

BRIEF REPORT: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AMONGST IDENTIFIED ALCOHOLICS

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Abstract

The aim of the study was thus to explore the perceptions and experiences of students related to their alcohol use at emerging tertiary institutions in South Africa. A qualitative approach utilising an exploratory phenomenological design was utilised. The research used a purposive sample of 10 students who attended a counselling clinic, because of their alcohol use. This consisted of 6 males and 4 females between the ages of 18 and 22 years. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data. Three themes arose naturally out of the data namely: 1) I don't drink too much; 2) Experiences of drinking alcohol and 3) People should 'mind their own business'. Findings included that both male and female students in the sample often drank alcohol to excess but seemed unaware of the negative implications of doing so in terms of both their academic and social lives. Moreover, some students had sexual encounters when under the influence and did not use protection making them vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Additionally, some of the sample had negative family interactions. It seemed that students generally drank to boost their self-esteem. Recommendations included ongoing programmes at the university to inform students about the effects of alcohol on their health and wellbeing.

Keywords: alcohol use and abuse, experiences, perceptions, self-esteem, wellbeing

1. INTRODUCTION

This study was part of a series of investigations which researched the use of alcohol amongst students at emerging, previously called disadvantaged, universities in South Africa. These include a study by Nekgotha, Nel and Govender (2020) which found that students mostly drank to moderation however, some drank more heavily and self-reported that sometimes after a night of drinking they did not remember their actions or behaviour. Govender, Nel and Mogotsi (2015) found that students reported behaviours such as drink driving and being involved in fights whilst under the influence. Moreover, Govender, Nel and Sibuyi (2017) reported that students were found to use and/or abuse alcohol because they are at an age where they want to experiment with substances. They also found that some students drank because of financial problems and familial challenges. Other findings included that some students are stressed because of their high workload and negative emotional events such as break-ups with romantic partners. Students also reported that drinking alcohol enables them to connect more easily with their peers (Murphy & Brown 2018).

There is no doubt that studying at tertiary institutions can be extremely stressful as there are many challenges and students often drink to overcome their frustration and isolation (Kumar & Bhukar 2013). It has been established that the young use alcohol for many recreational activities as well as to combat any educational challenges (Chikere & Mayowa 2011). This is because drinking of alcohol is a comparatively cheap way of de-stressing (Govender et al. 2017). According to Mogotsi (2015), students also use alcohol to repress any inhibitions they might have for instance, when going out to dances or talking to girls. This, the author suggests, also makes them vulnerable to making poor decisions which they might regret for instance, having sexual relationships without protection making them vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as gonorrhea, and HIV.

It is also true that students, especially first entering ones, must move from a school to a tertiary environment where things are not as ordered and thus face many academic challenges (Jeyagowri & Ilankumaran 2018). This can make them stressed and lead them into for instance, substance use and abuse (Bendonlos, Noonan, & Wells 2013). It must also be noted that young people might have poor knowledge about the overuse of alcohol and its debilitating effects (Chikere & Mayowa 2011).

The aim of the study was thus to explore the perceptions and experiences of students related to their alcohol use at emerging tertiary institutions in South Africa. Two research questions arose out of the aim: 1. What are student perceptions of their alcohol use? and 2. What are the experiences of students in terms of their alcohol use?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research design

A qualitative research approach using an exploratory phenomenological research design was utilised in this research.

2.2. Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in the study. Ten participants were drawn from a sample of students who attended a counselling clinic at a university campus regarding their use and abuse of alcohol. In this regard a notice detailing the study was put up in the clinic and interested students were asked to contact the researchers. The first 10 students who contacted the researchers were enrolled into the study. The sample comprised of 6 males and 4 females between the ages of 18 and 22 years.

2.3. Materials

A semi-structured interview protocol was constructed out of a reading of the literature. Questions such as “Can you tell me why you drink alcohol?” and “In your experience, does your alcohol drinking affect your family in any way?” Semi-structured interviews were conducted as they allow each participant to share their experience and perceptions of their challenges with the researcher in their own words (Cresswell & Creswell 2017).

