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Alcohol Consumption, Sensation Seeking and Sexual Behavior among College Students

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Abstract
College students are renowned for engaging in many unhealthy behaviors. Many students view college as the time to be independent and explore new things. Compared to other age groups, college students have higher rates of alcohol use. The students also partake in unprotected sex and have multiple partners. High sensation seekers engage in casual sex more often than low sensation seekers and also are more likely to have sex with multiple partners. The present study examines college students from a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) to see how alcohol consumption, sensation seeking and risky sexual behavior relate to each other. The data was analyzed using a Pearson’s r analysis and a one-way ANOVA. The results indicated that there was a positive relationship between the three variables, with a major difference in alcohol consumption observed between freshmen and juniors. The data showed that the junior class consumed more alcohol than any of the other classes. A few limitations may have altered the overall results of the study, including privacy and academic class. Future research should continue to examine these three variables but also examine the influence of religiosity.

Key Terms:
- Sensation Seeking
- Sexual Behavior
- Alcohol
- Correlational

Gabrielle Dowdy is a Psychology, Pre-medicine major from Memphis, TN. Upon graduating from Xavier in 2013, Dowdy hopes to attend medical school to become an OB/GYN as well as pursue a Ph.D. Dowdy’s research interests include influences of pop culture on college students. Dowdy is currently the secretary for the Psychology Club.
Contemporary movies such as “No Strings Attached” (2010) glamorize casual sex, using actors that college students may admire and suggesting that sex without commitment is acceptable behavior. However, psychologists know that risky sexual behaviors can be problematic for college students worldwide, especially when alcohol is involved (Weiten, Lloyd, Dunn, Hammer, 2009). There are many factors that may entice students to engage in casual sex and drinking alcohol. The student’s level of sensation seeking is one prominent factor that may affect these behaviors (Grasha & Kirschenbaum, 1986). The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between alcohol consumption and sexual behavior as it relates to college students and to examine how sensation seeking relates to them both.

College students are renowned for engaging in many unhealthy behaviors (Hou, 2009). Some of these behaviors include abusing prescription drugs, marijuana, alcohol, and other drugs (Gullette & Lyons, 2005). These vices can be deadly and are often illegal. According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), prescription drug abuse is a rising trend among college students. The drugs are used to get high and also to cram for tests or other school related activities. Even though some of the students’ intentions are good, the unauthorized use of these drugs is deadly. The use of drugs may lead to many health related and mental issues and even death. Hittner and Kennington (2008) discovered that students who used drugs and alcohol were more likely to socialize and have sex rather than study for school.

Compared to other age groups, college students have higher rates of alcohol misuse (Hittner & Kennington, 2008). A large number of students also report participating in binge drinking. Binge drinking is defined as consuming more than three alcoholic beverages during one sitting (Gullette & Lyons, 2005). Hittner and Kennington (2008) found that binge drinkers were more likely to suffer alcohol related problems than students who did not binge drink. College students who experienced being drunk before the age of thirteen years old were also more likely to have more sexual partners during college (Hittner & Kennington, 2008). Several researchers have related alcohol intoxication to unplanned sexual behavior (Klein, Geaghan & MacDonald, 2007). Anderson and Mathieu (1996) claim that sporadic condom users had more sexual partners and were more likely to have used alcohol before intercourse than frequent condom users. In one particular study, 38% of students reported having unplanned sex because of alcohol and other drugs (Klein et al., 2007).

Risky sexual behavior includes high frequency of sexual behavior, high frequency of unprotected sex while drunk and/or high and high number of sexual partners in the past year (Poulson et al., 2008). These risky sexual behaviors also include engaging in anal and oral sex. Some students partake in unprotected sex and have multiple partners (Gullette & Lyons, 2005). According to Grello, Welsh and Harper (2006), students who engage in sex at a younger age are more likely to have casual sex during college. According to Hou (2009), 80% of college students surveyed had had sex before college and the condom use rate was low among them. In addition, 70% of college students in their sample report they have had sex with people they did not like in a romantic way (Grello et al., 2006).

Sensation seeking and sexual behavior are complementary, even though they may seem contrary to each other. Zuckerman and Kuhlman (1993) describe sensation seeking as one’s willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of the experience. A high sensation seeker would be bored easily and take more risks. According to these authors, a high sensation

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seeker would also engage in casual sex more often and have multiple partners. Sensation seeking affects both men and women, but it affects each group differently. Women who are high sensation seekers may drink excessively, but they also pursue more dangerous careers such as law enforcement or firefighting (Grello et al., 2006). Sexual sensation seeking can be defined as a person who attends parties, drinks excessively and seeks sexual adventures (Grello et al., 2006). Such people would use their high sensation seeking in all aspects of their life, not just sexually. They prefer multiple sexual partners because they are easily bored with the same person and same routine (Grello et al., 2006).

Past research has not linked sensation seeking, alcohol consumption and sexual behavior, however high sensation seeking has become synonymous with risky sexual behavior (Grello et al., 2006). Studies have also shown that binge drinking is a characteristic of high sensation seekers (Grello et al., 2006). Alcohol is one leading factor that seems to boost risky sexual behavior, as students who use alcohol are more likely to engage in sexual intercourse with multiple partners (Klein et al., 2007). The fact that college students engage in elevated rates of alcohol abuse and illegal drug use indicates that the students are more susceptible to risky sexual behaviors (Hittner & Kennington, 2008).

The present study focuses on alcohol consumption, sexual behavior, and sensation seeking as they relate to college students. It explores why college students may engage in such risky behaviors. It is evident that alcohol consumption plays a crucial role in risky sexual behaviors, but how does sensation seeking influence either of these? I hypothesize there is a positive relationship between sensation seeking, alcohol consumption and risky sexual behaviors among college students.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants in this study were students from Xavier University of Louisiana, a Catholic Historically Black College in the Southeast. There were 36 male and female participants for this study, and all were 18 years old and older. The participants received extra credit in a Psychology course for participating.

