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### Anxious Emotions Lead to Anxious Solutions? Examining the Relationships Between Emotions, Alcohol Consumption, and Consent

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# Anxious Emotions Lead to Anxious Solutions?: An Analysis of Consent Through Alcohol Consumption Levels

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## Background

Research indicates that the motives for alcohol consumption are myriad, including: social enhancement, conformity, or coping with unwanted emotions. Anxious emotions have been previously associated with alcohol consumption to relieve tension, nervousness, or overall distress in a hookup experience (Blumenthal et al., 2010). Worries about rape and harassment, stalking, or sexually transmitted diseases can be categorized as having “safety anxiety”. Alcohol has been proven to impair cognition and proprioception (Sayette, 2017). Logically individuals concerned for their safety would decrease alcohol consumption to maintain alertness and prioritize safety. On the other hand, concerns about fitting in, being a good sexual partner, or being gossiped about could be categorized as having “social anxiety”. With a mindset focused on the opinions of others, alcohol may serve as a lubricant for social situations allowing individuals to be more talkative or friendly (Blumenthal et al., 2010).

Alcohol consumption also complicates the conversation around affirmative consent. For the socially anxious group, the intention for drinking may be to increase sociability, however, the result may lead to increased miscommunication for sexual activity requiring affirmative consent. Research has shown that alcohol consumption acts as a "cue" for consent, leading to decreased verbal consent, and increased reckless behaviors (Blumenthal H, et al). Alongside these concerns, the ability to process complex situations when under the influence decreases. In heteronormative couples, it has been identified that males are more likely to misperceive a women’s willingness to consent when under the influence (Tiffany, 2021). The purpose of our study aims to further assess how anxious emotions around safety or social situations dictate alcohol consumption and how this complicates the ability to consent. Data collected and analyzed from this study can be used to further educate students on college campuses about the relationships between anxiety, alcohol, and consent.

## Research Question

What is the relationship between anxious emotions, level of alcohol consumption, and the ability to consent?

