

From Avoidance to Risk-Taking: How Social Anxiety Patterns Shape Alcohol-Related Experiences

Anton J. Fichtenmaier^{1*} & Amanda M. George¹

¹Discipline of Psychology, Faculty of Health, University of Canberra, Australia.

Presenter's email: Anton.Fichtenmaier@canberra.edu.au

11 Kirinari Street, Bruce, Australian Capital Territory, 2617

Introduction:

Those high in social anxiety tend to be more avoidant, especially of risky situations, yet they experience more problems related to their drinking than their non-anxious peers (Fichtenmaier & George, 2026). However, people who are both socially anxious and impulsive, appear to be less avoidant, more risk-prone, and report even greater alcohol-related problems (Kashdan & Hofmann, 2008). These different social anxiety patterns may not just impact the overall level of problems people experience, but also the specific consequences they may be vulnerable to.

Methods:

Patterns of social anxiety and impulsivity were observed among 422 young Australians (aged 18-29) to classify participants as either socially anxious and impulsive, socially anxious and not impulsive, and then those who were non-anxious nor impulsive. Across these three different patterns, Chi-squared analyses highlighted mean-level difference in specific alcohol-related problems (i.e black-outs, drink-driving), while moderated nonlinear factor analysis revealed which items also had differential item functioning.

Key Findings:

Preliminary results suggest those with a pattern of high social anxiety and impulsivity may be more likely to report experiencing specific consequences related to risk-taking (drink driving), dependence (needing a drink after waking), and issues with physical appearance (becoming overweight due to drinking).

Discussions and Conclusions:

Certain problems may be more common for different people depending on the pattern of social anxiety they fall into. Even at the same overall level of alcohol-related problems experienced, some social anxiety patterns responded differently to certain items, highlighting a significant vulnerability to that consequence.

Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations communities:

These early findings highlight potential clinical implications and the need for practitioners to be considerate of these different patterns of social anxiety, which may require different treatment considerations. Especially, as it pertains to treatment of problematic alcohol use and specific consequences certain people may be prone to.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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