Drinking game participation, gender performance and normalization of intoxication among Nigerian university students

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Most research on drinking games (DGs) and the associated risks focuses on Western countries. In the Nigerian context, DGs activity has not attracted scholarly attention but growing media reports indicate that Nigerian youths play DGs, and that a number of gamers have died during or immediately after game-playing. Methods: Drawing on gender performance scripts, we explored the performance of gender through DGs practices and the factors that motivate DGs participation. Thirty-one in-depth interviews were conducted with male and female college students (aged 19–23 years) at a university in south-eastern Nigeria. Results: The participants discussed the popularity of the DGs that students play on this campus, identifying the spaces where each game is played and the motivations for game-playing. Collective, contextual constructions of gender identities through ‘Fasitst-Drinker’ DG were identified, and the participants also performed gender through ‘Truth-or-Dare’ and ‘Endurance’ DGs. Men dominated ‘First-to-Finish’ DGs, which are played at parties and bars, and consumed beer or stout, while women, who mainly played Truth-or-Dare games, drank spirits or sweetened alcoholic beverages. Boredom and fun seeking provoked game-playing among women while adherence to masculinity norms, which engendered the public performance of masculinity and gambling activities, motivated men to play DGs. To avoid ‘collective shame’, men’s friendship groups provided support/care for inebriated game-playing members, but the immediacy of this support/care varied according to DGs type. Conclusion: DGs appear to normalize heavy drinking and the culture of intoxication on this campus. Measures to monitor alcohol sales outlets around campuses and interventions that target students’ leisure spaces should be developed.

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1. Introduction

Heavy and extreme drinking patterns are part of the growing culture of intoxication among students (Peralta, 2007; White, Anderson, Ray, & Mun, 2016). Studies conducted in Western countries have shown that one of the drinking rituals that promotes these and other hazardous drinking practices is drinking games (DGs) (see Borsari, 2004; Zamboanga et al., 2014). In the Nigerian context, DGs activity has not attracted scholarly attention despite the growing number of media reports indicating that DGs are popular among young people in Nigeria and that in some instances, game players have died from over-consumption of alcohol (Dumo, 2016; Mba, 2015).

Nigeria has no codified national alcohol control policies (World Health Organization, 2014). As such, standard drinks are not defined and little or no regulation/monitoring of alcohol marketing exists (Dumbili, 2014). The marketing activities of transnational alcohol corporations, which exacerbate alcohol availability (Babor, Robaina, & Jernigan, 2015) and create conditions that encourage alcohol misuse among Nigerian students, are increasing in number (Dumbili, 2016b). These policy issues could be one of many factors contributing to the rise of alcohol consumption and related problems among Nigerian young adults (Abayomi, Babalola, Olakulehin, & Ighoroje, 2016), particularly in the south-eastern region of Nigeria (Dumbili, 2016a). Providing empirical evidence of the roles DGs may play in young people’s consumption of alcohol and the related problems is also imperative because empirical studies can help us to understand how students’ own rationales for drinking align with their wider social context.

As Sallee and Harris (2011, p.410) noted that “universities are rich sites for the social construction of gender”, in that students often express and construct a range of masculine and feminine gender identities on campuses (Peralta, 2007), this study draws on gender performance theories, exploring Nigerian university students’ gendered DG participation. Specifically, this article’s objectives are to explore how Nigerian
students perform gender through DGs practices, the factors that motivate DGs participation among them, and in particular, how these motivations reflect norms relating to gender and heterosexual relations.

1.1. Drinking games among students

According to Zamboanga et al. (2013, p.276), (i) “DGs are governed by a set of specific rules (which may be simple or complex) that specify when participants should drink and how much alcohol to consume, (ii) DGs are designed to promote increased alcohol consumption within a short period of time to facilitate intoxication, (iii) DGs are social events, and (iv) DGs involve performing some kind of physical and/or cognitive task while playing”. While Borsari’s (2004) review of DGs research indicated that 50%-62% of students in Western countries play DGs, a fairly recent review (Zamboanga et al., 2014) reported a higher rate of engagement in DGs, to the extent that up to 91% of drinkers are gamers. Evidence shows that over 500 types of DGs (e.g., ‘Chugging’, ‘Beer-Pong’, ‘Truth-or-Dare’, ‘Flip Cup’ (Kenney, Hummer, & LaBrie, 2010, p. 1488; Zamboanga, Leitkowski, Rodriguez, & Cascio, 2006)) exist, but the popularity level of each type varies (Zamboanga et al., 2006). LaBrie et al. (2013, p.2133) identified 100 types of DGs and categorised them into five groups: “Targeted and Skill, Communal, Chance, Extreme Consumption and Even Consumption” games.

