



# **Reasons and Outcomes of Student Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Among University Students in Zambia: A Case Study of One Private University**

*Jordan Tembo<sup>1</sup>, Patricia Mambwe<sup>2</sup>, Abigail Jane Moyi<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Kalindawalo General Hospital, P.O. Box 560008, Petauke, Zambia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Nursing, School of Health Sciences, Rusangu University, Monze, Zambia

<sup>3</sup>School of Education, Rusangu University, Monze, Zambia

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## **ABSTRACT**

Student Alcohol and other Drug Abuse is common place in colleges and universities. Without a greater level of understanding of the problem from every standpoint, nations risky losing brilliant young people to physical and mental health challenges. The objective of this study was to examine the reasons and the consequences of alcohol and other drugs abuse among students in Zambia taking one private university as a case study. A total of 30 participants whose age ranged between 21 and 27 years were sampled through snowball sampling. Qualitative data was collected between March and June, 2022. The study found that some students entered the university already hooked on drugs and alcohol while others got influenced while on campus. Trigger factors for substance abuse on campus included satisfying cravings arising from addiction; desire to integrate with a social group, to read intensively for higher grades, to navigate stress and problems and for fun. Despite the ecstasy derived from the abuse of alcohol and drugs, the study found that the ultimate agony was a catalogue of behavioural and medical related problems- poor grades due to casual attitude characterized by missing classes which ultimately increased their chances to dropout or stay longer in school, risk of being bashed by cars on the road due to poor judgement when intoxicated including being a social nuisance to other students. Medical effects included mental health problems, malnutrition, stomach ulcers and liver problems. Preventive Health Education, counseling, treatment and intensified rehabilitation are critical to combating the problem of substance abuse among young people.

## **I. Introduction**

The abuse of alcohol and other drugs is increasingly becoming common among adults and adolescents across the globe<sup>1</sup>. What makes the problem especially of grave Public Health concern to both developed and developing societies is that, young people, who are at the leading edge of social and economic change, and therefore the world's assets, log upward trends in alcohol and other drug abuse<sup>2</sup>. Excluding tobacco and caffeine, alcohol is the psychoactive substance used mostly by college and university students<sup>2</sup>. The Student Alcohol and other Drug Abuse scenario exists in High schools, college and universities. The National Institute of Alcohol and Alcoholism in Ross & Dejong (2008) described the problem of Student Alcohol and other Drug Abuse in institutions of Higher learning as "widespread, dangerous, and disruptive"<sup>3</sup>. This alarming evidential declaration is daguerreotyped by the World Health Organization as having potential to ruin individual lives, wreck families, and vandalize communities<sup>4</sup>.

Zambia stands as one of the top-ranking African countries with worrisome alcohol consumption rates<sup>5</sup>. The World Health Organization's 2014 report found that the prevalence of alcohol use disorders among male and female populations aged 15 years in Zambia was 7.9% and 1.0% giving a higher overall rate of 4.5% above the average of 3.3% for the World Health Organization African Region<sup>4</sup>. To crown it all, a study designed to assess prevalence of addictive behaviours among young people from 73 low and middle income countries by de la Torre-Luque et al., (2021) found that the prevalence of regular alcohol use was the highest in Zambia and lowest in Senegal<sup>6</sup>. During the commemoration of the 2022 International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, the Drug Enforcement Commission's report of 810 clients managed in 2021<sup>7</sup>, the nation was made to understand the extent of the problem. Several studies have been conducted locally to establish the prevalence, causes and consequences of abusing alcohol and other drugs among student populations, however, the studies have been mostly quantitative as such deeper insights surrounding the disorder have remained obscure. Substance abuse dispenses a wide range of problems such affecting the innocent students' population<sup>8</sup>. If the game plan to lessen alcohol and other drugs abuse including the associated harms younger population in institutions of higher learning are to be effective, it is necessary to improve our understanding<sup>9</sup> about the reasons, actual substances abused and the consequences for substance abuse.

