

The bright side of indulgence

When disinhibited consumption fosters problem solving and creativity

Bob M. Fennis

Yannick Joye

University of Groningen

Luk Warlop

KU Leuven/BI Oslo

Abstract:

Indulgent or disinhibited consumption of hedonic foods and beverages such as sugary and fatty snacks or alcohol has been blamed as one of society's root evils, promoting obesity, risk behavior and substance abuse, which in turn adversely affects health and well-being. And so it seems plausible to put effort in avoiding indulgence and in promoting moderation. Yet, for some, disinhibited consumption has been hailed as a pathway to desirable outcomes. For example, artists such as (rock) musicians or painters frequently claim that indulging in drug use or alcohol consumption has helped in bringing about their best songs and most creative work. Is there any truth to these claims? Is there a bright side of indulgence that can yield such positive outcomes?

The results of two (field) experiments suggests an affirmative answer to these questions, but—in keeping with the example above—not for everyone. More specifically, in line with earlier work on disinhibition (cf. Hirsch et al., 2011) and popular belief, our studies tested and found support for the hypothesis that disinhibition, induced by indulging in alcohol consumption “liberates” the person of situational constraints, thus revealing “the true self”. Hence, under conditions of alcohol consumption and *ceteris paribus* the impact of dispositional factors on behavior increases, which could have negative, but also positive consequences. In the present work we focused on the latter case and examined the potential for enhanced problem solving and creativity.

Experiment 1 showed that the dispositional factor of need for cognition had a more pronounced impact on problem solving when participants had consumed alcohol, compared to when they had not. Under these conditions, need for cognition positively affected performance on a series of math problems. Experiment 2 extended these findings by focusing on creativity and found that particularly when participants were reminded of disinhibited consumption, dispositional openness to experience promoted creativity when participants had consumed alcohol. In sum, these findings suggest a bright side of indulgence, showing the potential of disinhibited consumption to promote positive outcomes.