

Exploring the factors and effects of alcohol abuse on the behaviour of university female students at one South African University Campus

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine the factors and effects of alcohol abuse on the behaviour of female students at one South African university campus, Eastern Cape Province. This paper is underpinned by (1) alcohol myopia theory which is based on the notion that alcohol intoxication restricts information processing and (2) social exchange theory which posits that females tend to enter into sexual relationships characterized by benefits. In a qualitative study conducted, twelve Xhosa-speaking respondents, aged 18 to 24 years, were interviewed. Ethics were adhered to throughout the research process. The following themes were identified, namely; transactional sex, gender- based violence, peer-pressure, financial support, stigma and discrimination, pregnancy and abortion. The recommendations propose that the universities should have partnership with the Police Services in protecting the human rights of students and provide more residents for female students to curb cohabitation.

Keywords: Abortion, Drugs, Sexual promiscuity, Poverty, Violence,

1. Introduction

Epidemiological studies in the United Kingdom and United States of America have proven that alcohol abuse among university female students continue to rise to unprecedented levels (Eaton, Kann, Kinchen, Shanklin, Flint, Hawkins, & Whittle, 2012; Kaysen, Atkins, Simpson, Stappenbeck, Blayney, Lee, & Larimer, 2014). Given the multiplicity of factors influencing university female students to abuse alcohol, Menon, Kusanthan and Mwaba (2016) found that it may be due to boredom, relief of pressure, conformity motives and the influence of mass media as well as how the advertising companies portray females in promoting alcohol. The phenomenon of alcohol abuse among university female students is also common even in Sub-Saharan countries. In Uganda, at Mbarara University, Straftstrom and Agardh (2013) found that heavy drinking is prevalent during celebrations and the university management have noticed that alcohol consumption leads to a decline academic progress, rape, violence and mental health problems. Coupled with the use of illicit drugs such as marijuana, waterpipe, mandrax and/or heroine (Peltzer, & Ramlagan 2015) such a group is presumed to be at heightened risk for being physically

assaulted, risky sexual behaviour including HIV/AIDS, owing to disinhibition (Nichter, Carkoglu, & Lloyd-Richardson, 2010).

By risky sexual behaviour, Deckman and DeWall (2011) described it as a situation when an individual would practice unsafe sex with multiple partners and use of condoms infrequently, particularly under the influence of alcohol abuse. It is important to note that risk-sexual behaviour can also be understood as a choice that provides an element of hope for female students in vulnerable positions (Rau, Radloff, Coetzee, Nardi, Smit & Matebesi, 2014). For example, Shefer, Clowes and Vergnani (2012) found that female students that are in heterosexual relationships with older men (i.e. intergenerational relationships) exchange sex for material benefits such as money to pay for their tuition, photocopies or books, clothes and to gain social status among their peers.

Since for most first- year female students below age 20 it is still a transitional period from adolescence to adulthood (Kalat, 2014) and have never lived independently before except for those from boarding schools, majority tend to be influenced by deviant peers and engage in alcohol abuse because the supervision rendered by matrons at the residence is minimal (Fincham Needham, & Smit, 2015). Peers may also arrange hook-ups, in which female students when become intoxicated enter into casual or non- committed sexual intercourse with “friends with benefits” (FWB) or someone they have sexual feelings towards (Bachtel 2013). There is general tendency subsequent to such hook-ups where majority of university female students report feeling more regret more than their FWB and justify their contextual vulnerability for hook-ups (Fisher, Worth, Garcia, & Meredith, 2012).

However, it is not poverty that drives female students to alcohol as in the study conducted at the University of Venda, Limpopo Province, South Africa, Kyei and Ramagoma’s (2013) findings revealed that peer pressure and the allowance from affluent parents contributed to female students’ substance abuse and poor lecture attendance. Similarly, Young and De Klerk (2012) found that at Rhodes University, which is located in Grahamstown, one of the affluent towns in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, most of the female students who consumed alcohol had financial means. To some extreme, they also engage in cohabitation. Among Nigerian undergraduate students, Ugoji (2011) found that cohabitation is promoted by both all students who show positive attitudes of premarital sex and abuse alcohol. The feminist theory asserts that due to power imbalances within the patriarchal societies, the issue of intimate partner violence is common during cohabitation (Zacarias, Macassa, Svanstrom, Soares, & Antai, 2012) as Barrick, Krebs and Linquist (2013) reported that university female students with history of childhood physical abuse endured gender-based violence and prone to unsafe sexual practices. For example, Desta and Regasa (2011) found that even when the condoms have broken or never used, a disproportionate number of this cohort lack knowledge to reduce the incidences of unintended pregnancy by drinking the Emergency Contraceptive Pills (ECPs) or so called “morning-after-pill”, the following day. In this regard, the Department of Higher Education should act in terms of putting in place effective programmes to curb risk sexual behaviour since the International Labour Organization (2001) predicted that by year 2020, the labour force will be 10-22 percent smaller in countries with higher prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