2.4 Methods

2.4.1. Data collection

The researchers scheduled appointments with the participants and conducted a semi-structured interview with each of them. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each with 5 minutes for rapport building and 5 minutes, at the end of the interview for debriefing. The interviews were conducted at the clinic in a quiet room so that the participants could feel comfortable. Demographic data were collected first to help participants get used to being interviewed. This was followed by more the more challenging questions relating to their experiences of alcohol use and abuse.

During the procedure of collecting data the researchers used an audio-recorder with permission from each participant. The researchers also took field notes which noted down each participants observed behaviour. The audio recordings were all transcribed within 24 hours of each interview.

2.4.2. Data analysis

According to Anderson (2010), analysis of large chunks of qualitative data is a procedure which looks at ordering it and then extracting in-depth meanings out of it. It is iterative and interpretive. In this research, thematic analysis (TA) was used to search for patterns and themes in the data set. The following steps according to Braun and Clark (2012) were used in this regard: 1) Data familiarisation, in this step the researchers immersed themselves in the transcripts and read them until they were very familiar with them. They also read their field notes, so they were completely familiar with the behavioural observations they made about each participant. The researchers wrote down anything for instance, that was relevant to the research questions. 2) Generating codes, in this process the researchers found thought-provoking responses throughout the data set. These helped summarise or describe the data in terms of the lived-experiences of the participants. 3) The search for themes. This step in the process included sifting through the various codes and putting them into initial themes. These emerged out of the data and were related to important notions aligned to the research questions. 4) Initial theme review, here the generated themes were looked at closely to see if they were coherent. In this process the researchers rejected some codes within a theme and moved them into another theme which was more

appropriate. 5) Naming the themes, in this phase the themes that were identified through an in-depth analysis to ensure that it had a specific focus. However, it must be noted that there may be some overlap between themes owing to the nature of the phenomena. The researchers also ensured that the themes matched the content of the participants responses and accurately identified participants meanings. 6) Complete the research report. The researchers did this by completing both a report and an article out of the findings.

2.4.3. *Quality criteria*

Transferability was considered by the researchers giving an account of the selection process. Credibility was established through the researchers continual reflections on every step in the research process. Dependability was assured as participants were asked to verify the transcripts of their interviews. Bias was accounted for by bracketing which was used to ensure that the researchers put aside any ideas they had about participants in terms of their drinking habits. They had meetings to discuss this and reflect on any bias they might have so they could gain insight into their own thoughts and prejudices. They did this so that they could present a balanced view of the participants meanings.

2.4.4. *Ethics*

All ethical procedures for instance, informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity were followed in the research process. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time with no penalties as this was their right. The participants were being given counselling for their issues related to alcohol abuse however, they were told if they felt upset in anyway after the interviews further sessions could be provided.

3. RESULTS

The following themes emerged out of an analysis of the data. These were 1). I don't drink too much. 2). Experiences of drinking and 3). People should mind their own business. To ensure that confidentiality was not breached students were numbered 1 – 10 so that they remained anonymous.

3.1. *Theme 1: I don't drink too much*

In this research students perceived that they did not drink to excess as is seen in the following responses.

"You know, I only drink 3 or 4 times a week and over weekends just to have fun and to chill. I don't drink more than 7 or 8 beers and sometimes I have a couple of shots. Some people drink much more so I don't think that is excessive. I go to counselling because one of my lecturers said I was drunk at a lecture so I had to go otherwise I could have got a disciplinary." **Participant 3 male – 19 years.**

"No, because I only drink beer in the evenings (probing, "How often?"). Well, every night usually and I do go out over weekends. However, I just drink a few maybe 4 or 5 and sometimes I don't finish the last glass." **Participant 9 male – 18 years.**