## **II. Materials and Methods**

**Study Design:** A descriptive qualitative explorative study design was used.

**Study Location:** The study was conducted at one of the private universities on the Southern part of Zambia renowned with problems of substance abuse among students.

**Study Duration:** It was conducted during the month of March and June, 2022.

**Sample size** :30 students participated in the study.

**Sample size calculation:** The sample was purposively drawn from the population of students from second year to fifth year.

#### **Inclusion criteria**

1. Only students available and willing were enlisted into the study

#### **Exclusion criteria**

1. No first year students participated
2. Students who were busy and therefore unavailable did not participate in the study.

#### **Sample & selection method**

The sample was selected through snow ball sampling method. Snowball sampling is an effective way of generating a large sample from a hidden population where no formal sampling frame is available<sup>10</sup>. The researchers were first taken to 5 students who were known to abuse alcohol and other drugs. These first respondents led the researchers to 25 more participants. These were a mixture of single substance abusers and multiple substance abusers.

#### **Procedure Methodology**

Data collection used Focus Group Discussion and in-depth interview methods. 3 Focus Group Discussions were conducted. Each Focus Group Discussion consisted of 8 participants. 6 participants were comfortable with providing their perspective through in-depth interview. Before holding the discussion or interview, researchers introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the study. Informed consent was obtained. Permission was also obtained to use a recording device. Participants were also assured of anonymity and confidentiality. One private room was secured for group discussions to ensure adherence to privacy needs. It was encouraging to observe that participants were willing to participate in the study.

### **III. Results**

The sample consisted of 30 participants comprising of 22 males and 8 females all aged between 21 and 27 years. These were all single and pursuing various programmes between second year and fifth year of study. Female participants wore casual attire- a head sock, slippers, ripped casual jeans; some appeared in cropped blouses. A larger proportion of males (80%) abused alcohol alone- spirits, local brew while 20% confessed to abusing marijuana and diazepam. Female participants abused alcohol- spirits and lagers and snuff. 65% of the participants began abusing substances before they gained admission to the university. Students accommodated at the campus had a higher number of abusers than those accommodated outside the campus. This could be attributed to two possible theories namely those accommodate on the campus were more in number and secondly students with private accommodation were difficult to monitor. 10% of males abused alcohol daily while 90% went out on weekends for alcohol, marijuana and other substances. Females with history of abusing spirits had no regular timetable. They sneaked out to drink. These deliberately found accommodation outside campus.

**Table 1. displays significant information about participants.**

<b>GENDER</b>	<b>YEARS OF ABUSE</b>
Male	3years
Male	4years
Male	9years
Male	2years
Male	8years
Male	2years
Male	4years
Male	7years
Male	3years
Male	2years
Male	4years
Male	3years
Male	3years
Male	4years
Male	3years
Male	4years
Male	3years
Male	4years

Male	4years
Male	3years
Male	3years
Male	2years
Male	3years
Male	4years
Female	3years
Female	2years
Female	2years
Female	3years
Female	2years
Female	1year
Female	2years

**Question:** *Explain how you began using*

*alcohol and or other drugs?*

The question was designed to dig out information built around reasons for the social behaviour to use alcohol and other drugs among the students. The following were the themes generated: coming from families that abused alcohol, conformity/ peer pressure, social curiosity, addiction, frustration and boredom. Researchers observed that participants felt comfortable to explain their perspective using a third person and second person instead of the first person pronouns.

#### ***Coming from families taking alcohol***

The Focus Group Discussions and in-depth interviews demonstrated that students growing up in social environments where alcohol was freely used developed a 'blasé attitude' towards alcohol and its use. They treated alcohol as an ordinary recreational drink which anybody could enjoy; thus the prevailing group conditions in their immediate social home environment significantly influenced them to embrace alcohol early as reported by one participant aged 26 years:

'I began to take alcohol at a young age when I was in grade 9 or 10 somewhere there. You know coming from a family where mom and dad drink; they send you to buy alcohol so you treat alcohol as something normal. No wonder I drink without any feeling of shame' (Male participant).

