



SPORTS PRACTICES AND ALCOHOL USE AMONG MALE UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

Sports and alcohol are two increasingly popular things among university students particularly among males. Alcohol is associated with harmful effects and the effects of sports on alcohol use remains unknown in Sri Lanka. This study aimed to investigate the pattern of alcohol use and the association between sports and alcohol. This was a descriptive study conducted among 110 male students in Eastern University, Sri Lanka (EUSL). Majority (74.1%) of the students used alcohol to celebrate the happiness. Family history of alcohol was associated with alcohol use ($p < 0.05$). No significant association between sports participation and alcohol use was observed. Majority (79.6%) of the students who drink alcohol wanted to quit and have tried quitting before unsuccessfully. Friends introduced alcohol to 55.6% of students who consume alcohol. Alcohol use appears to be unrelated to sports participation in Sri Lanka unlike Western countries. Alcohol as a way of celebrating and coping are common among students. Measures to support those who wish to quit alcohol would be beneficial to students and further studies are required to assess the peer influence in alcohol consumption.

Keywords: *alcohol, sports, male, university.*

Introduction

Sports is an important aspect of university students' lives. While many research¹⁻⁴ have demonstrated beneficial outcomes of sports participation in terms of physical, mental and behavioural aspects, some negative role, however, has been shown in few studies⁵⁻⁹, particularly that of the alcohol use. The public health concern about alcohol consumption has increased in the recent times worldwide. The evidence from previous studies is inconsistent regarding sports to be a protective or risk factor for alcohol use.

Individuals aged 18 to 25 years are more prone to use alcohol than other age groups¹⁰ and some studies found out that, among those in that age group, the college students have high prevalence of alcohol usage than non-college youth^{11,12}. Interestingly, the peak time for sports participation is also shown to be during peri-adolescence in most individuals¹³, raising the question of possible association between the two. In Sri Lanka, both above fall under the category of university undergraduates, where they experience complex social interaction which can influence their later life. Exploring the possible association between sports practices and alcohol usage may help to identify interventions to prevent, reduce and treat harmful alcohol usage among the students.

Several characteristics of sports participation contribute in different ways to the usage of alcohol rather than participation per se¹⁴⁻¹⁷. For example, degree of involvement into sports, type, of sports, influence of teammates, frequency, and motivation for sports, all influence the alcohol use among undergraduates. While scholars have suggested different theories and reasons for the increased alcohol consumption among sports people, no exact reason was found yet. Previous research¹⁸ shows that heavy alcohol consumption among college students results in negative consequences like, unprotected sex, road traffic accidents, and violence which can have significant long-term impact in their life. The purpose of the present study is to utilise close ended questioning to analyse the drinking pattern from participants' own



perspective and to address the significance between the sports participation and alcohol use among undergraduates.

Harmful use of alcohol and its negative impact among undergraduates has long been a great concern for universities. There is increasing trend towards hazardous drinking behaviour¹⁹ especially among the student population. Ironically, sports, which is said to be having a positive role in the health of youth¹⁻⁴, has also been shown to be one of the risk factors for developing alcohol consumption among students⁵⁻⁹. Nonetheless, the research directed particularly towards the influences of sports related behaviours in alcohol use among students, in Sri Lanka, is scanty in amount. Provided that thousands of undergraduates take part in sports each year, finding out the relationship between the above two may represent an important context for effectively administrating interventions to modify the alcohol use among the society.

The study setting is Eastern University, Sri Lanka. Since students from all over the country study here we can study samples with different socio-economic status and multiple ethnic groups providing validity and generality to the study. The information from the participants will be more reliable due to the literacy level of students. It is more feasible to collect data due to its close proximity within Physical Education Unit, EUSL. No previous research on this subject has been undertaken in EUSL. This makes EUSL the ideal setting for this study to be conducted.

Considering all above, our cross-sectional study is targeted to investigate the sports practice and alcohol use among male undergraduates in Eastern University Sri Lanka. This study also seeks to answer questions regarding the association between the sports participation and alcohol use among male undergraduates in Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

Objectives

- To describe the pattern of alcohol use among male students in Eastern University, Sri Lanka
- To determine the association between alcohol use and sports participation among male students in Eastern University, Sri Lanka

Literature review

A study⁵ done by Ward et al. (2007) among undergraduates showed that organized recreational sports participation was predictive of the typical number of alcohol drinks consumed on a day of drinking and average number of drinks consumed per week. It also proved that peer influence had strong association with heavy episodic drinking. It was suggested that heavy and frequent alcohol use was considered as an accepted behaviour. One important limitation in this study was they failed to control for the sports played, as drinking behaviour could be different among various sports groups.

