

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## An explorative study on students' perceptions of reckless alcohol consumption at a university of technology

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### ABSTRACT

Alcohol consumption is a well-known public health problem, particularly among university students. Students experience many challenges in life that may lead them to consume alcohol. The aim of this study was to explore student's perceptions of reckless alcohol consumption at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study utilised a qualitative and exploratory design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 selected students using convenience sampling. The findings of this study revealed that reckless alcohol consumption among students is challenging and that there are many contributing factors leading to alcohol consumption. The recommendations sourced from participants indicate that the issue of reckless alcohol consumption must be addressed by the university through awareness campaigns, initiating support groups for students struggling with reckless alcohol consumption, and strengthening policies related to substance abuse.

### KEYWORDS

*Alcohol consumption, qualitative research, university students*

### Introduction

Alcohol consumption is a public health concern and a leading cause of global suffering, including health issues and social effects (Davoren et al., 2016). Alcohol contributes to many diseases and injuries associated with various health conditions (Mekonen et al., 2017). Chekole (2020) argued that despite the adverse health and social issues related to alcohol use, it is one of the most common risky behaviours among university students. Zadarko-Domaradzka et al. (2018) revealed that extreme alcohol consumption is typical among university students worldwide. It is well established that university students are at an age at which they can make personal choices that influence their behaviours (Chu et al., 2016). However, Aboagye et al. (2021) and Olashore et al. (2018) argue that university students may use alcohol as a coping strategy in dealing with stressful events.

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Several factors contribute to increased alcohol consumption (Sudhinaraset et al., 2015). Davoren et al. (2016) indicate that, in most cases, alcohol consumption by students is influenced by changes in lifestyle, lack of parental support and stress. Mitchell et al. (2022) argue that parents have a range of mechanisms to reduce alcohol consumption risk and to balance the harms of alcohol use among young people. Biramo and Philipos (2016) echo these sentiments and indicate that peers can influence each other in forming certain behaviours, among which is alcohol consumption. Peer pressure has been reported to be a significant contributing factor to alcohol use by university students (Calhoun et al., 2018; Teffera, 2018).

Various researchers have indicated that psychological stress is associated with alcohol consumption and abuse among young people, including university students (Balogun, 2014; Risi et al., 2019; Sallie et al. 2020). However, Becker (2012) noted a complex relationship between alcohol consumption and stress. He further stated that alcohol reduces anxiety and relieves stress (Becker, 2012). Castaño-Perez and Calderon-Vallejo (2014) echo these sentiments and argue that alcohol abuse could exacerbate existing social and emotional stressors and damage individuals, contribute to accidents and physical altercations, and negatively impact academic retention. Of particular concern in this study was the reckless alcohol consumption among university students. The concept, reckless alcohol consumption, refers to a pattern of drinking that ignores the potential negative impact on a person's physical, mental, social and emotional health and disregards the legal consequences associated with intoxication or subsequent behaviours.

## **Alcohol consumption among university students**

Alcohol consumption among students has received considerable attention because of its negative impact on students and the university community (Makongho 2018). Onyebuchkwu et al. (2015) suggested that there is a significant relationship between alcohol consumption and academic performance. Alcohol consumption can lead to poor academic performance (Htet et al. 2020). Govender et al. (2017) also reiterated that alcohol affects students' academic progress. To address alcohol consumption among students, El Ansari et al. (2020) stressed that universities should assess alcohol consumption among students and emphasise a preventative focus. Against this backdrop, there has also been a call for collective efforts, including interventions and strategies to address alcohol consumption among students (Cabalatungan, 2015).

The following sentiments and arguments motivated the study being reported on:

- Reckless alcohol consumption among students is a matter of concern as it leads to health and social effects.
- Students are exposed to different challenges that they deal with in their daily lives, hence these challenges can entice students to consume alcohol recklessly.
- There are several factors and causes that contribute to students' alcohol consumption.
- The impact of alcohol consumption on students can be far-reaching, including but not limited to poor academic performance and other social pathologies.

- Universities should develop interventions and strategies to address alcohol consumption among students.

Consequently, this study explored students' perceptions of reckless alcohol consumption at a university of technology in South Africa. The significance of this article lies not only in exploring students' understandings and perceptions of reckless alcohol consumption but also in identifying factors that contribute to alcohol consumption among students. Additionally, the study sought to investigate the impact of alcohol consumption on students' academic and social lives, and health. Most importantly, this study highlights possible prevention and intervention strategies for addressing reckless alcohol consumption among students. Universities need to put in place appropriate measures to ensure that students who are recklessly abusing alcohol get the necessary support by all available means.