"I only drink when my friends come over. Yes, they come over a few times a week and at weekends, but this is normal. I mean I don't have a problem with that because we (students) need to relax as the work is a lot and this makes us stressed." **Participant 7 male – 20 years.**

"What is drinking a lot? All my friends and I drink. We like a couple of bottles, or a box, of wine in the evening amongst us. (Probing: Amongst how many?) That depends, it can be 3 or more of us, I don't know who will pitch up – they bring their own drink and we put it together. Sometimes, we drink vodka or brandy and coke." **Participant 1 female – 18 years.**

"Ya, I mean it is normal to drink to relieve our stress and any other problems we might have...you know with our boys (laughs).. It is hard at school (university). I drink beer, wine, and sometimes other things like vodka. I drink on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays not in the week. I suppose it can be around 10 drinks or more – depending on whether I can afford it or if my boyfriend can pay for it." **Participant 4 female – 21 years.**

It is apparent that both male and female students in this research reported to drinking alcohol because of peer influence and to relieve stressors related to their academic work and social and romantic lives. This supports findings in previous research (Govender et al. 2017; Kumar and Bhukar 2013; Mogotsi et al. 2015). They appear to think that they do not drink too much however their responses contradict this perception perhaps because they lack knowledge about what is ‘too much’ alcohol consumption (Chikere & Mayowa, 2011).

3.2. Experiences of drinking alcohol

The following responses from participants in the research reflects their experiences when they have been drinking alcohol.

“Alcohol is not so bad when I drink I feel free, and nothing worries me I feel good. You know sometimes I feel really bad the next morning and I sometimes don’t go to class (lectures) but I catch up...mostly. I have failed a couple of tests, but my average is okay, and I will learn hard for the next ones.” **Participant 5 female – 22 years.**

“Ya, I like the feeling of being happy when I drink though sometimes I can’t remember everything that happens. The worst is if I get sick – that’s not nice but luckily that only happens sometimes and when I mix too many drinks. I like to dance and drink it is great – I meet boys and we have fun. (Probing: Do you ever go home with these boys?) Do you mean, do I have sex with them? Yes (laughs). (Probing: Are you always careful, as in do you use protection?). Mostly, but sometimes no we just must get it on right there (laughs again). I mean all the boys are clean.” **Participant 10 female – 18 years.**

“I drink with my friends ‘cos they do, I don’t want to be left out anyway I enjoy it...it makes me popular with the ladies (laughs). Ya, you see we all must drink when we want to meet a girl, so we don’t get shy.” **Participant 2 male – 20 years.**

“I like to forget my problems with my work (academic) and sometimes it is easy to meet girls if you are a bit drunk...not too drunk then they don’t want to know...just enough to be funny and friendly.” **Participant 8 male – 19 years.**

“Ya, it is great but the next morning it isn’t so great! You know what they say if you have another drink then you feel okay – I often do that.... of course, I do miss some classes but that isn’t a problem as I can always get notes. I have missed a couple of practical classes which is a problem, but I managed to get a letter from the clinic to say I had to go to a session which meant I didn’t get into trouble, but my marks did go down too much. That’s why I went to the clinic my friends told me to just to act sad and as if I had a problem and then you can get letters excusing you from class (laughs)...a few of us do that.” **Participant 9 male - 18 years.**

The experiences of the students in the sample are underpinned by previous research for instance, using alcohol to relax inhibitions to make social progress at functions and to meet girls (Mogotsi 2015). They also report problems with their academic work such as not going to class or practical’s which leads to overall poorer academic performance. This is supported by findings by other research investigations (Chikere & Mayowa 2011). They also self-reported behaviours which could be considered irresponsible or hasty decisions such as having unprotected sex. This is a worrying finding which is echoed in other research findings (Mogotsi 2015). One participant noted that he could not remember everything that happened the night before which might be suggestive of an alcohol induced blackout. This was found in previous research by Nekgotha et al. (2020).