Indeed, spaces where DGs are played are often occupied by three categories of people: “winners, losers and spectators” (Borsari, 2004, p. 37), and as part of the appealing social activities that characterise students’ leisure culture, DGs engender social interaction (Newman, Crawford, & Nellis, 1991; Polizzotto, Saw, Tjhung, Chua, & Stockwell, 2007). In most instances, the heaviest drinkers initiate game-playing (Polizzotto et al., 2007). Although DGs are mainly played by males (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2008; Zamboanga, Iwamoto, Pesigan, & Tomaso, 2015), research shows that some females are gamers, although the motives for, and consequences of, game-playing differ by gender (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2006; Zamboanga et al., 2006).

Some social contexts such as bars, pubs and parties influence DGs (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2008) and game-playing is also facilitated by peer pressure and boredom (Polizzotto et al., 2007). Among other factors, Johnson and Sheets (2004) argued that conformity reasons, novelty seeking and interpersonal dominance motivate game-playing. Fun, sexual purpose (Borsari, 2004; Zamboanga et al., 2014), ‘liquid courage’ (Ham, Zamboanga, Olthuis, Casner, & Bui, 2010) and adherence to masculine norms (Iwamoto, Cheng, Lee, Takamatsu, & Gordon, 2011; Zamboanga et al., 2015) also motivate game-playing, especially because the ability to ‘hold one’s drink’ is perceived to be intimately tied to the performance of masculinity (Peralta, 2007; Zamboanga et al., 2015).

1.2. Gender performance perspective

Gender scholars (e.g., Butler, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987) argue that gender is enacted through a specific kind of repetitive doing. Following Sallee and Harris (2011), we drew largely on West and Zimmerman’s (1987, p.126) version of gender performance theory, which argues that gender is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment”. West and Zimmerman (1987, p.140) note that “a person’s gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others”. Indeed, gender identity construction is contextual, (i.e., individuals enact different masculinities and femininities in different contexts or situations (Sallee & Harris, 2011, p.413)). Therefore, gendered behaviour should be understood in the light of the context in which it is enacted. Furthermore, because gendered behaviour is not constructed in isolation, but socially in collaboration with others (West & Zimmerman, 1987), it is often enacted based on the expectations of others (Sallee & Harris, 2011).

Every society has roles and expectations that members are expected to fulfill (Sallee & Harris, 2011), and these are internalised through the process of gender socialisation (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Despite the fact that individuals construct gender identities and behaviours, the accomplishment of gender is often carried out in the presence of onlookers (Peralta, 2007), “who are presumed to be oriented to its production” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.126). This is why individuals who perform gender are accountable to ‘others’ (Sallee & Harris, 2011; West & Zimmerman, 1987), who determine whether or not their performance meets the internalised criteria for ‘appropriate/inappropriate’ gendered behaviour. Due to this evaluation of gendered behaviour based on the conception of appropriate/inappropriate behaviours, conformity to, and deviation from, gender roles and expectations have consequences.

As gender is performative, different resources are employed to accomplish gender behaviour, and one of these is alcohol. In most societies, men and women are socialised to conform to gendered drinking norms, and this positions alcohol as an important resource for gender performance and social identity construction (Montemurro & McClure, 2005; Peralta, 2007). In Nigeria, alcohol use has been gendered. Traditionally, adult males dominated drinking spaces while, for adult females (and young people), drinking was taboo (Heap, 1998). Notwithstanding this constraint, recent research shows that the consumption norm is evolving, in that alcohol has become a resource for young people’s gender performance and social identity (de)construction (Dumbili, 2015b). Against this backdrop, this article explores the role of DGs in alcohol consumption and gender performance on this campus.

2. Methods

Exploring the social factors and contexts that facilitate drinking among students, who lived on and around University campuses is important as these locations have been found to be primary social spaces for heavy drinking in Nigeria (Dumbili, 2013). Following ethics approval by the Nigerian University and Brunel University London Ethics Boards, the data were collected between September and December 2013 from a university located in a city of Anambra State, in south-eastern Nigeria. The participants were recruited on campus using word-of-mouth and snowballing approaches. On campus, EWD approached students and introduced the project to them. After establishing rapport, the students were then asked if they drank alcohol. Those who self-identified as current alcohol users (defined as having consumed alcohol at least once in the last 30 days) were then asked if they would consider participating in the study and sharing their experiences of alcohol use. Those who indicated interest were provided with an information sheet that detailed the aims of the study, the role of participants and the potential benefits and harms of participation, the methods for securing data and maintaining confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation. While 26 (20 males and six females) were recruited via this approach, snowballing methods facilitated the recruitment of an additional three females and two males.

These techniques became necessary for the successful recruitment of female participants. Alcohol use among young people is a sensitive issue in Nigeria which elicits socio-cultural disapproval, and young female drinkers are particularly stigmatised (Dumbili, 2015b; Umunna, 1967). Young people, especially females, are not easily accessible for such sensitive studies, and reaching them via any means that may expose their identity will hinder their participation. It is notable that the participants were not incentivised. All the names used in the results section are pseudonyms.

2.1. Interviews and data analysis

Thirty-one in-depth interviews lasting 33–90 min were conducted with 22 male and nine female undergraduate students (aged 19–23 years), who are of legal drinking age (i.e. 18 years and above). The interviews were recorded with a digital device with the permission of the
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