### **Theoretical framework: Understanding alcohol consumption through the ecological systems theory of development**

The present study drew on aspects of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory of development. This theory illuminates how human development is influenced by various environmental systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The study focused on four ecological systems: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems.

To understand students' alcohol consumption, it is crucial to consider the life cycle of a student and their surroundings. A *microsystem* is a setting in which people interact directly with each other. This includes family, friends, classmates, and other individuals who directly interact with a particular person's microsystem (Ettedal & Mahoney, 2017). Students involved in alcohol consumption may be influenced by people with whom they interact on a daily basis. Moreover, positive influence may come from this setting as well, encouraging students to overcome alcohol consumption and alcoholism.

Krishan (2010) indicates that the *mesosystem* is the second immediate layer that contains the microsystem. This layer focuses on two or more systems that are different from microsystems, that is, school, home, and playmate settings. Such environments presuppose students developing friendships, relationships, identities, and new behaviours. In these situations, there are often issues of peer pressure. Home and university play a significant role in students' lives (Luescher et al., 2023). There should be effective interaction between the student's home and the university, as these settings are part of the student's life. Therefore, the university should play a role in assisting these students and provide them support to ensure that they have a bright future ahead of them.

*Exosystems* refer to settings external to the student but which may influence students' behaviours. Such environments include media, social media, neighbourhoods, parents' friends, and other external factors. For example, students spend a lot of time on social media, where alcohol is often portrayed as 'cool'. This narrative is also portrayed in alcohol advertisements. In addition, many universities are built around cities where

there is access to places of fun, nightclubs, and others which inevitably expose students to alcohol. Policies and legal structures play an important role in alcohol consumption. In South Africa, the drinking age is 18 years (Inaç et al., 2021); however, students start drinking before they reach the age of 18.

*The macrosystem* layer may not be a specific framework, but is comprised of cultural values, customs, and laws (Berk, 2000). This layer examines the factors affecting student development. Such factors include ethnicity, background, and socio-economic status (Inaç et al., 2021). Moreover, the majority of students in South African universities tend to be from poor backgrounds and end up using alcohol as a form of coping with the challenges posed by university life.

## **Goal of the study**

The main aim of this qualitative study was to explore students' perceptions of alcohol consumption at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal South Africa. The researchers sought to identify the factors that contribute to reckless alcohol consumption and the subsequent negative effects on students. Furthermore, the researchers explored the views of participants on strategies to assist students with alcohol consumption issues and alcoholism. The study was guided by the following research question: What are the perceptions of students at a university of technology in South Africa towards alcohol consumption, the contributing factors to reckless consumption and alcoholism, the negative effects thereof on students, and participant views on strategies to assist students dealing with issues of alcohol consumption and alcoholism?

## **Research methodology**

### **Research design**

A qualitative methodology was adopted to conduct this study. Qualitative research includes the contextualised study of people, communities, systems, and concepts through interviews, observations, and artefacts (Eyisi, 2016). Consequently, a qualitative methodology was deemed as most suited to developing an in-depth and rich understanding of students' experiences associated with alcohol consumption.

### **Sample**

This study employed a convenient sampling technique and 13 students were recruited to participate in the study. The demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1. All of the participants in this study were black and aged between 19 and 25 years. Furthermore, the demographic representation shows that seven participants were males and six were females. Therefore, there is a slight difference in gender balance. Three participants were in their third year, five participants were in their second year, two participants were in their fourth year, and one participant was in the first-year level of study.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants**

Participant no.	Gender	Race	Age	Level of study
P1	Male	Black	23	Third Year
P2	Male	Black	22	Second Year
P3	Male	Black	21	Second Year
P4	Male	Black	19	Second Year
P5	Female	Black	23	Fourth Year
P6	Female	Black	23	Third Year
P7	Female	Black	19	First Year
P8	Female	Black	21	Second Year
P9	Male	Black	20	First Year
P10	Male	Black	23	Third Year
P11	Male	Black	25	Fourth Year
P12	Female	Black	21	Second Year
P13	Female	Black	24	Third Year

### **Data collection**

Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews facilitated via an online platform. Specifically, interviews were conducted via video call. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used. The guide consisted of the following questions:

- What is students' understanding of alcohol consumption?
- What are the factors that lead to alcohol consumption?
- What impact does alcohol consumption have on students' health, academic and social lives?
- What prevention and intervention strategies can be developed to address the issue of alcohol consumption amongst students?

