



Urgency and negative emotions: Evidence for moderation on negative alcohol consequences

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ABSTRACT

Prior research had shown that impulsivity may enhance the impact of negative emotions on alcohol related problems. However, these studies used broad measures of both negative emotions and impulsivity that may have obscured the effects of more specific constructs of impulsivity or negative emotions. One such construct is urgency, which is defined as the tendency to act impulsively in the face of strong positive emotions (positive urgency) or negative emotions (negative urgency). The present study tested whether urgency moderated the association between separate negative emotions (anger, depression and anxiety) and alcohol related problems. Data were obtained from a large online sample of currently drinking college students attending a large Northwestern university ($n = 442$). Findings indicated that alcohol related problems were directly associated with anger and both urgency facets. Additionally, positive urgency, but not negative urgency, enhanced the effects of depression, while the buffering effects of positive urgency on the anxiety-consequences association approached significance. These results suggest the importance of emotional context in understanding how dispositions towards rash action may lead to problematic alcohol use.

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1. Introduction

Recent research suggested that common measures of impulsivity actually reflect five modestly correlated dispositions to rash action—including sensation seeking, lack of planning (or premeditation), lack of persistence (or perseverance), and negative and positive urgency (Cyders et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2007). Of these dispositions to rash action, negative and positive urgency have been most consistently related to alcohol-related consequences—such as social, physical or legal problems due to drinking (Fischer, Anderson, & Smith, 2004; Fischer & Smith, 2008; Magid & Colder, 2007). The urgency facets characterize a tendency to engage in impulsive actions when faced with strong negative emotions (i.e. negative urgency) or strong positive emotions (e.g. positive urgency) (Cyders et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2007). In turn, these impulsive behaviors may reflect a broad propensity to be dysregulated when experiencing strong emotions, and may reflect an underlying dysfunction in the ability to regulate emotions (Cyders, Flory, Rainer, & Smith, 2009). For individuals who are high on either positive or negative urgency, efforts to address the experience of strong emotions might deplete resources that are typically dedicated to impulse control and might make these individuals

more likely to focus on their immediate emotional needs (Cyders & Coskumpinar, 2010; Cyders et al., 2007).

The experience of strong emotions might shift the balance of perceived risk towards the pursuit of immediate emotional relief or enhancement and away from long term interests. This may make individuals high on these urgency facets more likely to engage in risky behaviors as a means of either enhancing their positive affect or alleviating negative affect (Cyders et al., 2009), and more likely to experience negative consequences as a result of their behaviors (Cyders et al., 2007; Simons, 2003). Particularly, this tendency to focus on immediate emotional relief or enhancement over the long term consequences of a behavior might make individuals high on these urgency facets more likely to engage in less controlled alcohol use and, consequently to experience increased problems with alcohol (Cyders et al., 2007, 2009; Fischer et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2007). Indeed, prior studies have demonstrated that higher levels of positive and negative urgency are both direct risk factors for alcohol related problems (Cyders et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2007).

At the same time, the experience of strong negative emotions (including anger, depression, and anxiety) has long been considered to be a direct risk factor for problematic alcohol use. One well studied theory posits that alcohol is used as a way of coping with the aversive experience of negative emotions (Cooper, Frone, Russell, & Mudar, 1995; Russell & Mehrabian, 1975), which in turn leads to alcohol problems and alcohol use disorders through a cycle

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of negative reinforcement. However, this theory has received inconsistent support from prior research. Some studies have indicated that depression, anxiety, and anger are related to problematic alcohol use (Benningfield, Trucco, Barreira, & Greenfield, 2009; Buckner, Timpano, Zvolensky, Sachs-Ericsson, & Schmidt, 2008; Eftekhari, Turner, & Larimer, 2004). At the same time, other studies have indicated no association between these emotions and problematic drinking (Kaplow, Curran, Angold, & Costello, 2001; Pirkola et al., 2005; Tivis, Parsons, & Nixon, 1998). One possible explanation for these inconsistent findings is that different operationalizations of negative emotions, such as state versus trait measures of emotions, have differential associations with alcohol use and problems.

Taken together, impulsivity that reflects rash action in the face of strong emotions and the experience of strong negative emotions have both been identified as risk factors for problematic alcohol use. It may be that negative or positive urgency are even more strongly connected to alcohol consequences during time periods where strong negative emotions are experienced.

Past findings have indicated that the experience of negative emotions interacted with negative urgency on risk taking (Cyders & Coskunpinar, 2010) and that positive urgency is related to the tendency to experience negative emotions (Cyders & Smith, 2008). In the presence of negative emotions, individuals high on negative urgency might be more likely to engage in less controlled alcohol use for emotional relief and individuals high on positive urgency might become more likely to use alcohol recklessly to boost low levels of positive affect.

