

# Differentiating between sensation seeking and impulsivity through their mediated relations with alcohol use and problems

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## Abstract

Disinhibition is a strong correlate of alcohol use, yet limited alcohol research has examined the facets of this personality construct. Recent work suggests that sensation seeking and impulsivity show differential relations with alcohol outcomes, indicating unique mechanisms of risks associated with each of these dimensions of disinhibition. The goal of the study was to examine sensation seeking and impulsivity as unique predictors of alcohol use and problems, and to test a broad range of drinking motives as potential mediators of these relations. Self-reported data from college students ( $N=310$ ) were utilized for the study. Results suggested that sensation seeking and impulsivity were associated with alcohol use and problems through different mediational pathways. There was some evidence for gender moderating these pathways.

The findings indicate that alcohol prevention and intervention programs should be tailored to specifically target individuals elevated on impulsivity versus sensation seeking.

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## 1. Introduction

Alcohol consumption by college students has remained consistently high over the past 24 years (Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2005) and alcohol-related problems continue to be a major concern (Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005). Understanding the etiological pathways leading to problematic college drinking is crucial for the development of effective preventive

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interventions. A variety of traits related to disinhibited personality have been shown to be associated with alcohol use and problems among college students (e.g., Andrew & Cronin, 1997; Camatta & Nagoshi, 1995; Galen, 1997; Sher, Bartholow, & Wood, 2000; Zuckerman, 1994). Sensation seeking and impulsivity are among the most stable and strong personality correlates of alcohol involvement in this population (e.g., Camatta & Nagoshi, 1995; Earleywine & Finn, 1991; Hutchinson, Patock-Peckham, Cheong, & Nagoshi, 1998; La-Grange, Jones, Erb, & Reyes, 1995; McMillen, Pang, Wells, & Anderson, 1992; Nagoshi, 1999). As discussed below, there are important measurement issues with respect to the assessment of sensation seeking and impulsivity that have largely been ignored in studies of alcohol use. The goal of the present study is to test mediational mechanisms by which sensation seeking and impulsivity are related to alcohol outcomes while using refined measures to reduce the overlap among items that assess these personality traits.

### *1.1. Sensation seeking, impulsivity, and alcohol*

A number of researchers have proposed that sensation seeking and impulsivity are complex and multidimensional traits (Arnett, 1994; Dickman, 1993; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001; Zuckerman, 1979). Sensation seeking has been defined as a strong need for varied, novel, and stimulated experiences, and willingness to take risks for the sake of such experiences (Zuckerman, 1979). Impulsivity, on the other hand, can be conceptualized as a lack of reflectiveness and planning, rapid decision-making and action, and carelessness (Schalling, 1978). Sensation seeking and impulsivity are related, leading some researchers to combine them into a single construct (e.g., Zuckerman, 1996). Others consider sensation seeking and impulsivity to be separate traits (e.g., Schalling, 1978). To examine whether sensation seeking and impulsivity represent unique constructs or are better conceptualized as facets of a general behavioral disinhibition trait, MacLean and Magid (submitted for publication) performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of six measures that represented either sensation seeking or impulsivity. A two-factor CFA model fit the data significantly better than a one-factor combined model, suggesting that sensation seeking and impulsivity appear to represent unique traits.

Although distinct from one another, sensation seeking and impulsivity are moderately correlated, which raises some caution when interpreting the relevant alcohol research. First, if one of these traits is included in a model but the other is not, the effects of the non-included variable may be mistakenly attributed to the included trait. Second, most existing measures of sensation seeking and impulsivity reflect the conceptual inconsistencies in the field, such that some measures include items reflecting both traits (even though the measure's label reflects only one; e.g., Eysenck & Eysenck, 1978) and others take a narrower approach and attempt to keep them separate (Schalling, 1978). These conceptual and measurement issues have been evident in the alcohol research that has examined behavioral disinhibition traits as predictors of alcohol involvement. Studies have used measures in which sensation seeking and impulsivity were intentionally combined into one construct (e.g., Read, Wood, Kahler, & Maddock, 2003) or used a measure meant to assess one of the traits but intentionally or inadvertently taps into the other as well (e.g., Nagoshi, 1999; Nagoshi, Wilson, & Rodriguez, 1991). Such studies potentially confound unique relations between sensation seeking, impulsivity, and alcohol involvement. This is supported by the results of a study of college students that included both sensation seeking and impulsivity using relatively pure, narrow measures (MacLean & Magid, submitted for publication). It was found that sensation seeking and impulsivity were differentially related to alcohol use and alcohol problems in college students, such that the former was a stronger predictor of alcohol use and the latter was a stronger

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