Contrary to the bleak picture cited above, a factor that has been shown to influence university female students’ health behaviour is self-efficacy, a multi-dimensional construct by Albert Bandura (2001) who pioneered social learning theory. Self- efficacy is considered as a dynamic process that motivates an individual to have a sense of competence to achieve set goals and to resist risk- sexual behaviour (Fincham, Roomaney, & Kagee, 2015). Unlike the 31 percent

medical female students in their sixth year of study at the University of Free- State, South Africa, who reported alcohol abuse for repeating one or more academic years (Marais, Calitz, Rataemane, & Joubert 2015), Saadat, Ghasemzadeh and Soleimani (2012) found that female students who displayed positive self-efficacy and positive mental health attributed their ability to resist peer influence and risky sexual behaviour to religious activities and sports.

Globally, research studies which investigated the negative outcomes of alcohol abuse among university female students in Australia (Glichrist, Magee, Smith, & Jones, 2012) and New-Zealand (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008) were of quantitative nature and from affluent countries. However, there has been little research examining alcohol abuse among university female students in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The current study is relevant because it is qualitative in approach and conducted among IsiXhosa speaking female students, in one university located in rural areas of the Eastern Cape, Nkonkobe Municipality. Against this background, this research study seeks to answer the following questions: (i) Which factors are associated with university female students' alcohol abuse? and (ii) What are the consequences of alcohol abuse among university female students?

2. Theoretical Framework

Through the lens of alcohol myopia theory by Josephs and Steele (1990) which asserted that alcohol consumption impairs the cognitive functioning (that is, encoding, storage and retrieval of learned information) and causes disinhibition in an individual to act impulsively, university female students may have poor judgement to resist sexual advances made to them by male counterparts. On the other hand, social exchange theory pioneered by Homans (1958) and Emmerson (1976) posited that female students are most likely to sustain sexual relationships provided that the benefits outweigh the demands. Additionally, when this group of students are involved in sexual relationships characterized by social exchange theory and preferably "sugar daddies" or *Mudhara* in Shona language (Masvawure, 2010) financial provisions are presumed to strengthen the relationship, thus increases trust, liking, and intimate feelings for couples. Conversely, Taukeni (2015) contended that female students may find themselves being passive to male dominance and failing to negotiate safe sex.

3. Method

3.1 Design

An explorative, inductive, qualitative research was employed in this study for it provides the researchers an opportunity to conduct the focus groups as form of design. Rubin and Babbie (2015) argued that qualitative research methods are more likely to tap the deeper meaning of particular human experience, and generate new theory through the open-ended questionnaires and interviews. The researchers described the respondents' experiences according to the African context of the university which is situated in a rural setting, using axial, selective and open coding. By open coding, it is the broken down of words and phrases, comparing and categorizing them (Babbie, 2013) while axial coding refers to making connections between categories or themes and in selective coding the core categories are selected and related for and confirmation and finally explained (Creswell, 2013).

3.2 Sampling and Sample

A non-probability sampling procedure was employed using snowball technique. In snowball sampling, Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2015) suggested that the researchers approach a few individuals from the population, who later act as informants to recruit other members from the same population for inclusion in the sample. As suggested by Bryman (2013) the respondents shared the same characteristics because they drink alcohol. The sample for this study comprised of twelve Xhosa-speaking female respondents, aged 18 to 24 years, from the University of Fort Hare (Alice Campus) Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. All the respondents were undergraduate students- 3 (Bachelor of Social Sciences), 5 (Bachelor of Agricultural Science) and 4 (Bachelor of Education).

4. Trustworthiness

To establish the rigor of the research study, four constructs by Lincoln and Guba (2000) were adopted, namely credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. For credibility, all the respondents were asked the same questions during the focus group discussion until there was data saturation (prolonged engagement). Dependability was accomplished through a dense description of the qualitative approach to conduct the study and data which was organised into themes following the verbatim transcriptions, findings and the recommendations have been made. With regard to confirmability the audit trail was used for the verbatim descriptions and themes identification (Krefting, 1991). Finally, transferability as suggested by de Vos, Delpont, Fouché, & Strydom (2011) a literature control was done after data-collection where similar findings of previous studies were reported

5. Ethical considerations

This study took place in September 2014 in the Psychology Department following the permission granted by the Ethical Committee of the University of Fort Hare. To protect the human dignity of the respondents who participated voluntarily in this study, the researchers adhered to the ethical principles during data collection. The respondents were asked to give their informed consent prior engaging them to the focus group interviews and for tape-recording the discussion. Furthermore, the respondents were guaranteed of their privacy and anonymity as the study was conducted on a weekend. Anonymity was maintained by giving pseudonyms to respondents as a form of identification during the interview. The transcriptions were confirmed after the researchers referred back to a few respondents to validate the transcriptions. Their rights to confidentiality were ensured by destroying the audio-tapes after the research.