Another participant explained that he was from a home where alcohol was served at the end of each meal. Children too were served booze in smaller amounts. Said the participant, 'I can be sensitized to stop taking alcohol but guess what? I will find it when I go home. So if my own parents see no problem with drinking I feel it's the right thing to do' (Male participant).

For other students, the door for potential alcohol use flung more and more open as they, still underage boys, undertook errands on behalf of their parental figures to purchase, collect, transport and serve alcohol. Consistent exposure of the boys to alcohol- risky situations blunted his conscience. Alcohol's dangerousness was normalized. Its negative side was totally ignored. Male participant aged 22years reported the following:

'I lived with my elder brother. Every weekend he could send me to buy alcohol. I was about 7 years old that time. I remember clearly that I would gulp down the remnants when told to dispose the alcohol bottles and cans. Since that time I have continued to drink' (Male participant).

Other participants reported of coming from unstable violent families where parents quarrelled daily infecting the home environment with yells, insults, swearing and cursing. To escape the memory of such social wasteland environments they joined friends who used alcohol, glue and other illegal substances as reported by one participant aged 23 years old:

'Sometimes you do not purpose to start drinking but the home environment provides a trajectory. You witness parents quarrel, fight and exchange nasty words. You may tolerate but when you reach tipping point you want to escape these social realities then you start drinking or sniffing glue as your corner of escape'(Male participant).

#### ***Conformity to group sub-culture/peer pressure***

This study found that some students were under pressure to conform to the sub-culture of their social group. They were faced with the situation of hang with us or be purged out situation. In the quest to conform to the social identity of the group, they subscribed to group membership for companionship to meet their social needs. Reported one female participant:

'When you have friends who rush to help whenever you have a problem, you feel socially obliged to embrace them and their way of life' (Female participant).

Other students admired the status enjoyed by substance users at the university. Substance abusers displayed unique social interactional skills. They appeared to have a store house of jokes. They cracked jokes wherever and whenever. They became a source of attraction to females and earned themselves a nickname 'crazy fun'. Using their social skills, they lit up gloomy social convocations. They won the hearts of their friends, colleagues as well as their enemies. Their social status soared. Many craved for association with these local social stars to improve their social interaction skills.

Therefore, moved by the desire to improve their social skills they opted to hang out with the 'social experts' and shared in their alcohol culture. A male participant said the following:

'You only begin to understand yourself that you lack interactional skills when you hang out with experts. When they are around everyone including girls burst into laughter. Then comes the urge to be like them. What happens next? You fly for a sip so that you too can kindle social life '(Male participant).

### ***Social Curiosity***

The study also found that some students were socially curious. They reported to have heard numerous stories about substances that stimulate the brain and cause people to feel high. Away from supervisory watch care of parents and guardians, the explorative behaviour set in as elucidated by one male participant:

'I could get a lot of stuff from those who drink and do drugs. They shared pleasant stories about the high feeling and their ability to transform from a shy introvert personality to a courageous extrovert personality. I thought to myself why not try?' (Male participant).

The other male participant explained that he would be intrigued with the smooth, easy going, happy, excited behavioural tendencies exhibited daily by substance abusers even when it was clear they were facing serious challenges. They went on with life as if all was pleasant.

'As students, we go through a lot of challenges. Our challenges range from lack of tuition fees to poor grades and going hungry sometimes for lack of money. You feel stressed out but when you check on your colleagues you find them laughing and taking it easy. You get challenged and feel well may be let me also jump in and forget my problems' (Male participant).

### ***To intensify reading***

Studying was another reason for abusing drugs by students. It was explained that substances such as marijuana took away sleep and motivated them to study the entire night. Marijuana helped them to stay awake and concentrate to read several textbooks within a single night.

