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Short Communication

Further evidence for the validity of the Need Inventory of Sensation Seeking

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ABSTRACT

The Need Inventory of Sensation Seeking (NISS) by Roth and Hammelstein (2012) conceptualizes sensation seeking as a motivational trait, a need for stimulation that can provoke different behaviors. Extending the area of application to the field of sexuality, the results of an online survey with a convenience sample ($N = 368$) provided evidence that the NISS outperforms traditional measures of sensation seeking. In a series of hierarchical regression analyses, the NISS added incremental variance in predicting the number of sexual partners and the frequency of extreme sexual behaviors and fantasies. No relationship between the NISS and pornography use was found. Moreover, the NISS subscale Need for Stimulation performed better than the subscale Avoidance of Rest. Overall, the study supported the assumption that the NISS is a valid and reliable instrument in the area of sexuality.

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1. Introduction

Sensation seeking is a personality trait that is defined as the seeking for novel, varied, and complex stimuli and experiences, and the willingness to take risks to achieve such experiences (Zuckerman, 1994). Its relationship to risky behaviors (e.g., drug-use, risky sexual behavior, risky driving behavior, and risky sports) makes it an important predictor for outcome variables in the field of clinical and health psychology. Perhaps the most prominent instrument for measuring sensation seeking (e.g., Ferrando & Chico, 2001) is the Sensation Seeking Scale Form V (SSS-V; e.g., Zuckerman, 1996; Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978), or similar short forms (e.g., the Brief Sensation Seeking Scale, BSSS-8; Hoyle, Stephenson, Palmgreen, Lorch, & Donohew, 2002). The SSS-V consists of four subscales Experience Seeking, Boredom Susceptibility, Thrill and Adventure Seeking, and Disinhibition and its items reflect specific activities referring to risky behaviors. This conceptualization and operationalization has not gone without critique (e.g., Arnett, 1994; Jackson & Maraun, 1996;

Roth, Hammelstein, & Brähler, 2007, 2009, 2014; Zuckerman, 2008), resulting in the development of alternative ways of measurement.

In this article, we focus on one of the most recent attempts to provide an alternative approach to conceptualize and measure sensation seeking: the Need Inventory of Sensation Seeking (NISS; Hammelstein & Roth, 2010; Roth & Hammelstein, 2012; Roth et al., 2007, 2014). What makes it different from previous instruments is its theoretical conceptualization of sensation seeking as “a global need for stimulation based on varied, novel, complex, and intensive sensations and experiences” (Hammelstein & Roth, 2010, p. 661; cf. Arnett, 1994), which can provoke different behaviors. Thus, items in the NISS do not ask about the frequency of specific behaviors (e.g., “bungee jumping” or “visiting strange places” like the SSS-V or the Arnett Inventory of Sensation Seeking [AISS], Arnett, 1994), but rather “assess the underlying motivational aims” (Roth & Hammelstein, 2012, p. 12) by addressing the pleasure of stimulation.

The NISS consists of two subscales, Need for Stimulation (NS) and Avoidance of Rest (AR). The NS comprises 11 items (e.g., “I like feeling totally charged”, “I prefer strong and impressive experiences”) and reflects the approach dimension of sensation seeking. The AR subscale comprises six negatively poled items (e.g., “I enjoy it when there’s nothing going on for a while”, “I like to take time out to relax”) and reflects the avoidance dimension. However, Roth and Hammelstein (2012) argue that AR could be also just a methodological artifact because all negatively poled items loaded on this factor. Roth and Hammelstein (2012) reported high internal

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Table 1
Means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and internal consistencies of scales and outcome variables (N = 368).

	M	SD	NISS-NS	NISS-AR	BSSS-8	SSSS	SexP	PI	ESB	ESF	SD	IM
NISS-NS	3.46	0.82	.93									
NISS-AR	2.60	0.62	.05	.85								
BSSS-8	2.87	0.74	.46*	.13	.78							
SSSS	2.83	0.46	.42*	.15*	.33*	.75						
SexP	10.08	13.36	.23*	.14*	.16*	.18*	.83					
PI	4.05	1.38	.03	.05	.03	.37*	.05	.83				
ESB	1.94	0.59	.40*	.11	.06	.21*	.31*	.00	.95			
ESF	2.10	0.63	.45*	.07	.06	.29*	.21*	.17*	.75*	.95		
SD	2.96	0.49	.23*	.05	.07	.14*	.06	-.02	.19*	.22*	.62	
IM	2.88	0.62	-.03	.09	-.17*	-.11	-.06	-.09	.15*	.14*	.15*	.58

Note. Cronbach’s alphas are displayed in italics along the diagonal. NS = Need Inventory of Sensation Seeking subscale: Need for Stimulation; AR = Need Inventory of Sensation Seeking subscale: Avoidance of Rest; BSSS-8 = Brief Sensation Seeking Scale; SSSS = Sexual Sensation Seeking Scale; SexP = number of sexual partners; PI = pornography index; ESB = extreme sexual behaviors; ESF = fantasies about extreme sexual behaviors; SD = Social Desirability: Self-Deception; IM = Social Desirability: Impression Management.

