the relationship between alcohol consumption and relationship satisfaction because there are so many cases of alcohol contributing to relationship dissatisfaction that we all talk about and hear about. The entire reason for us looking at this topic was because of this reason. We can see that we did have significant results when only looking at mediators and how they effect relationship satisfaction so there is something there that is important to continue examining. It may just be that different cohorts, other than college students, would be better to test.

Conclusion

While relationship satisfaction can be measured in countless ways, we believe that the three mediators that were selected were a good representation of what can make or break a relationship. Drinking did not have a significant effect on relationship satisfaction, but we still believe that it is in fact a factor in the escalation of emotions. This can largely be defended by the phenomenon of alcohol myopia which can make social responses more extreme when under the influence of alcohol (Steele and Josephs, 1990). This may significantly affect participant’s jealousy, which would make them less likely to trust their
partner, and a conflict might arise. In closing we found that while alcohol did not have a statistically significant role within relationship satisfaction, we did find that our three mediators; trust, conflict, and jealousy are important components to having a satisfying relationship. Until we find participants who like to consume alcohol at a greater rate, I suppose we will just have to look at this study as a way to show that sobriety may be vital to relationship satisfaction.
References


Appendix A

Relationship Assessment Survey

1. Age: ______

2. Sex: Male Female

3. What is your year in school? 1 2 3 4

4. What is the length of your current relationship (in months) ______

In the past two weeks….

1. What is the number of times you have drank alcohol? _____

2. How many times were you drunk? _______

3. What is the usual amount of alcohol you consumed when you drank? ______

4. How important is it to you to get drunk when you are drinking? ______

Using the scale provided, please rate your level of agreement with the following statements.

Strongly 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly
Disagree Agree

1. I suspect my partner is secretly seeing someone of the opposite sex. _____

2. My partner has proven to be trustworthy and I am willing to let him/her engage in activities which other partners find too threatening. _____

3. I respect my partner’s feelings. _____

4. I am satisfied with the communication and openness within my relationship. _____

5. I worry that someone of the opposite sex may be chasing after my partner. _____
6. Though times may change and the future is uncertain, I know my partner will always be ready and willing to offer me strength and support. _____

7. I show my partner I care. _____

8. I suspect that my partner may be attracted to someone else. _____

9. I have insulted or swore at my partner. _____

10. I am not satisfied with the way my partner and I resolve conflicts and arguments. _____

11. I am never certain that my partner won’t do something that I dislike or will embarrass me. _____

12. You get angry when my partner comments to you on how great looking a particular member of the opposite sex is. _____

13. I am not satisfied with my partner’s degree of affection and caring. _____

14. I have shouted at my partner. _____

15. My partner is very unpredictable. I never know how he/she is going to act from one day to the next. _____

16. I get upset when my partner shows a great deal of interest or excitement in talking to someone of the opposite sex. _____

17. I find myself doing things to spite my partner. _____

18. I am satisfied with my partner’s intimacy and closeness. _____

19. I can rely on my partner to react in a positive way when I expose my weaknesses to him/her. _____

20. I get upset when my partner is flirting with someone of the opposite sex. _____

21. I have kicked, but, or punched my partner. _____
22. I am certain that my partner would not cheat on me, even if the opportunity arose and there was no chance that he/she would get caught. _____

23. I am not satisfied with the degree of my role in my relationship. _____

24. I get upset if my partner works closely with a member of the opposite sex (in school). _____

25. I have slapped my partner. _____

26. I can rely on my partner to keep the promises he/she makes to me. _____

27. I frequently look through my partner's drawers, handbags, or pocketbook (e-mail, phone, facebook) _____

28. I am satisfied with my partner's role in the relationship. _____

29. I have used force to make my partner have sex. _____

30. When I am with my partner, I feel secure in facing unknown new situations. _____

31. I frequently question my partner about past romantic relationships. _____

32. Even when my partner makes excuses that sound rather unlikely, I am confident that he/she is telling the truth. _____

33. I frequently say something nasty about someone of the opposite sex if I see my partner shows an interest in that person. _____

34. Overall I am satisfied with my relationship. _____

35. I have used threats to make my partner have sex. _____

36. I frequently question my partner about his/her telephone calls or text messages. _____

37. My partner has been cut or bled because of me. _____

38. I frequently question my partner about his/her whereabouts. _____