**Materials**

The first variable is sensation seeking which was measured using a brief form of the Zuckerman-Kuhlman Scale (2000). This scale was developed to measure individuals’ level of risk taking. In the interest of time, I shortened the questionnaire to only 19 true or false questions instead of the original 99 questions. The scores range from 0-19 with a higher score being equivalent to higher sensation seeking. Sample questions include, “I like doing things just for the thrill of it” and “I’ll try anything once.”

The second variable is alcohol consumption which was measured using the Alcohol Decisional Balance Scale (2005). The scale was developed to measure a person’s alcohol decisional balance. The questionnaire has 20 questions with five answer choices. The scale ranges from 20 to 100. A higher score is equivalent to more alcohol consumption. Sample questions include, “My drinking causes problems with others” and “Drinking relaxes me.”

The third variable is sexual behavior which was measured using a scale by Hudson and Murphy (1998). They developed a scale that measures a person’s sexual attitude. It is a 25-item scale with five answer choices. The point scale ranges from 0 to 100. A higher score is equivalent to a stricter sexual attitude. Sample questions is, “Sex education...
should be restricted to home” and “There is too much sex on television.”

**Procedures**

Participants were given an informed consent form to ensure they were comfortable with participating in the study. They were told the purpose of the test was to measure sexual knowledge of college students. The participants were given three different questionnaires to measure alcohol consumption, sexual attitude and sensation seeking. After they completed the questionnaires, the participants were given a debriefing form. The participants were told the hypothesis of the study after they finished the questionnaires and were allowed to ask questions.

**Results**

The data was analyzed using two tests. A Pearson’s r tested the association between alcohol consumption, sensation seeking and risky sexual behavior. A significant relationship was found between alcohol consumption and risky sexual behavior, \( r = .540, p = .002 \). This means as alcohol consumption increased so did risky sexual behavior. There was also a significant relationship between alcohol consumption and sensation seeking, \( r = .391, p = .022 \). This means as alcohol consumption increased so did sensation seeking. The association between risky sexual behavior and sensation seeking was also significant, \( r = .494, p = .001 \). A one-way ANOVA test was also done using academic class and alcohol consumption as variables. A significant relationship was found, \( F = 2.942, p = .055 \). Figure 1 shows the mean alcohol consumption for each class. The major difference was between the freshman and junior classes. The mean alcohol consumption for the freshman class was 45.25, which was much lower than the mean for the junior class which was 61.13.

**Discussion**

I hypothesized a positive relationship between sensation seeking, alcohol consumption and risky sexual behaviors among college students. The results confirm that there is a positive relationship between the three variables. There were very interesting findings between academic class and alcohol consumption. The results also show that juniors had the highest mean of alcohol consumption out of the four classes. The freshman class had the lowest mean of alcohol consumption. There was not a significant difference between the sophomore, junior or senior classes. The largest difference was between the freshman and junior classes, which could be attributed to a few things. As freshmen, students may not have many friends and may still be trying to adjust to college life. By their junior year, students may have a consistent group of friends and are really comfortable with college life. Also, students usually turn 21 years old during their junior year and are therefore allowed to drink alcohol legally.

The purpose of this study was to examine the importance of determining the relationship between alcohol consumption, sensation seeking and risky sexual behavior. Past research showed that alcohol consumption and risky sexual behavior was related. The research also showed that risky sexual behavior and sensation seeking were related. The past research did not link alcohol consumption, risky sexual behavior and sensation seeking together. The purpose of this study was to examine how each variable related to each other. The results from the present study show that alcohol consumption, sensation seeking and risky sexual behavior are related.

There are a few practical implications of this study that could decrease possible problems caused by the three variables. First, the legal drinking age should be enforced. It is quite easy for a student under 21 years old to obtain alcohol. This may be exceptionally true in New Orleans, where the study was conducted. Also, there should
be worthwhile abstinence classes. The class should not just say, “do not have sex,” rather it should provide justified reasons and explanations. Research has shown that abstinence only programs do not work (Weiten et al., 2009). It would also be a good idea to let the students interact with other people their age who already have children. This might make the student think twice before engaging in risky behaviors if they witness firsthand how difficult it is to raise a child. Finally, the amount of sexual content in the media should be decreased. Students may spend a lot of time watching television and movies and reading magazines so they are always bombarded with sexual references. The media really sends a mixed message to many students; it makes such behavior seem acceptable.

There were also a few limitations to the study. Many personal questions were asked so the participants may not have been completely honest. The participants could have felt that the study was invading their privacy. There were two participants that did not report their academic class. Those two could have been freshmen, and that would have altered the results (see Figure 1). Also, there were an unequal amount of participants in each class. I cannot say conclusively that juniors drink more than the other class because the junior class had more participants than two of the other classes. Further, the gender of the participants was not assessed.

Future research for this study could be very promising. There should be a broader range of students. This study’s participants consisted of predominantly African American students from one school. In the future, there should be more schools involved and different ethnicities. This would provide more participants and allow for the results to be compared. It would be very interesting to see if and how religiosity plays a role. A person who is really religious may not engage in sexual behaviors or drink alcohol at all. Or, they may be the extreme opposite. The religious person could engage in lots of casual sex and drink alcohol a lot, but think their religion will protect them from the consequences. It would also be interesting to do a follow up of the students in this study. The new study could examine if they were affected by their choices they made in this study. Future research could be especially beneficial for those who work with college students.

References


Figure 1: Shows the mean of alcohol consumption for each class
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