Terry-McElrath and others⁶ examined a large number of individuals over a period of 5 years and found that athletic team participation at the age of 18 was associated with higher alcohol use frequency. The mean alcohol frequency was found to be increasing from age 18 to 22. However, the study did not investigate the relationship between the quantity of alcohol use and sports participation.

A cross sectional survey²⁰ done among 460 young elite athletes in France revealed being an elite student athlete to be a protective factor against alcohol use. But it could be seasonal, they mentioned, where they reduce alcohol use during competitive season. It also showed that participating in a team sport and



practising a sliding sport is associated with alcohol use which is showed in previous literature as well. But they attributed the association with sliding sports to be due to the sensation seeking which is the common need for with alcohol use and sliding sports.

Zhou and others conducted a study²¹ on alcohol use and its associations with sports-related identities and well-being. It revealed that although there was no direct effect found between identities and consumption, the positive reinforcement drinking motives fully mediated the relationship between respondents' social identity and alcohol consumption. The study also echoed the previous findings of drinking behaviour as identity-defining behaviour which facilitates the building of sports-specific identities.

A systemic review of fourteen longitudinal studies⁷ about sports participation among adolescents and young adults suggested that sports participation is positively associated with greater alcohol use during adolescence and early adulthood. Furthermore, the study found increasing use of alcohol from baseline to subsequent follow-ups and there was also significant increase in binge drinking during emerging adulthood.

Another systemic review conducted by S nderlund et al. (2013)⁸ eleven studies reported significant relationships between alcohol consumption and sports participation with only one study proving no association between the two. Higher rates of alcohol consumption and violence in athlete populations compared to non-athlete populations were noted. The possible factor for this was suggested to be the pressure and potentially negative athlete social identity.

Mays and others⁹ analysed a multi-wave sample of adolescents and found out that greater sports involvement was associated with faster average acceleration in problem alcohol use. It also showed that men had higher levels of drinking behaviour compared to women. However, the study indicated that participation in one or more academic activity and sports, greater sports involvement was associated with slower average acceleration in drinking behaviours over time. The main limitation of the study was that the sample contained more adolescents compared to youth.

Study methodology

This is a descriptive cross-sectional study conducted among female undergraduates of EUSL between the period of March 2021 and January 2022. Simple random sampling was introduced to generate sample. Data were collected using a self-administered structured questionnaire consisting of close ended questions designed to achieve the objectives of the research in three main categories: Part A: Socio-demographic factors, Part B: Pattern of alcohol use and Part C: Influences of sports on alcohol consumption. It was distributed among students along with information sheet and consent form and collected on the same day. To ensure privacy no identifiable data were collected, and all the information was restricted to the principal investigators only. Data were entered in SPSS, version 20.0 and descriptive statistics were used for data analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from ethics review committee of EUSL/E/PF/IPE/06.

Results

The study included a total of 110 male students and all of them were involved in sports at least as a leisure time activity. The demographic information of the students is given in Table 1.



Table 1 – Demographic details of the students

Variables	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	22-23	29	26.4
	24-25	47	42.7
	26-27	32	29.0
	28-29	2	1.8
Ethnicity	Tamil	29	26.4
	Sinhalese	52	47.3
	Muslim	26	23.6
	Others	3	2.7
Year of study	First	25	22.7
	Second	40	36.4
	Third	25	22.7
	Fourth	10	9.1
	Fifth year	10	9.1
Accommodation	Home	11	10.0
	University hostel	52	47.3
	Boarding	47	42.7
Family monthly income	<LKR 20,000	21	19.1
	LKR 20,001-50,000	38	34.5
	LKR 50,001-1,00,000	39	35.5
	>LKR 1,00,000	12	10.9

Out of the 110 students, 49.1% (n=54) consume alcohol and the majority (74.1%) of them stated the reason to be “to celebrate” followed by “to cope with stress” (22.2%) and “as a habit” (3.7%). Majority (55.6%, n=30) of them had been introduced to the alcohol by their friends and a little number of students (5.5%, n=3) had been introduced by their family and others (1.8%, n=1). Majority (90.7%, n=49) started drinking after 18 years of age.

Thirty-seven of the study population (33.6%) had someone who drinks in their family and there was a statistically significant association with the usage alcohol (p<0.05).

Out of the 54 students who drink alcohol, majority (48.1%, n=26) buy it from the supermarkets, while 27.8% (n=15) from bar and the rest (24%, n=13) from other places. Forty-one percentage (n=22) of the students who consume alcohol have it in their home or hostel room, 31.5% of the students (n=17) have it at friend’s place and the rest (27.8%, n=15) have it in other places.