Moreover, prior research has also indicated that higher levels of impulsivity may enhance the impact of negative emotions on alcohol use and consequences (Hussong & Chassin, 1994; Simons, Gaher, Oliver, Bush, & Palmer, 2005). For example, among college students, higher levels of impulsivity strengthened the association between negative affect and alcohol related consequences (Simons et al., 2005). Additionally, among adolescents, high levels of depression were found to strengthen the effect of impulsivity on alcohol use (Hussong & Chassin, 1994). However, both of these studies used broad measures of impulsivity and one study used broad measures of emotions. These studies did not examine the effects of separate negative emotions (i.e. anger, anxiety, and depression) on alcohol related problems given the disposition to behave impulsively in the face of strong emotions (i.e. positive and negative urgency). Since the urgency facets provide a more precise assessment of emotionally driven impulsiveness, testing interactions between these facets and specific negative emotions might further elucidate how and when the dispositions to behave rashly in the face of strong emotions might drive emotionally distressed individuals to engage in problematic alcohol use. As such, the present study aimed to examine whether positive and negative urgency might moderate the relationship between separate negative emotions and negative alcohol consequences.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Study data were obtained from the University of Washington. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Washington approved this study and waived informed consent. Participants ($n = 442$) were recruited from lower level Psychology courses. They completed the study in one session using a web-based questionnaire and were awarded course credit for participation. The present study recruited participants who reported alcohol use in the past month, who were fluent in English, and who were between the ages of 18 and 24. 36.7% of the sample were males and 63.3%

were females. The median age of the sample was 19 years old. Approximately 44% were 18 years old, 29.3% were 19, 14.2% were 20, 8.4% were 21, 3% were 22, 0.7% were 23, and 0.5% were 24. Although data on race/ethnicity were not collected in this study, other studies sampling from the same population were comprised of around 60% Caucasian and 30% Asian or Pacific Islander—with the remaining 10% comprising other races. Because we were interested in predicting negative alcohol consequences rather than use, we excluded non-drinkers from the current study to ensure that any observed effects were not confounded with abstinence. In other words, we predicted the level of alcohol consequences among those who drank alcohol.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Negative alcohol consequences

Participants reported on the social, physical and legal consequences they experienced because of drinking in the past year (such as being arrested for drunk driving, being fired from a job or expelled because of drinking, or urinating on oneself because of drinking). Participants also reported on symptoms of physical dependence (such as having the shakes after cutting down on drinking). Twenty-seven negative consequences items were derived from the Young Adult Alcohol Problems Screening Test (YAAPST; Hurlburt & Sher, 1992). Twelve additional negative consequences items were taken from a study by Mallett, Bachrach, and Turrisi (2008). Response options ranged from (0) “Never” or “Not in the Past Year” to (1) “1 times in the past year” to (8) “40 or more times in the past year.” Negative alcohol consequences items were computed as a mean—with higher mean value indicating greater experience (reflecting both variety and frequency) of alcohol related consequences ($\alpha = .91$).

2.2.2. Urgency

Negative urgency was assessed using the urgency subscale of the UPPS Impulsive Behavior Scale—which is a 44-item inventory designed to measure personality pathways to impulsive behavior (UPPS; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). Positive urgency was assessed using the Positive Urgency Measure (PUM; Cyders et al., 2007). The negative urgency subscale consists of 12 items, which assess impulsive behaviors that follow or are related to negative affect. The Positive Urgency Measure consists of fourteen items, which assess impulsive behaviors following or relating to positive affect. These items were assessed in terms of likelihood of occurrence, with response options ranging from (1) “Not at all” to (5) “Very much.” Positive urgency items and negative urgency items were calculated as separate means—with higher mean value indicating higher levels of urgency. Internal consistency coefficient was approximately .90 for both urgency facets and the two facets were moderately correlated ($r = .51$).

2.2.3. Negative emotions

Past month depressive symptoms were assessed using 21 items from the Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). The scale score was the summed value of all 21 items. Total scores for the inventory ranged from 0 to 63, with greater depression severity reflected by higher scores ($\alpha = .92$). *General feelings of anger* were assessed with 10 items from the Trait Anger scale of the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI-2; Spielberger, 1999). Score for trait anger was calculated as a mean—with higher mean value indicating higher levels of anger ($\alpha = .87$). *General feelings of anxiety* were measured with 20 items from the Trait Anxiety scale of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger, 1983). Score for trait anxiety was calculated as a mean—with higher mean value indicating higher levels of anxiety ($\alpha = .64$).

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