* $p < .01$.

consistencies: Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$ for NS, $\alpha = .82$ for AR, and $\alpha = .86$ for the total scale. Validity was examined by predicting pathological gambling and the willingness to try new things or change jobs (Roth et al., 2014). High correlations between the NISS and these external criteria support Hammelstein and Roth’s assumption that the NISS is a valid instrument for measuring sensation seeking. However this assumption is challenged by the questionable validity of the AR subscale, which often showed zero-correlations with related constructs. Furthermore, they compared their instrument to other well-established sensation seeking measures like the SSS-V and the AISS (Arnett, 1994). The NISS showed higher correlations with these external criteria than the SSS-V did and was not statistically significantly correlated with the age of the participants.

The purpose of our study was to provide further evidence for the validity of the NISS and to expand the nomological network by examining the NISS in the field of sexuality. Sensation seeking is often mentioned as a predictor for sexual behaviors (e.g., Donohew et al., 2000; Kalichman, Simbayi, Jooste, Vermaak, & Cain, 2008; Mashegoane, Moalusi, Ngoepe, & Peltzer, 2002; Skovran, Huss, & Scalora, 2010; Zuckerman, 1979, 1994). In addition, Peter and Valkenburg (2006, 2011) found positive correlations between sensation seeking and the use of sexually explicit online material. However, concerning the NISS, these relationships have not been investigated yet. Thus, our aim is to investigate the validity of the NISS with regard to relevant outcome variables like sexual behaviors and fantasies, and pornography use.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited via social network sites and German online bulletin boards about sexuality. They were asked to fill out a 30-min online survey. On the first page of the online survey, participants were informed about their voluntary participation and their ability to end the survey at any time. Due to the intimate nature of the questions about sexual preferences and behaviors, participants confirmed that they were 18 years or older. After answering the survey that included the sensation seeking and social desirability scales described below, questions about sexuality and media preferences, and socio-demographics, the participants were thanked and offered the chance to send an email to the author for more information and the results.² The final sample consisted of 368 participants (age: $M = 35.09$ years, $SD = 11.16$, range 18–69 years; 59%

female, 71% heterosexual, 21% bisexual, and 8% other sexual orientations).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Extreme sexual behaviors and fantasies, pornographic media use, and sexual partners

Participants were asked about different sexual actions with a list of 39 extreme sexual acts (e.g., bondage, beating, and role-play; Benecke, 2009). These activities were chosen because they can be described as extremely arousing, novel, varied, and complex stimulations and experiences that require a certain willingness to take risks, and thus, are special cases of sensation seeking behaviors. On a four-point scale (1 = never; 4 = very often) participants were asked to indicate their frequency of such extreme sexual behaviors and fantasies. Afterward, participants were asked two questions about their pornography use (“How often do you watch pornographic movies?” with rating options ranging from 1 = never to 7 = every day, and “How much do you like pornographic movies?” ranging from 1 = I don’t like it at all to 6 = I like it a lot). Both items were highly correlated ($r = .73$, $p < .001$). Thus, a pornography index (PI) was built by calculating the mean of both items. Furthermore, participants indicated the number of sexual partners they had in the last five years.

Descriptive statistics, correlations, and internal consistencies for all measured constructs are provided in Table 1.

2.2.2. Need Inventory of Sensation Seeking (NISS)

The German version of the NISS (Roth & Hammelstein, 2012; Roth et al., 2014) as aforementioned was used. The items were measured with a five-point response scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

2.2.3. Brief Sensation Seeking Scale (BSSS-8)

The BSSS-8 (e.g., Hoyle et al., 2002; Stephenson, Velez, Chalela, Ramirez, & Hoyle, 2007) contains eight items from the SSS-V with two items for each dimension (i.e., Experience Seeking, Boredom Susceptibility, Thrill and Adventure Seeking, and Disinhibition) and a five-point response scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Hoyle et al. (2002) reported Cronbach’s alphas between .74 and .76 for the total scale. Correlations with risk factors (e.g., drug use) and protective factors (e.g., self-acceptance, law-abiding) were substantial and indicated a valid measure of sensation seeking. The BSSS-8 and the SSS-V have shown similar correlations with relevant criterion variables. The BSSS-8 was transferred into German via translation-back-translation method by Schneider (2012) and yielded—in comparison to Hoyle et al. (2002)—similar values (Cronbach’s alphas between .77 and .78)

² All established ethical standards according to the German Psychological Society (DGPs) were met.

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