



Short Communication

The role of personality variables in drinking game participation



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Impulsivity and sensation seeking associated with frequency of drinking game play.
- Impulsivity and sensation seeking associated with negative consequences.
- Impulsivity and sensation seeking had direct and indirect effects on consequences.
- Results highlight relationship between personality and risky drinking.

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 3 March 2014

Keywords:

Alcohol
Personality
Drinking games
College students

ABSTRACT

Drinking games are prevalent among college student and associated with increased risk of experiencing negative alcohol-related consequences. Personality variables, and specifically impulsivity and sensation seeking, have been linked to increased alcohol consumption and related negative consequences, but research on the relationship between personality and drinking game participation is limited. The current study used path analysis to assess the impact of sensation seeking and impulsivity on frequency of drinking game participation and related consequences in a sample of undergraduate college students. Findings suggest that sensation seeking and impulsivity are positively associated with frequency of drinking game participation. Both impulsivity and sensation seeking had a direct effect on negative consequences associated with drinking games, and both had an indirect relationship when controlling for the frequency of drinking game participation. The results are largely consistent with previous studies in suggesting that impulsivity and sensation seeking play a role in predicting risky alcohol use and related negative consequences. Understanding the relationship between personality variables and negative drinking game consequences may better inform the treatment of hazardous drinking among college students.

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1. Introduction

Alcohol consumption is common on college campuses, with 71.8% of students reporting drinking in the past 30 days (Core Institute, 2006) and about half report binge drinking (≥ 5 drinks for males, ≥ 4 for females) (e.g. Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2012). College binge drinking is associated with increased reports of alcohol related consequences such as unplanned sexual relations, legal problem, and nausea (e.g. Hingson & White, 2013). However, previous findings (e.g., White & Labouvie, 1989) indicate that quantity and frequency of drinking do not fully account for negative consequences, suggesting a need to consider unique drinking practices and intrapersonal factors that also contribute to risk.

One variable that consistently predicts binge drinking and related problems is drinking game (DG) participation (Borsari, 2004; Pedersen & LaBrie, 2006). DGs refer to “social activities in which standardized

rules determine the amount of and the manner in which alcohol is consumed” (Polizzotto, Saw, Tjhung, Chua, & Stockwell, 2007, p. 469). Participation in DGs is relatively common among college students (Borsari, 2004; Neighbors, Foster, Fossos, & Lewis, 2013), and playing DGs has been associated with higher BrAC levels (Breath Alcohol Concentration; Borsari, Bergen-Cico, & Carey, 2003; Clapp, Johnson, Shillington, Lange, & Voas, 2008), and negative alcohol-related consequences (e.g. Cameron et al., 2010).

Given the prevalence and unique risks associated with DGs, it is imperative to examine intrapersonal factors that may contribute to DG participation as well as the associated negative consequences. Literature on college drinking points to personality traits, specifically sensation seeking and impulsivity, as personal factors accounting for some variability in alcohol use (Baer, 2002; Ham & Hope, 2003). Impulsivity is defined as carelessness and quick decision-making (Evenden, 1999). Previous studies have suggested that impulsivity is associated with alcohol use and related problems among college students (e.g., MacKillop, Mattson, Anderson, Castelda, & Donovan, 2007; Simons, Gaher, Oliver, Bush, & Palmer, 2005). Sensation seeking is the tendency to seek out

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novel experiences and risk taking (Zuckerman, 1994). An association between sensation seeking and alcohol consumption has been demonstrated in several studies (e.g., Simons, Gaher, Oliver, et al., 2005), with those high in sensation seeking reporting higher levels of alcohol consumption (Quinn, Stappenbeck, & Fromme, 2011).

Recently these personality traits have been investigated in the context of high risk drinking events. For example, the amount that college students consume while celebrating 21st birthdays and their beliefs about the role of alcohol during these celebrations, have been found to be related positively to these personality traits (Day-Cameron, Muse, Hauenstein, Simmons, & Correia, 2009). Two previous studies have looked at the relationship between sensation seeking and DG participation in samples of college students. One study linked DG participation and associated negative consequences to higher levels of sensation seeking (Johnson & Cropsey, 2000). The second study found that individuals high in sensation seeking may continue to play these games for fun and excitement, despite the increased risk of negative consequences; the study also found that students low in sensation seeking tend to have negative attitudes towards DGs (Johnson & Cohen, 2004). To our knowledge there are no published studies linking impulsivity to DG participation among college students. However, one study of high school students identified an association between impulsivity and experiencing a report regrettable sexual situations following DG participation (Borsari et al., 2013).

