



Sensation seeking and alcohol use: A meta-analytic review[☆]

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Abstract

A meta-analysis was conducted to investigate the association between sensation seeking and alcohol use. Analysis of 61 studies revealed a small to moderate size, heterogeneous effect (mean weighted $r = .263$) between alcohol use and sensation seeking total scale scores. Analysis of the four sensation seeking components indicated that disinhibition was most strongly correlated with alcohol use (mean weighted $r = .368$). Categorical moderator analyses revealed that studies that did, versus did not, analyze covariates yielded smaller effect sizes. Continuous moderator analyses indicated that earlier published studies and higher percentages of male and white Caucasian participants were associated with stronger effect sizes between sensation seeking and alcohol use. Novel statistical methodologies for analyzing the association between sensation seeking and alcohol use were proposed and recommendations for future research were suggested.

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1. Introduction

Sensation seeking is a personality trait that is characterized by the tendency to seek out varied and novel sensations and experiences. These experiences may include participation in risky physical activities (e.g., mountain climbing, bungee jumping, or skydiving), an attraction to novel political and

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philosophical ideologies, or participation in activities that are potentially addictive such as gambling and substance use. Sensation seeking is thought to be a normally distributed personality characteristic that is influenced by both biological and environmental factors (Zuckerman, 1994). In addition, sensation seeking is conceptualized as being a multidimensional, or multifaceted, personality construct (Zuckerman, 1979, 1994) that is comprised of the following four components: thrill and adventure seeking, experience seeking, disinhibition, and boredom susceptibility. These four components are assessed by the Sensation Seeking Scale, or SSS (for reliability and validity information and for information bearing on the development of the instrument, see Zuckerman, 1979 and 1994). As regards to the SSS's factorial validity, numerous empirical studies conducted in the United States and abroad support the instrument's four-factor structure (see chapter two of Zuckerman, 1994, for a review. See also Loas et al., 2001; Roberti, Storch, & Bravata, 2003; Rowland & Franken, 1986).

The thrill and adventure seeking (TAS) component is characterized by a desire to engage in activities that involve speed or danger, such as downhill skiing or cliff diving. Whereas TAS is expressed through physical pursuits, a second dimension of sensation seeking, experience seeking (ES), reflects the need for novel personal or inner experiences. With this type of sensation seeking there is a preference for new and different experiences that might be achieved through travel to exotic destinations, interaction with people from different cultures, or learning about new philosophies. A third component of sensation seeking, disinhibition (DIS), is characterized by the expression of reduced social restraint. Individuals with this behavioral tendency are less constrained by societal norms and expectations and so they are more experimental with regard to their behavior. High disinhibitors often report having many sexual partners and they are more likely to both gamble and engage in illicit drug use (Zuckerman, 1994). The final dimension of sensation seeking is labeled boredom susceptibility (BS). BS is evident when an individual frequently reports distaste for anything routine or predictable. To counter their tendencies toward boredom, individuals high in BS often seek out new experiences and they seek out new people with whom to share such experiences. Perhaps not surprisingly, people high in this type of sensation seeking often have problems maintaining long-term personal relationships, but they do thrive in professions involving changing environments, such as aviation (Zuckerman, 1994).

Although numerous articles and book chapters have been written on the causes, correlates and consequences of sensation seeking, few topics have received as much attention as the association between sensation seeking and alcohol use (see, for example, Alterman et al., 1990; Brennan, Walfish, & AuBuchon, 1986; Cherpitel, 1993; Donohew et al., 1999; Zuckerman & Kuhlman, 2000). Higher levels of sensation seeking have generally been shown to correlate with greater quantity and frequency of alcohol consumption (Zuckerman, 1994). Moreover, empirical research on treatment-seeking adults has found a negative relationship between sensation seeking and both age at first use of alcohol and age of onset of alcohol abuse (Ball, Carroll, & Rounsaville, 1994), suggesting that high sensation seekers first use and abuse alcohol at an earlier age than their lower scoring counterparts. Relative to other measures of personality, sensation seeking has been shown to be a particularly strong predictor of initial substance use and abuse in adolescence across a variety of drug use categories (Andrucci, Archer, Pancoast, & Gordon, 1989; Jaffe & Archer, 1987).

In light of these empirical research findings, the question naturally arises as to *why* it is that high sensation seeking is associated with greater alcohol use. The predominant theoretical explanation for this finding stems from research showing that sensation seeking is negatively correlated with platelet levels of monoamine oxidase, or MAO (see chapter 11 of Zuckerman, 1994, for a review). MAO regulates levels of monoamines, such as dopamine and norepinephrine, by breaking them down either after

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