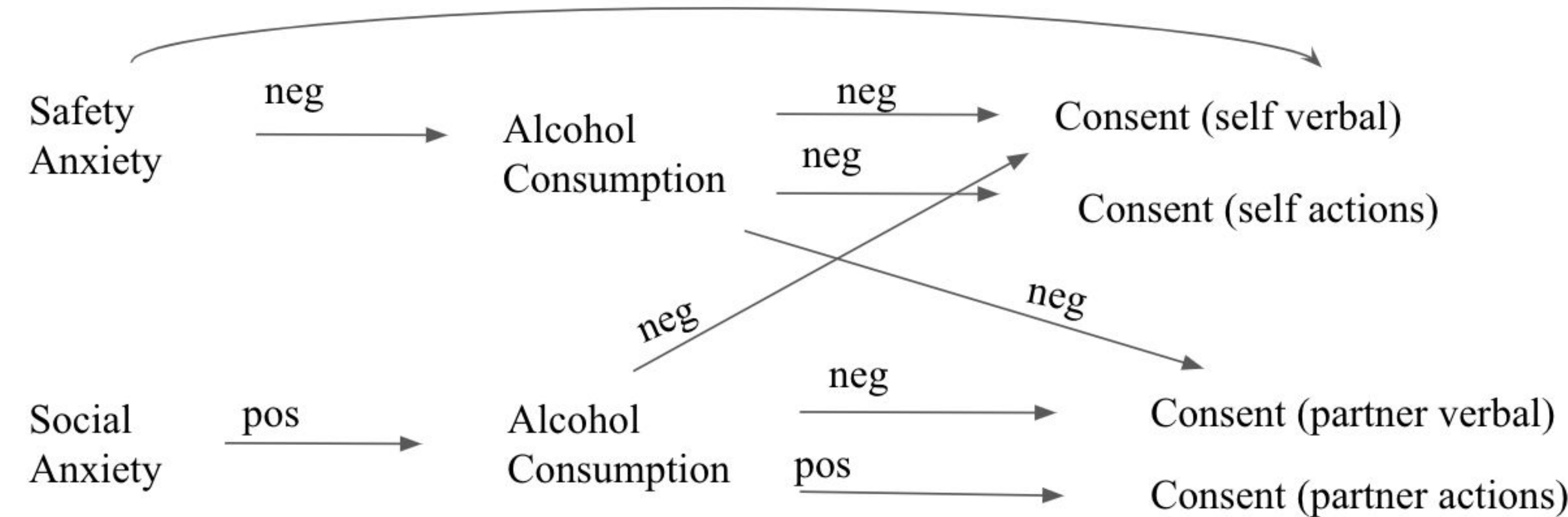
## Methods

One survey was released to a mid-sized northeastern university in 2020. Participants (N=149) fully completed online questionnaires using Qualtrics software. Researchers analyzed various questions from the survey related to anxious emotions, motivations for and levels of alcohol consumption, and perceptions of consent, such as (1) How much do you worry about the following when you've hooked up, or were thinking about hooking up?, (2) Tell us a bit about the role of alcohol in your hookup encounters..., (3) How much did you want to be drunk during your last hook up? (1=not at all to 7=very much), (4) How frequently do you get drunk during your hookup encounters?, (5) I use words to indicate whether or not I give consent/I use actions to indicate whether or not I give consent (1 to 10), (6) I rely on my partner’s words to indicate whether or not they give consent/I rely on my partner’s actions to indicate whether or not they give consent (1-10). Researchers analyzed the data using SPSS software, testing the relationships between alcohol consumption, consent, and anxious emotions.



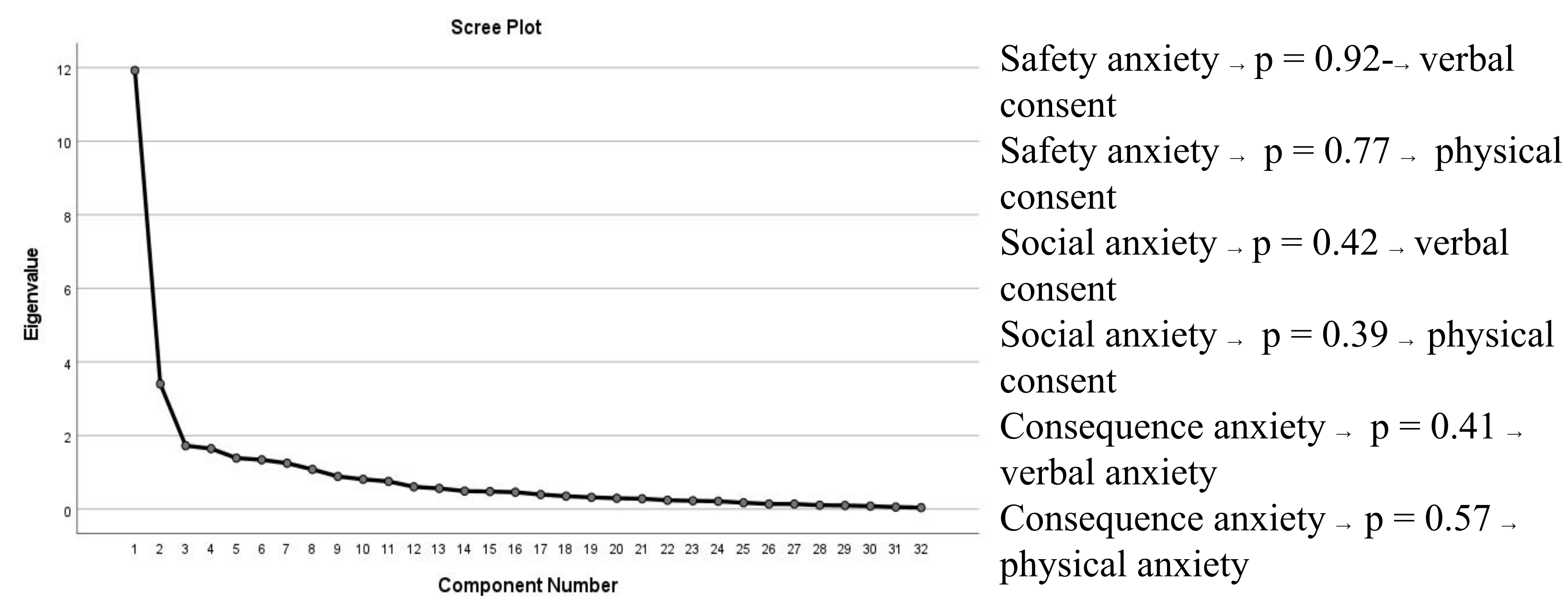
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## Hypothesis



## Results

A factorial analysis (FA) was run on a 32-question questionnaire that measured the anxiety characteristics of students around hooking up. The overall Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.85, classifying this as 'meritorious' according to Kaiser (1974). Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ( $p < .0005$ ), indicating that the data was likely factorizable. The FA revealed eight components that had eigenvalues greater than one, however, a visual inspection of the scree plot indicated that three components should be retained (Cattell, 1966). In addition, a three-component solution met the interpretability criterion. As such, three components of anxiety were retained, explaining 53.3% of the variance: safety, social and performance, and consequence.