'Others smoke marijuana to enable them study nonstop until the day of examinations' (Male participant).

### ***Addiction***

It was made clear from the study that some students abused alcohol and smoked marijuana while at school because they were addicted. To function well physically and socially, they needed to be under the influence of stimulants. As reported, these sneaked out of campus at the slightest opportunity to satisfy their cravings. Said one participant:

'There are guys and girls who can't do without alcohol or other substances. They sneak out of campus after classes and over the weekends just to get high' (Male participant).

### ***Frustrations***

It was reported that students faced insurmountable frustrations arising from failing examinations, parental nagging, disappointment from boyfriends and girlfriends, losing personal computers following a spate of theft, competition and social rejection including threats of suspension and expulsion. To deal with these stressful situations, some students resorted to substance abuse as strategy to relieve anxiety and feel better.

### ***Boredom***

Boredom was one of the reasons submitted for abusing alcohol and other related substances among students. Amplification was made to the effect that institutions of learning remotely located from socially active places were eerily boring. To dispense with the lingering boredom, some students slipped out of campus to drink or do drugs.

### ***Question: What type of alcohol and drug related substances are abused by students at this institution?***

The question was specifically intended to find out the types of alcohol and other drugs abused by students. The following broad categories of substances were reported: spirits, lagers, local brew, marijuana, antidepressants and snuff. One male participant reported the following specific liquor:

'Guys drink spirits such as Bolz, Legend and Double shot' (Male participant).

A male participant- tall and dark said:

'Some take Waka, KSP, 1<sup>st</sup> Choice all these are part of the family of spirits' (Male participant).

Female participants explained that some students abused marijuana including ground powdered tobacco such as Kuber, Pomo, sunko as reported by one of them:

‘Some abuse marijuana and Kuber’ (Female participant).

Another female reported:

‘Others use pomo’ (Female participant)

A male aged 25 years old added that other students drink kachasu and Maureen Mukia- both local brew.

‘You still find guys going for kachasu and Maureen- Mukia’ (Male participant).

Female participants supplemented that it was not uncommon for students to drink lagers such as Mosi and Black Label.

‘Those with money they go for Mosi and Black Label’ (Female participant).

**Table 2. Summary of substances abused**

CATEGORY OF SUBSTANCES ABUSED	SPECIFIC SUBSTANCES
SPIRITS	Bolz, Legend, Double shot, Waka, KSP, 1 <sup>st</sup> Choice
LAGERS	Mosi, Black label
LOCAL BREW	Kachasu, Maureen- Mukia
CANNABIS	Marijuana
SNUFF	Snuff, Kuber, Pomo
ANTIDEPRESSANTS	Diazepam

***Question: What consequences follow from alcohol and other drug abuse?***

The question was calculated to determine the consequences manifested following the abuse of alcohol or other substances. Two broad themes- behavioural and medical consequences emerged from the data collected. Under the category of behavioural outcome emerged the following: social nuisance, theft, suspension/ expulsion from school, poor grades, and greater risk of being hit by moving cars. Under the category of medical consequences, the following were generated: mental health problems, malnutrition, stomach ulcers, liver problems.

***Social nuisance***

Social nuisance was reported to be characterized by- irritating noise to other students, vomiting alcohol on other innocent students, and fighting. One male participant explained:

‘Noise. Irritating noise is what other students complain about. You find drunk students chatting and launging loudly when others are sleeping’ (Male participant).

Another male participant disclosed:

‘I know of students who have complained of drunk roommates occupying top bunk beds. They complained that their roommates vomited down on them’ (Male participant).

Said a male aged 25: ‘there are reports of students fighting because both are drunk’ (Male participant).

***Theft***

Theft was one of the consequences for substance abuse among students.

‘You find guys who drink getting caught and arrested for stealing computers, mattresses to raise money for drugs’ (Male participant).

***Suspension/expulsion***

It was reported that some students had been suspended or expelled on charges of being found in possession or abusing illicit substances.