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from participants. Permission to record interviews was requested from participants. Interviews lasted between 20-25 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded, and notes were taken for later analysis. Due to the study taking place online, participants were assured of the confidentiality.

### **Data analysis and ethics**

The data were analysed using thematics analysis, which included the following steps (Henning et al., 2011). First, the lead author immersed themselves in the data by listening to the audio recordings and reading the transcriptions. Next, the transcribed interviews were coded and themes were identified. The analysis concluded by presenting the emergent interpretation.

The university of technology granted permission to conduct the research study after the researchers received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee (IREC 049/20).

All data were anonymised to protect participants' identities, and were stored on a computer secured with password access.

## Findings

Four themes emerged following the thematic analysis, namely: (1) understanding of alcohol consumption (2) factors contributing to reckless alcohol consumption (3) impact of reckless alcohol consumption on academic, social life and health and (4) possible prevention and intervention strategies to address reckless alcohol consumption. The emerging themes are presented in the sections that follow. Then, the themes are integrated and discussed.

### Understanding of alcohol consumption

Participants revealed that reckless alcohol consumption is problematic among students. To this end, other participants indicated that alcohol has the potential to affect students' academic performance in negative ways. The following quote substantiates this interpretation:

*Yes, alcohol consumption comes with many challenges, and which leads students not to focus on their academic work and they become addicted to a point where they misuse their NSFAS money. (P11)*

NSFAS is an important organization that provides financial support to students in higher education who are from marginalised communities. It's crucial to use the funding responsibly as misusing it could have negative consequences on both academic performance and meeting personal needs that are essential for survival.

The participants highlighted that reckless alcohol consumption could potentially lead to alcohol addiction. The following verbatim quotes indicate students' opinions that they have limited to no control regarding alcohol consumption, which could spur addictive behaviours:

*Yes, alcohol consumption is a problem with students. Some of the students they drink every night and day and they end-up being alcoholics. (P10)*

*... it is a problem. It is a common issue to university students as some are into a partying life and end up in addiction because of alcohol. (P3)*

Issues related to decision making were also raised. Some participants argued that due to alcohol consumption, some students struggled to make sound and informed decisions. This can potentially affect academic performance. Furthermore, the students raised concerns about poor budgeting and careless spending due to alcohol use and abuse. Moreover, participants indicated that, under the influence of alcohol, there was also the potential of being involved in risky and life-threatening situations.

*... it is a problem because tend to make drastic decisions based on the alcohol like waste money. They involve themselves with more dangerous situations and put their lives in danger. (P4)*

In light of the above, it is clear that students foresaw the various challenges associated with alcohol consumption. The factors contributing to reckless alcohol consumption are discussed in the next section.

### **Factors contributing to reckless alcohol consumption**

The participants revealed that many factors contribute to reckless alcohol consumption. These factors include academic-related challenges, financial precarity, and other diverse challenges. The following quotes offer insight into participants' perspectives:

*There are many things which include academic stress, family issues, depression and financial stress. (P8)*

*The contributing factor to alcohol consumption and alcoholism is stress, exams and the academic stress including their background as they think about their past. Also, peer pressure because they have friends who are influential. (P6)*

*Students drink alcohol because they want to deal with challenges that they face in life and drinking alcohol is the solution to cope with these challenges. They also do it because of the peer pressure they have so that is why they drink alcohol. (P1)*

In addition, the participants claimed that the transition from high school to university was a key factor associated with alcohol consumption. The transition from high school to university is a well-documented stressor among student populations and a critical stressor that, if not managed well, could lead to the student not being fully integrated into university life and ultimately leading to dropout (Luescher et al., 2023). Participant 11 reported that

*Some of the students face challenges which force them to alcohol consumption and alcoholism. The change of environment and academic and financial stress and peer pressure are the contributing factors.*

Besides the factors stated above, student background, including family history, was reported to be a risk factor for alcohol abuse. Participant 2 explained that family history plays a role in drinking alcohol because some of them learn this behaviour from their homes. Participant 2 also indicated that

*Mental health is a contributing factor for students to drink alcohol as they face challenges. I believe that the environment contributes and including the peer pressure as they hang with people who are drinking alcohol. They also have trauma of academic as they lack the ability to cope with the pressure of academics.*

Consequently, students may utilise alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with challenges in the context of higher education. While such coping strategies may provide temporary relief, they are bound to create further problems for students as they encounter more stressors in the university milieu (Mason, 2016).