While it has been suggested that sensation seeking and impulsivity represent aspects of a single unitary construct (see Baer, 2002), recent empirical work suggests that they can be viewed as overlapping but distinct aspects of behavior (e.g., Magid, MacLean, & Colder, 2007; Smith et al., 2007). Magid et al. (2007) suggest that failing to include measures of both traits can mask or confound unique relationships between sensation seeking, impulsivity, and alcohol use among college students. Studies that have simultaneously investigated sensation seeking and impulsivity have reported that both play a role in the prediction of alcohol use, although through different mediational pathways (Lammers, Kuntsche, Engels, Wiers, & Kleinjan, 2013; Magid et al., 2007; Simons, 2003; Simons, Gaher, Correia, Hansen, & Christopher, 2005). For example, Magid et al. (2007) noted that the effect of sensation seeking on alcohol consequences was mediated by frequency of drinking and drinking motives, whereas the effect of impulsivity on alcohol-related problems was mediated through coping motives but not frequency of drinking. Similarly, Simons (2003) and Simons, Gaher, Correia, et al. (2005) have reported that impulsivity is directly related to alcohol-related problems and sensation seeking is indirectly related to motives and frequency of use. However, Lammers et al. (2013) reported that the relationships between drinking behavior (frequency of use, binge drinking, and alcohol-related problems) and both impulsivity and sensations seeking were mediated – but through different motivational variables – in a sample of adolescents.

As a set these studies present inconsistent findings, suggesting that additional work is needed to further understand the mechanisms through which both impulsivity and sensation seeking are related to negative drinking outcomes. Magid et al. (2007) made a strong case for developing theoretical accounts to understand these mechanisms. In short, individual with elevated sensation seeking are likely to consume alcohol to increase arousal, which may indirectly lead to increased consequences. Elevated impulsivity is often characterized by failure to inhibit behavior and poor attempts at coping with distress; these features are thought to be more directly related to experiencing negative alcohol-related consequences. Understanding the mechanisms through which various personality traits lead to alcohol use and related problems has implications for prevention and intervention efforts.

1.1. Current study

Recent studies report that a significant proportion of college students engage in DGs, and that such participation can result in a variety

of negative outcomes. The findings from these studies suggest that both sensation seeking and impulsivity are linked to increased alcohol consumption, negative alcohol-related consequences, and DG participation. However, no published studies have simultaneously investigated the association between DG and both sensation and impulsivity in a sample of college students, and previous studies on the mechanisms through which these personality variables relate to alcohol-related problems have produced inconsistent results. The current study attempted to bridge this gap by examining the impact of sensation seeking and impulsivity on frequency of DG participation and related consequences using a path analytic model. Based on previously published studies on the link between personality and alcohol-related problems, we expected that the relationship between sensation seeking and negative DG consequences would be mediated by frequency of DG participation. The literature on the potential for the frequency of DG participation to mediate the relationship between impulsivity and DG consequences was less clear; in the current study both direct and indirect relationships were assessed.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 831 undergraduates (71% female, mean age: 20.38, 81% White) enrolled at large public Southeastern University, who completed an online survey in exchange for course credit. Nearly 70% of participants reported drinking in the past 30 days, with an average of 10 drinks a week. Lifetime participation in a DG was endorsed by 81% of the sample; 53% reported playing in the past month, with 79% of those who played in the past month reporting at least one negative DG consequence in the past month.

2.2. Measures

The Eysenck Impulsiveness Scale (EPI; Eysenck, Pearson, Easting, & Allsopp, 1985) was used to assess Impulsivity. Sensation seeking was assessed with a 16-item scale adapted from the work of Zuckerman's Sensation Seeking Scales (Donohew et al., 2000; Zuckerman, 1979). The Hazardous Drinking Games Measure (HDGM) was used to measure frequency and negative consequences of DG (Borsari et al., 2003, 2013). Participants indicated how often in the past 30 days they played DGs, from 1 (Never) to 5 (Four or More Times a Week) and if they experienced a series of negative DG consequences.

2.3. Data editing

Univariate outliers, as defined as \pm two interquartile values from the median, were identified for sensation seeking, and were changed to two interquartiles from the median. Univariate outliers were also identified for consequences of DGs; however, after further assessing the data the consequences of DGs outliers were determined to be indicative of the intended population and were not deleted or modified. Seven

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations ($N = 831$).

Variables	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	Range	1.	2.	3.
1. Impulsivity	7.09	4.32	0–18	–		
2. Sensation Seeking	52.37	9.84	24–75	0.40*	–	
3. Frequency of Game Play	2.03	1.12	1–5	0.29*	0.41*	–
4. Drinking Game Consequences	0.92	1.41	0–8	0.36*	0.36*	0.63*

Note: Impulsivity: Eysenck Impulsivity Scale total score. Sensation seeking: total sensation seeking score. Frequency of Game Play: Number of times participant played drinking games in the past month (1 = 0 times, 2 = once, 3 = 2–4 times a month, 4 = 2–3 times a week, 5 = 4 or more times a week). Drinking game consequences: sum of number of drinking game consequences endorsed.

* $p < 0.001$.

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