Several mediated analyses were run using PROCESS to assess the statistical significance of the impact of types of anxiety (i.e. safety, social and performance, consequence) on how individuals navigate consent when hooking up (i.e., verbal, physical) when mediated by alcohol consumption. The indirect effect of anxiety on verbal and physical consent was insignificant with safety anxiety ( $p = .92$ ;  $b = -0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ;  $p < .77$ ;  $b = -0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.18$ ), social anxiety ( $p = 0.42$ ;  $b = -0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ;  $p = 0.39$ ;  $b = -0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ), or consequence anxiety ( $p = 0.41$ ;  $b = 0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ;  $p = 0.57$ ;  $b = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ) when alcohol was used as a mediator. There were no statistically significant direct effects between anxiety type and consent type.

### Response Breakdown By Sex Assignment

	Males n = 99			Females n = 231		
	n	%	M	n	%	M
Safety Anxiety	56	56%	2.34	140	61%	3.00
Social and Performance Anxiety	58	58%	3.70	140	61%	3.00
Consequence Anxiety	59	59%	2.90	141	64%	2.71
Verbal Consent	77	77%	8.32	190	82%	8.12
Physical Consent	69	69%	8.04	177	77%	8.40

Table 1

## Discussion

Our study has several contributions to the literature. First, although our hypotheses were not supported and did not yield significant statistical results, we were able to find support for our initial conceptualizations of anxiety (safety, social, and consequence). Our factorial analysis resulted in these three factorial components, and we believe that if the drivers of different types of anxiety are better understood, campus sexual assault education programs can more effectively tailor their messages related to addressing these types of anxiety, reducing the need for alcohol to moderate these anxious feelings, and ultimately reduce rates of sexual assault and non-consensual sexual experiences on college campuses.

Second, as further discussed below in our Limitations section, we believe that the skewness of our sample related to anxiety and consent questions indicates that a more robust and accurate way of measuring consent behavior (self and partner; verbal and non-verbal) is needed. A response rate with a low of 59%, and a high of 82% were recorded for the various consent and anxiety questions. We also note that female’s response rates were consistently higher than males. It is possible that males do not feel comfortable 1) endorsing that they have experienced anxiety related to hooking up and 2) endorsing that they did not engage in non-consensual hookup encounters (despite knowing that such encounters do occur on campuses). If we are sincere about preventing sexual assault on campus, more accurate measures of actual behaviors are important.

## Limitations

We note several limitations to our study. Our study had a skewed sample due to the small sample size, skewed responses, and potential survey fatigue. Many participants skipped questions or gave the same responses for all questions. We predict that participants may have experienced fatigue while taking the survey due to the amount of questions. This in particular affected our sample because the questions analyzed were towards the end of the survey. While taking the survey, almost half of the participants skipped questions about anxiety, likely leading to insignificant results. We also predict that our approach to asking consent questions may induce avoidance. While the online questionnaire is anonymous and participants are made aware of that, people may be concerned about consequences if they answer the survey questions truthfully.

## Future Research

It is important to evaluate why participants are not answering questions so that future research can better tailor questions to elicit appropriate responses. Questions that were more introspective or implied that their actions did not align with social standards had a lower response rate. Researchers should consider using different language other than directly asking about “consent” to imply the later. In previous analyses from this lab, using language such as “verbally inviting” or “physically inviting” resulted in significant data. This invites the question “Are participants less likely to respond to questions that use socially weighted words such as “affirmative consent”?”. Gender may also have a relationship to responding to survey questions, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Our research focused on University students who are completing the survey for credit. Future research should consider that our participants may skew their responses due to possible academic consequences. It would be beneficial to recruit participants within this age group that are outside the University or are completing the survey voluntarily.