### **Impact of reckless alcohol consumption on health, academic and social life**

When asked about the impact of alcohol consumption, there were differing views. Participants believed that the effects of alcohol consumption on academic life, social life, and health were major issues resulting in negative consequences for students. The students expressed that poor academic progress was linked to reckless alcohol consumption. The following quotes highlight this interpretation:

*They lose focus for their academic work and their academic performance drops. In terms of their social life, it destroys their relationships and when it comes to health it affects their thinking capacity and the body. (P1)*

*There is a slight chance of academic excellence if some of the students consume alcohol – this is because some of them spend their time away from their books instead of studying. (P5)*

Other participants felt that alcohol consumption could lead to unhealthy relationships with friends and family members. Students under the influence of alcohol come into contact with issues of unprotected sexual encounters, which could potentially cause sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV transmission. Besides the risk of contracting STDs, other participants felt that alcohol could also lead to other health-related issues, including mental health issues.

*... Also, the use of alcohol influences bad behaviour which most of the time affects the relationship that they have with others because they end up fighting. Another thing, when students are drunk, they also engage in unsafe sexual intercourse which exposes them to different diseases. (P12)*

*Some students tend to lose control over the use of alcohol and in that case their academic studies suffer because they cannot balance things. They tend to make friends with wrong people and who are fake friends. Alcohol contributes for students to get severe diseases, and some do suffer from mental health because of alcohol. (P4)*

Some participants highlighted that alcohol could lead to abusive behaviour. Violence in intimate relationships has also been reported. Participant explained that

*Alcohol impacts the academic progress of students as it contributes to poor academic performance, and they sometime submit their assignments late. Some students when they are under the influence of alcohol they become abusive of which it may contribute for them to be in abusive relationships. Alcohol contribute for students not being fit because they are controlled by alcohol. (P3)*

### **Possible prevention and intervention strategies to address reckless alcohol consumption**

The participants made recommendations on strategies to assist students who struggle with reckless alcohol consumption. Some participants felt that the university community should proactively ensure that students do not consume alcohol. According to Participant



7, the university should provide education on the risks of alcohol consumption through programmes:

*Everyone within the institution should play a role in ensuring that students should not involve themselves with alcohol as it is not good for them. We need to have awareness programmes that will give lessons to students about the danger of alcohol. (P7)*

Participants noted that because stress was one of the factors that lead to alcohol consumption, emotional support through support groups should be created to eradicate problems associated with reckless alcohol consumption. Specific quotes associated with this interpretation include the following.

*We must have support groups as there are students who can talk and share their experiences of alcohol. Also do programmes that will focus on addressing alcohol consumption. (P5)*

*There should be supports groups for students and facilities where they will get help from and have programmes that will bring awareness to students. (P8)*

Participant 13 added that the issue of student alcohol consumption should be addressed at a policy level, whereby the university provides ways to tackle the problem. According to the specific participant, *"The university should have policies that would speak specifically about substance abuse and this policy must have guidelines that will help to reduce the use of alcohol by students"* (P13).

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to explore student perceptions of reckless alcohol consumption at a university of technology. The findings of this study showed that the participants understood alcohol consumption. Whilst students shared their perspectives on alcohol consumption, they also emphasised the deleterious effects associated with abuse. In this regard, Mekonen et al. (2017) indicate that alcohol consumption is problematic among students because it has the potential of unpleasantly impacting students' academic performance (Ntombela, 2022). According to Barr and McClellan (2018), university life is highly stressful, and students can regard alcohol consumption as a way of coping. However, as the findings reported herein indicate, alcohol consumption can result in various negative sequelae. Ham et al. (2021) suggest that alcohol consumption can lead individuals to become aggressive and lose control of their emotions. Alcohol consumption and violence are linked to major public health issues (Gebara et al., 2015). Sontate et al. (2021) suggested that alcohol as a contributing factor to aggression should be scientifically explained to educate the public, and people should practice moderate drinking to avoid violence.

