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Sensation Seeking and Attitudes towards Substance Use in Athletes and Non-Athletes

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Abstract

We examined differences between college athletes and non-athletes on sensation seeking and attitudes towards substance use. We found that there was no significant difference between athletes and non-athletes on sensation seeking nor on attitudes about alcohol, tobacco, cocaine, marijuana, or ecstasy. However, athletes trended toward more favorable views about alcohol use than non-athletes. Overall, college students higher in sensation seeking had more positive attitudes about substances. Given the present findings, continued examination about substance use among college athletes with larger sample sizes is warranted.

Background

Substance use among college athletes and non-athletes is common (Johnston, O'Malley, Miech, Bachman & Schulenberg, 2015; Yusko, Buckman, White & Pandina, 2008). Previous research showed that athletes had higher rates of alcohol consumption than non-athletes, while non-athletes showed higher rates of tobacco, marijuana, cocaine and ecstasy use (Yusko et. Al., 2008). Prior research has also shown that athletes tend to score higher in sensation seeking than non-athletes. Differences in substance use between college athletes and non-athletes may be related to sensation seeking.

Hypothesis

In the present study, we examined differences between athletes and non-athletes in regards to sensation seeking and attitudes towards substance use. We hypothesized that:

- athletes would score higher on measures of sensation seeking than non-athletes.
- athletes would have more positive attitudes towards alcohol than non-athletes.
- non-athletes would have more positive attitudes toward tobacco, cocaine, marijuana and ecstasy than non-athletes.

Method

Participants

Twenty-five college students (8 male, 17 female) were separated into two groups by athletic status (10 athletes, 15 non-athletes). Ages ranged from 18-29 years old ($M = 19.82$, $SD = 3.10$).

Measures

Sensation Seeking Survey V (SSSV). Zuckerman's Sensation Seeking Survey (1994) was used to assess sensation seeking behaviors in athletes and non-athletes. The scale consists of 40 items where higher scores indicate strong sensation seeking behavior tendencies.

Zuckerman's Sensation Seeking Scale Form V

1. Please indicate which of the following scenarios you would prefer.
 - a. I like "wild" uninhibited parties
 - b. I prefer quiet parties with good conversation
2. Please indicate which of the following scenarios you would prefer.
 - a. There are some movies I enjoy seeing a second or even a third time
 - b. I can't stand watching a movie that I've seen before
3. Please indicate which of the following scenarios you would prefer.
 - a. I often wish I could be a mountain climber
 - b. I can't understand people who risk their necks climbing mountains
4. Please indicate which of the following scenarios you would prefer.
 - a. I dislike all body odors
 - b. I like some of the earthy body smells

Attitudes Toward Substance Use surveys. Five 12-item surveys (one for each alcohol, tobacco, cocaine, marijuana and ecstasy) were used to measure attitudes about substances. Each survey was identical with the exception of the substance in each scenario. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree".

Attitude Toward Substance Use Survey

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Using alcohol can be a pleasant activity	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Using alcohol is fun	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Many things are much more risky than trying alcohol	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Alcohol use is one of the biggest evils in the country	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Alcohol use helps people to have experience life in full	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The police should not be annoying young people who are trying alcohol	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Procedure

After consenting to the study, college athletes and non-athletes completed self-report measures of demographic information, sensation seeking, and attitudes about substances via Qualtrics, an online survey platform.

Results

A series of one-way ANOVAs indicated there were no statistically significant differences between athletes and non-athletes on sensation seeking and the five substance use attitude surveys (see Table 1).

Table 1. Differences in Athletes and Non-Athletes

Measure	Athletic Status	M	SD	F	Sig.
SSSV	Athlete	21.3	8.69	0.328	0.573
	Non-athlete	19.2	9.17		
Alcohol	Athlete	3.53	0.62	1.285	0.269
	Non-athlete	3.18	0.83		
Tobacco	Athlete	2.84	0.75	1.186	0.287
	Non-athlete	2.51	0.72		
Cocaine	Athlete	2.09	0.77	1.151	0.294
	Non-athlete	2.39	0.61		
Marijuana	Athlete	3.63	0.68	0.941	0.342
	Non-athlete	3.31	0.87		
Ecstasy	Athlete	2.63	0.97	0.498	0.487
	Non-athlete	2.4	0.69		

Given the small size of the athlete and non-athlete groups, post-hoc correlational tests were examined. Several strong correlations ($r > .6$) were found between sensation seeking and attitudes towards several substances (see Table 2).

Table 2. Sensation Seeking and Substance Use Attitudes

	Sensation Seeking	Alcohol	Tobacco	Cocaine	Marijuana	Ecstasy
Sensation Seeking	-----	.679**	.640**	.500*	.640**	0.38
Alcohol		-----	.738**	.527**	.833**	0.291
Tobacco			-----	.610**	.703**	0.376
Cocaine				-----	.588*	.742**
Marijuana					-----	.429*
Ecstasy						-----
Means	20.04	3.32	2.65	2.27	3.44	2.49
Std. Deviation	8.86	0.76	0.73	0.68	0.8	0.8

** Indicates significance at the .01 level

* Indicates significance at the .05 level

Discussion

College athletes and non-athletes did not significantly differ on sensation seeking and attitudes towards substance use. Though conclusions are limited by the small sample size, correlational data suggests that sensation seeking was related to more favorable attitudes towards alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use. This suggests that sensation seeking college students may be at increased risk for substance use.