Fifty-seven students (51.8%) were not aware of the maximum level of recommended alcohol consumption for males per week and in those who claimed they were aware, only 20.8% (n=11) knew the correct maximum level which was 14 units per week.

Out of those who consume alcohol, only 29.6% (n=16) had faced problems either legal, emotional, social, relationship or educational in their life due to alcohol usage and only 38.9% (n=21) think that alcohol influences their behaviour. However, 79.6% (n=43) want to quit alcohol and the same number of students have tried to quit unsuccessfully before.



Seventy-one percentage of the study population stated that they were aware that consumption of alcohol is harmful for their health including 59.3% (n=32) of the students who consume alcohol. There were no statistically significant association between this awareness and usage of alcohol (p>0.05).

Eighty-nine of the sample (80.9%) played team sports while the rest played only individual events and 36.36% (n=40) stated that their teammates consume alcohol. However, there was no statistically significant association between either of these with alcohol usage (p>0.05). Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the participation in each sport.

Sport	Participants	
	n	%
Badminton	13	11.8
Basketball	15	13.6
Carrom	11	10.0
Chess	10	9.1
Elle	22	20.0
Hockey	3	2.7
Kabaddi	7	6.4
Karate	4	3.6
Swimming	1	0.9
Tennis	1	0.9
Table tennis	8	7.3
Track and field	8	7.3
Volleyball	7	6.4

Majority (53.6%, n=59) of the study population think that psychological measures would be the most effective intervention for in helping them or others quit alcohol usage followed by educating the students by seminars (27.3%, n=30). Among those who drink alcohol 77.8% (n=42) stated that they get support from the Department of Physical Education.

Discussion

A significant proportion of students had been introduced to alcohol via their friends. Even though our study did not focus on peer influence and alcohol usage, “by peers” was the commonest way if introduction. Further studies should be conducted to assess this association, as this can be a potential strategy to reduce alcohol consumption among students via intervening for the whole peer groups. In keeping the previous studies²², there was a statistically significant association between family history of alcohol use and alcohol usage. This emphasizes the need shape the future parents to educate children on the effects of alcohol and the importance of prevention.

Majority of the students had their first drink between 18 to 26 years of age. A population-based study conducted in Colombo, Sri Lanka²³ revealed the mean age of onset to be 20.8 years which is consistent with our findings although the study population and setting were quite different. It is important to address the early onset of alcohol which is defined as onset of alcohol use before the age of 22 years, as it is a well proven fact²⁴ that the earlier the onset of alcohol use, greater the likelihood for later dependence syndrome.



Even though the harmful health effects of alcohol have been established very well, interestingly, part of the population were not aware of these facts and continue to believe otherwise. Even though there was no statistical significance between the usage and the awareness, it is important that the future generations are enlightened about the harmful use of the alcohol.

In contrast to the findings of the most studies except for one⁸, our present study did not find any association with participating in a team sport and alcohol use. Also, being an athlete and alcohol usage also did not have any statistically significant association with the alcohol usage as suggested by the previous literature. The findings of the previous studies were attributed to the social identity and pressure, which also could explain the contradictory findings from our study as in Sri Lanka, there is generally no pressure to consume alcohol to maintain a positive social identity, although this could be highly arguable.

About a half of the students think psychological interventions would be beneficial in helping to quit the alcohol usage. Especially a number of students have stated drinking alcohol as a way to cope with stress which indicates maladaptive coping skills. Considering that majority of the students who consume alcohol wanted to quit and in fact have tried to quit before, it is necessary to assess the need of a well-established support system within the university for students to access as it may considerably reduce the usage of alcohol among students. Also, majority of the students who consume alcohol have stated they receive support from Department of Physical Education to quit the alcohol usage. Thereby it is a useful idea to establish the above proposed support system in liaison with this department.

We used a randomized sampling method for this study which avoids selection bias and our study population consisted of students from all over the country thereby making it less affected by socioeconomic factors. There are, however, some limitations. This was conducted in a single university setting, hence cannot be generalised to other university settings. Further, the data are cross sectional, thereby, making it difficult to identify the evolving association of alcohol use.

Conclusion

Alcohol is increasingly being used as a celebratory drink among university males however unlike western countries there was no significant association between sports participation and alcohol consumption. Use was strongly associated with a family history of alcohol consumption emphasizing the need of intervention. Awareness regarding alcohol consumption including recommended intake seems to be inadequate among the students. Majority of the students want to quit alcohol and a proper supporting system should be established in university to encourage and help them. Peer influence must be further investigated to identify the association as it could potentially help in tackling the alcohol misuse.

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