The second objective of this study was to identify factors that contribute to reducing alcohol consumption among students. Students face many challenges at university. Such challenges include academics, financial scarcity, and many other university-related challenges. Peer pressure is regarded as one of the leading factors in alcohol

consumption. The findings of this study confirm what Shange (2018) indicated, that students experience various difficulties when transitioning from their backgrounds into a challenging and diverse multicultural education institution environment, and that these challenges adversely impact their academic performance. Consequently, the reckless use of alcohol as a coping mechanism for academic stress by students appeared to be a significant factor, as most participants emphasised that most students used alcohol as a form of escapism from their academic challenges. The study conducted by Metzger et al. (2017) found that students used alcohol to cope with academic stress. Peer pressure has been shown to play a significant role in the misuse of alcohol (Studer et al., 2014). The participants emphasised that peer pressure among students is a unique issue that influences them to make decisions that are not good for themselves. Hence, they are negatively influenced by their peers who use alcohol. Morris et al. (2020) stressed the need to have a better understanding of supporting initiatives that would reduce the effects of peer pressure and develop strategies that would deal with factors influencing peer pressure.

The third objective of this study was to understand the impact of alcohol consumption on students' academics, social life, and health. This study found that reckless alcohol consumption negatively impacted students. Binge drinking has serious negative consequences (Salanță et al., 2018). This study found that alcohol affects the academic performance of students as they lose focus on their studies because they are always drunk. Students who misuse alcohol have poor academic performance, resulting in an inability to achieve their academic goals (Patte et al., 2017). Furthermore, participants also reported that students had poor relationships with others because when they were under the influence of alcohol, conflict was prevalent. Morris et al. (2020) suggest that alcohol can impact an individual's life as well as their relationships. Participants indicated that alcohol does affect their health, which may cause their body to not function correctly and become addicted to alcohol. Alcohol misuse can lead to acute and/or chronic health problems (Rehm et al., 2010).

The fourth objective of this study was to identify possible prevention and intervention strategies to address alcohol consumption among students. Among these participants recommended that awareness and education campaigns be conducted on the negative consequences of alcohol consumption. Thus, universities play a role in ensuring that their campuses are alcohol free (Dlamini et al., 2012). Furthermore, participants recommended that there should be support groups for students who are struggling with alcohol consumption (Cunningham et al., 2011). Moreover, universities need to create social and academic environments that support health-promoting norms to assist students struggling with alcohol consumption (Higher Education Center, 2011).

Finally, this study indicates a relationship between research findings and the ecological systems theory of development. Looking at the microsystem, the environment in which the learner lives, the findings confirm that the environment is one of the elements influencing students' alcohol consumption. This includes family and friends who encourage such behaviour. The challenges that some students face in the microsystem are also contributing factors, as they become reliant on alcohol. The

mesosystem is classified as a second layer containing the microsystem. This also includes the university setting. From the findings of this study, it is noted that many pressures emanating from academic pressure and not having the ability to cope in a new environment influence students' consumption of alcohol. In the exosystem, external settings influence student behaviour. The findings confirm that peer pressure is one of the issues that makes students consume alcohol, as they fail to make decisions on their own. Finally, as the macrosystem comprises cultural values, customs, and laws, this study found that financially strapped students misuse alcohol as an escape mechanism from the reality of their situations. Moreover, the findings emphasised the need to strengthen university rules and implement policies that address the issue of alcohol consumption among students.

### **Recommendations**

In light of the findings reported in this qualitative study, it is recommended that the university allocate additional resources to assist those who are struggling with alcohol consumption. Furthermore, there is a need for the development, provision and evaluation of student support programmes aimed at addressing reckless alcohol consumption. It is recommended that a policy relating to substance abuse be designed and implemented to address the issue of alcohol consumption among students. Lastly, findings draw attention to the importance of counselling services to address student mental health issues as an integral component of reckless alcohol consumption.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited in, amongst others, two ways. First, a relatively small and purposively selected sample was utilised, which was not representative of the entire university population. However, these findings offer valuable insights into student thoughts and perspectives on alcohol consumption. A second limitation is that all study participants were black. Hence, the qualitative interpretation should be interpreted with the stated limitations in mind. Further research should consider alcohol use and abuse in a more diverse sample of university students, as white, Indian, and coloured students were not represented. Moreover, the findings of this study cannot be generalised, as the research only focused on this particular university of technology in South Africa.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study confirm that reckless alcohol consumption is a significant issue among students. Students' perceptions of this subject reiterate the need for the university to think critically about how to address this issue and how students can be assisted in overcoming this problem. Everyone plays a role, including the staff members and students.

### **Ethics statement**

The study was conducted after researchers received ethical clearance from IREC. Respondents were not coerced into participating in the study.

## Potential conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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