3.3. Theme 3: People should ‘mind their own business’

This theme suggests that participants do not think people should be concerned about their drinking and should literally ‘mind their own business.’ The following participants responses underpin this theme.

“I think people should mind their own business. My girlfriend is always nagging at me telling me I drink too much...the more she goes on the more I drink...sometimes to annoy her ‘cos she goes away and leaves me with my friends. If I want sex I pick up another girl and don’t tell her my real name.” **Participant 9 male – 18 years.**

'My parents say they're worried about how much I drink. I don't take any notice as my father drinks a lot...often. My mother and him say but it is okay for a man to do that. I mean, no I don't think they can say that. If they go on too much I tell my father then he must stop drinking and then there is a big argument and I leave the house and sleep at my friends place. Next year I am going to try and get into a residence so I can do what I like.' **Participant 10 female – 18 years.**

"I don't listen to others; I was angry with my lecturer for calling me drunk in class but that worked to my advantage, but I didn't appreciate it. He goes to taverns my friends and I see him so he should just keep quiet. I have seen him there late in the evenings so he should what is it (the researcher gives him the saying) 'practice what he preaches.' **Participant 3 male – 19 years.**

"My Gogo (Granny) she says that I must go to church and find God so that I won't drink. She knows I do because I went to her house once when I was drunk, and my parents threw me out. She let me in but now she just goes on and on when she sees me – I don't visit her much anymore as she should know when to keep quiet. Anyway, we all drink ...I mean I don't know any one at varsity who doesn't." **Participant 2 male – 20 years.**

"Some of my friends who don't drink tell me that I must stop as I have got a bad reputation for having sex with boys when I'm drunk. They are just jealous, and I'm not going to listen to them because I have many more friends than they do." **Participant 4 female – 21 years.**

This points to the students in the sample not understanding the negatives in alcohol abuse. A finding which is supported in research by Chikere and Mayowa (2011) which is linked to their often, irresponsible actions when under the influence. This finding is supported by results from research by Mogotsi (2015). Social connectedness to peers is another rationale for student drinking in this study which is underpinned by findings from Brown and Murphy (2018). Students are also likely to take decisions which could have a negative impact on their health such as having unprotected sexual encounters (Mogotsi 2015). Lack of bonding with parents and/or grandparents and familial arguments also occur which is also noted by Elkins (2020).

4. DISCUSSION

The results suggest that male and female students in the sample often used alcohol in excessive amounts but were unaware of this. It is possible, that they were not aware of the negative impact that this could have on their general health and wellbeing. They use alcohol to relax and relieve stress but as they reported quite negative experiences for instance, missing lectures and practicals which it is likely, in the medium to long-term to have a negative impact on their academic future and ultimately cause them more stress. One student reported to not remembering his actions the morning after drinking to excess while others reported making rash decisions when under the influence of alcohol such as 'picking up' people for sex and having unprotected sex. This could lead to them becoming infected with STI's such as chlamydia and HIV which are prevalent in South Africa. Results suggest that the samples drinking habits also lead to lack of positive familial interactions and poor bonding between them and their parents/grandparents and in some instances, peers who do not drink. Overall findings also suggest that the students drink to enhance their self-confidence so that they are more acceptable to peers and romantic partners. The students in this study do not seem to be aware of the negative long-term ramifications of alcohol use in both their personal and academic lives.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the research support previous studies indicating that students abuse alcohol with negative consequences. They do not, or choose not, to understand the negative health and academic implications of drinking large amounts of alcohol in their pursuit of stress relief. Both males and females who participated in the research had similar perceptions about their drinking and reported comparable experiences. It is recommended that emerging universities in South Africa ensure that information regarding alcohol use is disseminated to students during their orientation and that mandatory workshops

are provided on a twice-yearly basis thereafter. This could be in lecture periods or workshops. Tertiary institutions websites should also have information on the subject and provide a drop-down menu on for instance, where to get help, information on alcohol use and the dangers of alcohol use.

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