Under the Cover of Alcohol: the Impact of Perceived Intoxication and Preventive Media on Intentions to Engage in Deviant Behavior

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Our research examines the decision making processes of college students under the influence of alcohol and the role of preventive media on the likelihood of engaging in deviant behaviors such as sexual aggression. Having our participants actually consume alcohol, we study the conditions under which they are more prone to take risks and the individual difference variables (alcohol expectancy and rape myth acceptance) that may lead to such actions. Drawing from the motivation literature, we argue that there are contextual and individual variables that may explain the observed variance in the tendency to engage in sexual aggression when intoxicated.

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Also, shopping is more central to the concept “needs” and the concept “wants” in the women’s space. This might represent women’s understanding of shopping as having equivalent roles in both necessary and unnecessary-but-desirable consumption. Women appear to closely relate shopping with a wider range of buying activities than do men. For example, the Galileo plot shows that women identify shopping and clothes as much more closely related than men (a t-test on the distance between shopping and clothes confirms this observation: t [205]=1.99, p<.05). It appears as if men consider shopping a not-so-good, disliked activity that, paradoxically, is most closely related to the acquisition of wants. For men, it appears, pain equals gain.

The structural equation models determined the causal relationships that existed between the variables of interest. These models suggested that women’s attitudes about shopping seem to activate a chain reaction of evaluations toward clothes, then food, then needs, wants, gifts and luxuries. These results have tremendous implications for application in debt counseling and education: It’s not enough, for example, for counselors to suggest, “Buy only what you need” when needs and wants are only marginally distinguishable.

The findings further suggest that (1) messages can be designed that attempt to influence attitudes toward and beliefs about shopping and debt indirectly, through related concepts, and (2) messages used for debt counseling might be much more effective if they employed gender-specific strategies that address men’s and women’s different understandings of shopping and related concepts. Even the act of determining an individual’s specific shopping-related space and revealing the significant relationships to him or her (i.e., making the space accessible and salient) may increase the effectiveness of debt counseling by creating a new awareness of associations between attitudes that may previously have seemed irrelevant. This prediction will be tested in an upcoming study.

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Previous research has established that alcohol impairs judgments and increases the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors. It has been reported in the alcohol literature that alcohol consumption leads to increased rates of sexual assault and acquaintance rape (Champion, Foley, DuRant, Hensberry, Altman, Wolfson 2004). As a part of social marketing efforts, the sponsors of warning ads use diverse message themes (such as fear appeals, social norm tactics and novel information) to attract attention and caution individuals against heavy drinking and its consequences (Kalsher, Clark and Wogalter 1993). Research on preventive media indicates mixed results: some studies suggest that when carefully designed, warning ads are influential (MacKinnon and Lapin 1998; Kalsher et al. 1993) while others posit that they are ineffective (Steele and Josephs 1990) and may even result in resistance to comply and/or counterproductive (boomerang) effects (Synder and Blood 1992).

Most of these works, however, ignore the impact of an individual’s subjective assessment of impairment (“perceived intoxication”) and the motivation behind such an assessment on these risky actions. We investigate whether the link between alcohol consumption and intention to engage in deviant acts results solely from alcohol’s pharmacological effects or from placebo effects as a consequence of the belief that alcohol has been consumed (Barthalow and Heinz 2006). Since individuals’ perceived extent of impairment is “a viable decision making component” (Nicholson, Wang, Collins, Airhihenbuwa, Mahoney and Maney 1992), we believe that “perceived intoxication” may be a better predictor of intentions. We suggest that “perceived intoxication” is a variable that mediates the relationship between alcohol consumption and sexually aggressive tendencies. In addition, we argue that there is an individual difference variable (Alcohol Expectancy-AE) that may help explain the tendency of individuals to overestimate their intoxication levels (MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969; Brown, Goldman, Inn and Anderson1980). The beliefs that individuals hold about the effects of alcohol on their behavior, moods, and emotions are expected to moderate the relationship between alcohol consumption and perceived intoxication.

It has been suggested in the literature that a person’s desire to experience a product’s expected benefits increases the efficacy of placebo effects (Shiv, Ziv and Ariely 2005; Irmak and Fitzsimons 2005). In a similar vein, we suggest that AE is the main motivation behind one’s self reported high intoxication levels. When people believe alcohol has the power to make them stronger, sexier, more confident and immune to dangers (high AE), they report their perceived intoxication levels much higher. We argue that this may even hold for individuals who are administered a placebo drink. “Perceived Intoxication” derived from the AE trait will act as a “cover” or permission to consider exhibiting an ordinarily forbidden behavior (such as sexual aggression). We also introduce an important individual difference variable, Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA), to explain individuals’ tendencies to engage in sexually aggressive behaviors (Wells 2003) and violent acts (Burt 1980; Stephens and George 2004). More specifically, the tendency to support adversarial sexual beliefs, tolerate interpersonal violence and stereotype gender roles are expected to moderate the relationship between perceived intoxication and the likelihood to engage in sexual aggression. These myths act as “psychological neutralizers” that allow individuals to turn off social prohibitions (Burt 1980).

In our model, Alcohol Expectancy constitutes the motivational aspect behind higher reported intoxication levels whereas Rape Myth Acceptance determines one’s likelihood to be acceptant of sexual aggression towards women. We provide a framework to examine the processes underlying deviant behaviors that arise as a result of alcohol consumption. We believe that it is meaningful to study the effectiveness of warning ads only after considering this broader framework.

In a pilot study, 52 heterosexual male undergraduate students of legal drinking age were recruited. Participants were screened via an online survey conducted a month before the actual experiment, where Alcohol Expectancy (adopted from Brown et al. 1980) and Rape Myth Acceptance (adopted from Burt 1980) measures were collected. The experiment was conducted in a design similar to a drinking occasion where participants consumed four drinks. They were then asked to rate perceived intoxication levels (“how intoxicated do you feel?” scale is from -9 to 9, with 0 meaning “at the legal limit”), attitude towards the ad and intention to engage in sexual aggression. It