6. Results

The following themes were identified, namely; transactional sex, gender- based violence, peer-pressure, financial support, stigma and discrimination, pregnancy and abortion.

6.1 Transactional sex

With respect to the question “Have you ever been given gifts (e.g. money, airtime, clothes etc.) by someone who wanted to engage in sexually practices with you? Majority of participants expressed concern that males give those gifts for sexually intercourse. For example, they were cited as follows:

“Yes, at one point an older guy who wanted to date me, used to buy me things in thoughts of or would sleep with him”. [Bachelor of Agriculture, Aged 22]

“Yes, as a female I have a lot of gifts from males. Mostly from older males this is because they believe in buying their way into our legs”. [Bachelor of Education, Aged 20]

“Many times and that cost me a lot in such a way that I lost my virginity here in University through guys who gave me gifts and I had sex with them because I had used their money”. [Bachelor of Social Sciences, Aged 19]

6.2 Peer-pressure

There was a strong affirmation among the respondents that peer influence led them to ill-informed choices. They cited that peer-pressure is a factor that causes them to engage in substance abuse and risky sexual practices.

“Poverty is the common factor but there are other factors such as loneliness, peer pressure and the need to be with someone whom loves you” [Bachelor of Agriculture, Aged 22]

“Peer pressure has a lot of influence and especially at Fort Hare because we are not under our parent’s guidance”. [Bachelor of Social Sciences, Aged 19]

“Peer-pressure has a huge impact, simple because we as female students we believe a lot to our friends than to our morals and culture.” [Bachelor of Education, Aged 18]

“When you not doing what others are doing, like going to bashes/parties you feel out of space. When you go there and you are not drinking you look like a loser so you decide to belong and you drink.” [Bachelor of Agricultural Sciences, Aged 21]

6.3 Financial support

This theme emerged because majority of respondents indicated that their multiple sexual partners help them to meet financial need and boost their self-esteem. For example they expressed the following:

“I think it is because different men provide different things because sometimes they see people having a man for financial support, love and transport”. [Bachelor of Agricultural Sciences, Aged 21]

“Students are involved in multiple sexual relationships because according to them when involved with one person they do not get the satisfaction of the things they want. This would mean that one person may be for transport, the other for money, etc”. [Bachelor of Social Sciences Aged 18]

“They have their loved ones, have those to provide money, airtime and hair also pay off their accounts and all of them they want sex in return”. [Bachelor of Social Sciences, Aged 19]

“Firstly it is all about multiple reasons, some it is financial purpose, sexual satisfaction, but here it also involves being seen looking smart by your friends. We all have different reasons.” [Bachelor of Education, Aged 22]

6.4 Gender- based violence

The second theme relates to gender-based violence. When asked to explain the challenges accompanied by alcohol abuse, majority of respondents indicated that they experienced threats and for fear of reprisal, they could not resist men who raped them.

“When a female is drunk or high on drugs abuse she cannot defend herself so males take advantage of her knowing that she won’t remember. Upon opening my room from Disco late at night, these two guys pushed me in with knives and raped me” [Bachelor of Education, Aged 18]

“In my case, this guy started by buying me alcohol at the welcome-bash and we took pictures. As time went by, he became aggressive and felt insecure when I danced with other guys. I guess it was around 1am when insisted that we go outside, that is where he demanded sex from me ” [Bachelor of Agricultural Sciences, Aged 20]

6.5 Stigma and discrimination

With respect to the question “On what conditions do female students report sexual abuse to the authority figures (e.g. SRC, SAPS, Dean of students)”, majority of respondents expressed concern that they are afraid of reporting sexual abuse due to stigma and discrimination. For example, they were cited as follows:

“Usually we don’t because of the stigma associated with being raped but if our families advise us to report this, we do that.” [Bachelor of Agricultural Science, Aged 23]

“Less chances, because it is a shame for a female raped in a bash drunk so they keep quiet about it. Moreover it becomes difficult when you are known that you have been cohabiting” [Bachelor of Social Sciences, Aged 20]

“When it’s bad enough and they need hospitalisation or when other students notice and feel ashamed.” [Bachelor of Social Sciences, Aged 19]

6.6 Pregnancy

With respect to the question: “What are the consequences of alcohol abuse among university female students”? Two respondents pursuing Bachelor of Agricultural Sciences and one Bachelor of Education expressed the following;

“As we speak I am pregnant with a married man and this depresses me as I can’t concentrate” [Bachelor of Agricultural Sciences, Aged 24]

“I do not know who the father of my child will be as a result of hook-ups and alcohol. I have not seen my menstruation in the last two months” [Bachelor of Agricultural Sciences, Aged 21]

