

Zoom and Alcohol Don't Mix—Looking at Yourself During Online Social Gatherings May Worsen Mood; Alcohol May Increase This Effect

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Summary: *The more a person stares at themselves while talking with a partner in an online chat, the more their mood degrades over the course of the conversation, a new study finds. Alcohol use appears to worsen this effect.*

Note: This article was updated November 18, 2022 to reflect the journal article's actual publication [in *Clinical Psychological Science*](#) on November 14.

As many social gatherings—dates, game nights among friends, and family hangouts—have migrated to an online environment, seeing ourselves on-screen while talking to others has become commonplace. These virtual-doppelganger encounters, however, have their downsides, including diverting attention away from our partners and encouraging us to fixate on our own appearance.

New research published in the journal [Clinical Psychological Science](#) found that the more a person

stares at themselves in an online chat, the more their mood worsens. Alcohol appears to intensify this problem. This research sheds new light on the relationship between mood, alcohol, and attentional focus during virtual social interactions.

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“These findings point to a potentially problematic role of online meeting platforms in exacerbating psychological problems like anxiety and depression,” said Talia Ariss, a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who co-led the research with psychology professor Catharine Fairbairn. “The findings add to previous studies suggesting that people who focus more on themselves than on external realities—especially during social interactions—may be susceptible to mood disorders.”

For the study, participants answered questions about their emotional status before and after online conversations. They were instructed to discuss their musical preferences and what they liked and disliked about living in the local community during the chats. Participants could see themselves and their conversation partners on a split-screen monitor. Some consumed an alcoholic beverage before talking, and others drank a nonalcoholic beverage.

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— C. Fairbairn (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign)

“By using eye-tracking technology, we found that participants who spent more time looking at themselves during the conversation felt worse after the call, even after controlling for pre-interaction negative mood,” said Ariss. “Those who were under the influence of alcohol spent more time looking at themselves.”

In general, participants stared at their conversation partners on the monitor much more than they looked at themselves. But there were significant differences in the amount of time individual participants spent gazing at themselves. The more self-focused a person is, the more likely they are to report feeling emotions associated with anxiety and even depression, the researchers said.

“The cool thing about virtual social interactions, especially in platforms like Zoom, is that you can simulate the experience of looking in a mirror,” Ariss explained. This allows researchers to explore how self-focus influences a host of other factors, she said.

Adding alcohol to the experiment and using eye-tracking technology also allowed the scientists to explore how mild inebriation affected where a person focused their attention.

“In the context of in-person social interactions, there is strong evidence that alcohol acts as a social lubricant among drinkers and has these mood-enhancing properties,” Ariss said. “This did not hold true, however, in the online conversations, where alcohol consumption corresponded to more self-focus and had none of its typical mood-boosting effects.”

Users of the virtual meeting platform Zoom increased 30-fold during the pandemic, from 10 million in December 2019 to 300 million by April 2020, the researchers wrote. The pandemic also yielded surges in depression and anxiety. Given reports of heightened self-awareness and “fatigue” during virtual exchanges, they noted, some have blamed virtual interactions for exacerbating those trends.

“At this point in the pandemic, many of us have come to the realization that virtual interactions just aren’t the same as face-to-face,” Fairbairn said. “A lot of folks are struggling with fatigue and melancholy after a full day of Zoom meetings. Our work suggests the self-view offered in many online video platforms might make those interactions more of a slog than they need to be.”

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Reference: Ariss, T., Fairbairn, C., Sayette, M., Velia, B., Berenbaum, H., & Brown-Schmidt, S. (in press). Where to look? Alcohol, affect, and gaze behavior during a virtual social interaction. *Clinical Psychological Science*.