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Exploring Alcohol Use, Cannabis Use, and Desire to Dissociate in College Female Victims of Sexual Violence

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BACKGROUND

- Experiencing a traumatic event, such as sexual assault, has been shown to increase difficulties with emotion regulation, and both PTSD symptoms and emotion regulation difficulties have been associated with marijuana-use coping motives.¹
- Prior research has found that emotion dysregulation predicts alcohol involved sexual assault (AISA) in the short term, and alcohol problems increases the risk for AISA in the long term.² This suggests a cyclical relationship in coping drinking motives.
- Together, these findings suggest that both alcohol use and cannabis use could be involved in negative coping with traumatic experiences.
- Using substances to achieve a desire to dissociate is an understudied aspect of substance use and sexual violence. Dissociation is defined as a disruption in the typically integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment.
- Victims of sexual assault may use dissociative responses as a means of avoidant coping. They may use substances as an aid in experiencing dissociative symptoms.³

AIM OF RESEARCH

- Further examine the relationship between alcohol use and sexual assault, as well as examine cannabis use and dissociative tendencies as possible contributing factors.
- Few studies have examined the association between sexual assault-induced posttraumatic stress symptoms and cannabis use. This study seeks to explore that relationship.
- By addressing the question of how often one *desires* to dissociate from their experiences, this study hopes to discover information on dissociation as a means of avoidant coping.
- Additionally, little research has been conducted on how the desire to dissociate is linked with alcohol and cannabis use. This study seeks to address that.

HYPOTHESES

- We predict that experiencing sexual victimization will predict increased desire to dissociate as well as increased alcohol and cannabis use.
- Additionally, we predict that increased desire to dissociate will mediate the relationships between sexual victimization and both alcohol and cannabis use.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

- Only females were included in the study (n = 650, mean age = 19.74, SD = 2.84).
- Participants were from a large Plains State university and a private liberal arts college.
- The sample had representation of freshmen (46.3%), sophomores (19.2%), juniors (16.3%) and seniors (17.1%).
- The sample was majority European American (83.8%). Other ethnicities included African American (2.6%), Hispanic (3.8%), and Asian American (4.8%). Less than 1% identified as Pacific Islander, Native American, or Middle Eastern, and 2.5% identified as "Other."
- All participants were included in the study as long as they self-reported drinking an alcoholic beverage in the past 12 months and passed all embedded validity measures.

PROCEDURE

- Participants took an online survey for course credit in return.

MEASURES

Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT)

- A 10-item self-report questionnaire that assesses aspects of alcohol use including consumption, frequency, and symptoms with higher scores indicating higher alcohol use.

Cannabis Use Disorders Identification Test (CUDIT)

- An 8-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess problematic cannabis use patterns with higher scores indicating more problematic use.

Desire to Dissociate Scale (DDS)

- The DDS was constructed by modifying the items of the *Dissociative Experiences Scale-II* (DES-II). The DES-II is designed to quantify the frequency of dissociative experiences, whereas the DDS aims to address instances where one wishes to experience dissociation.

Sexual Experiences Survey - Females (SES-F)

- An 11-item self-report questionnaire designed to assess various degrees of sexual aggression and victimization experienced by female victims. The questions are categorized in four levels: contact, coercion, attempted rape, and rape. It is scored by summing the individual scores for each category level (1, 2, 3, 4) that they reported a victimization experience in.

ANALYSIS

- All analyses were run in SPSS 23.
- Multiple regression analyses were run to test the ability of age, ethnicity, SES-F, and DDS to predict aspects of alcohol use and cannabis use. Descriptive statistics were also run.
- The ability of DDS to mediate the relationships between SES-F and both AUDIT and CUDIT scores were tested using Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS

RESULTS

Table 1
Mean, standard deviation, and Pearson's correlation matrix for variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	19.7	2.84	—	—	-.118**	—	-.131**	.112**
2. Ethnicity (0=non-white, 1=white)	.839	.368	—	—	.134**	—	-.112**	—
3. AUDIT total	6.90	4.23	-.118**	.134**	—	—	—	.248**
4. CUDIT total	1.79	.746	—	—	—	—	—	.212**
5. DDS total	14.3	5.93	-.131**	-.112**	—	—	—	.126**
6. SES-F total	1.62	2.41	.112**	—	.248**	.212**	.126**	—

* p < .05, **p < .01

Table 2
Regression analysis predicting AUDIT score

	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Constant	8.608	1.602	—	5.374	.000
Age	-.200	.068	-.131	-2.96	.003
Ethnicity	1.658	.532	.136	3.12	.002
SES-F	.458	.079	.256	5.83	.000
DDS	.007	.032	.010	.222	—

Table 3
Regression analysis predicting CUDIT score

	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Constant	.697	.881	—	.792	—
Age	.047	.044	.086	1.074	—
Ethnicity	-.041	.167	-.020	-.246	—
SES-F	.057	.023	.201	2.48	.014
DDS	.007	.011	.050	.618	—

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

SUMMARY

- AUDIT scores were significantly negatively correlated with age and significantly positively correlated with ethnicity and SES-F scores.
- CUDIT scores were significantly positively correlated with SES-F scores.
- DDS scores were significantly negatively correlated with age and ethnicity, and significantly positively correlated with SES-F scores.
- SES-F scores were significantly positively correlated with age, AUDIT scores, CUDIT scores, and DDS scores.
- The multiple regression model for AUDIT produced $R^2 = .101$, $F(4, 481) = 13.44$, $p < .001$. As can be seen in Table 2, ethnicity and SES-F scores had significant positive regression weights, indicating students with higher scores on these scales were expected to have higher AUDIT scores. Age has a significant negative weight, indicating that after accounting for other variables, those older in age were expected to have lower AUDIT scores. DDS did not contribute to the multiple regression model.
- The multiple regression model for CUDIT produced $R^2 = .057$, $F(4, 148) = 13.44$, $p = .069$. As can be seen in Table 3, SES-F scores had a significant positive regression weight, indicating students with higher SES-F scores were expected to have higher CUDIT scores. However, the overall model was not significant ($p = .069$).
- DDS was tested as a mediator of the relationship between SES-F and AUDIT. DDS did not significantly mediate the relationship between these variables.
- DDS was tested as a mediator of the relationship between SES-F and CUDIT. DDS did not significantly mediate the relationship between these variables.

CONCLUSIONS

- These findings suggest that females with more sexual victimization experiences tend to use substances (both alcohol and cannabis) at higher rates and have more of a desire to dissociate than those scoring lower on the SES-F scale.
- Consistent with prior research, the results indicate that there is a relationship between sexual assault and alcohol use.¹
- No significant results were found regarding cannabis use and its relationship to alcohol use and dissociation. This could be due to cannabis use being rarer than alcohol use, as indicated by the large amount of missing data in this portion of the survey.
- Contrary to the study's hypothesized results, no significant results were found regarding the relationship between substance use and the desire to dissociate.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- The observed connection between sexual violence in females and cannabis use suggests that increased research in this area is warranted.
- Increased research investigating the relationship between substance use and the desire to dissociate is warranted, as the present study did not provide much information on this relationship.
- This study only addressed female victims of sexual assault, so more research could be done to include male victims as well.

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