Furthermore, a Bachelor of Education student, aged 18 expressed that the high rate of pregnancy on campus is attributable to social network. *“You end up not knowing who might have impregnated you because we get blind dates from Fort Hare page especially those who live in single rooms.”*

6.7 Abortion

Closely linked to pregnancy, the respondents expressed mixed views regarding abortion and keeping the baby. For example, the 21 year –old student pursuing Bachelor of Agricultural Science cited the following: *“My parents are respected people in the church, so if I am pregnant I will abort the baby because they have been keeping me away from boys since I was still a child”*. However, three respondents from Social Sciences indicated that though it may be painful not to know who the father would be, abortion involves risks. They cited;

“Abortion may lead to regrets in the long run especially when a person struggles to conceive.” [Age 19]

“Termination of pregnancy requires mental strength because if you are not emotionally mature, you won’t cope academically and you will lack sleep and never become the person you used to be because of guilt”[Age 20

7. Discussion

From the findings it is clear that majority of university female students that abuse alcohol, are economically vulnerable, have unclear sexual values and impaired self-esteem. Once they relocate from their home villages to pursue education at the institutions of higher learning, they abandon the sexual values which were transmitted to them by adults and adopt a new culture of being unguided. They demonstrated patterns of being susceptible to rape because they party until it is late without organizing transport for their safety. In this regard, they demonstrated a lack in making informed choices and decisions with respect to health sexual behaviour. Furthermore, because Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common STI among young women between 20 to 24 years of age and is responsible for cervical cancer (Centre for Disease and Prevention, 2012), female respondents may be at heightened risk to contract it while they exchange sex for money with multiple sexual partners. This study corresponds with the findings by Carvic (2011) among female students from the University of Botswana where a disproportionate number of pregnancies, STIs and disrupted education were reported by students from rural areas and poor financial backgrounds.

Furthermore, majority of the respondents reported to conform to peers that encouraged them to go to the night clubs and have sexual partners. These findings align with the study by Todd and Mullan (2011) who found that most female students who experience university life for the first time tend to go to the parties, make friends and learn to abuse alcohol. For fear of rejection and loneliness, they tend to conform and become sociable and extroverts (e.g. dancing with male counterparts at the party). This study also found that there is a strong evidence that when female students have abused alcohol they are most likely to act invincibly and risk their lives by being alone at night when leaving the entertainment settings. Considering the report released by Higher Education HIV and AIDS Programme (HEAIDS) (2010) that the HIV prevalence among black students was 8.4 percent at four universities in the Eastern Cape Province, namely; University of Fort Hare, Walter Sisulu University, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and Rhodes University, it is implausible to imagine victory over HIV transmission.

For ethical reasons, the respondents were never probed into sharing whether safe sex was practised while being sexually coerced because it is very rare in gang-rape to use condoms. Theoretically, it is impossible that they may not have experienced rape trauma syndrome. Rape trauma syndrome (RTS) is a term coined by Burgess and Holmstrom (1979) which describes the effects of rape. In the acute phase, these scholars claimed that most victims avoid being in the place where rape took place and may experience mood swings, difficulties with sleeping and recurrent nightmares.

Regarding stigma and discrimination, the respondents who reported rape, gender based-violence and pregnancies as a result of alcohol abuse indicated that the social consequences could be extreme in the sense that their parents may feel that they have been dishonoured and were not good role models. Thus, they preferred not to report their ordeal to the police.

Finally, the current study found that some university female students have abandoned the moral teachings from parents by being involved in risk-taking behaviours, hence they contemplated termination of pregnancy. It is evident that the respondents had little knowledge about contraceptives because if they were on intra uterine device and Norplant they would have prevented the unwanted pregnancies even though they are not 100 percent safe. No wonder at Muhimbili and Dar es Salaam universities in Tanzania, Somba, Mbonile, Obure and Mahande (2014) found the female students who have unwanted pregnancies ended up performing abortions. Additionally, some respondents suggested that pregnancies should not be terminated as they bear psychological effects. Consistent with these findings, Kheswa and Takatshana (2014) found that female students who performed abortion at the University of Fort Hare, reported grief, emotional emptiness and feelings of hopelessness every time they see mothers with their babies.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the scourge of HIV/AIDS, unintended pregnancies and poor academic performance of female students at the universities are mostly fuelled by alcohol abuse. This research study found that female students who use alcohol have a weak internal locus of control and act irrationally in the presence of peers without realizing the dangers of blind dates or hookups. Although the study focused on the effects that alcohol abuse has on the behaviour among university female students, not all the respondents dated older men. Also, this study has some limitations as the location in which the research took place, race, ethnic group as well as the year of study of the respondents might have an impact on the findings. Since the voice of men lacks in this study, it is thus recommended to understand the dynamics in heterosexual relationships within the context of university life.

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