‘Some guys have been forced to go home because they were caught in possession or smoking weed’ (Male participant).

### **Poor grades**

There was a report that some students who had sunk deeper in the habit of abusing substances missed classes and performed poorly.

'Unless otherwise you are really very good, there is a huge possibility of failing. Some have earned F grades and have been chased away or have faced a back set' (Male participant).

### **Greater risk of being hit by moving cars**

Two male participants reported that abusers of substances were at risk of being hit by fast moving cars because of poor judgement. They added that the institution had lost one life because they failed to make life-saving judgement while crossing busy roads at night.

'One fella was hit by a car in town because he could make sound judgement' (Male participant).

### **Medical problems**

Medical problems were reported to be long term effects of substance abuse. It was further reported that students with long history of substance abuse manifested with chronic lip burn, constipation, puffy face, malnutrition, liver and mental problems. One male participant reported that he knew two of his colleagues who looked pale, sickly with lip burn due to long history of abusing *kachasu*- a local brew with approximately 15% alcohol content. Said the participant:

'Sometimes I think twice about alcohol and what it can do when you abuse it. Two of my classmates are in a bad shape right now. They look older than their age. Their lips appear scorched, faces puffy and eyes popping out. One of them was advised by the doctor to stop drinking because they told him that his liver is getting damaged' (Male participant).

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## **IV. Discussion**

Student Alcohol and other Drugs abuse on campus is a widespread problem<sup>11</sup>. From the report given by the Drug Enforcement Commission (26<sup>th</sup> June, 2022), Zambia is recording alarming increase in the number of young people seeking rehabilitative services due to addictive behaviour. Until all stakeholders- Health Workers, Teachers, Lecturers, Administrators and many others, have a deeper understanding of the problem from the reasons for abusing drugs to specific substances abused and the outcomes thereof, it will be difficult to quell the ever spreading Public Health Problem. The objective of this study was to explore the reasons why students abuse alcohol, other drugs and the outcomes of this social behaviour. The study was conducted at a private university in Zambia.

The study found that the commonest substance abused at campus was alcohol. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's 2019 report states that the most prominent feature of college and university substance abuse is excessive drinking<sup>8</sup>. The study found that students abused a broad-ranging alcoholic beverages namely spirits, lagers and local brew with alcohol content between 5% and 40%. Some drunk daily while others over weekends. None among them drunk honourably. All of them confirmed excessive drinking. Female alcohol users confirmed drinking Mosi, Black label and spirits. To sustain the alcohol culture, students assisted one another- the one with money bought for colleagues in the group as reported by one male participant: 'it's a game of give and take. You help your friend today and they help you tomorrow' (Male participant).

This study found that students abused alcohol and other drugs because of a variety of reasons. Some abused alcohol as a carryover social behaviour learnt from parents and guardians. Their home environment supported the behaviour by making alcohol easily accessible and in some cases ready to be enjoyed by juveniles. Change of environment could not change the entrenched behaviour as one participant categorically stated: 'if I drink at home I am gonna drink even here' (Male participant). Others engaged in excessive alcohol drinking to sustain their 'high' mood because of addiction, to read intensively for a positive academic outcome, to draw in pleasant emotions under stressful situations, to conform to the group's sub-culture for social acceptance. These findings support those of the study by Boys et al, (2001) in which young people used alcohol and psychoactive drugs to 'help relax', 'get intoxicated', 'keep going', 'enhance activity' and 'feel better'<sup>9</sup>.

This study also found that the effects of abusing substances affected individual users as well as other students. For example, abusers disturbed other students with their irritating noise from their unnecessary loud jokes and laughter. They delayed others to use the ablution because they took hours bathing. They inadvertently vomited on their colleagues below their bunk beds. As they got hooked on substances they entirely depended on it to function physically and socially thereby affecting their class attendance, study and performance thus decreasing opportunities for them to graduate at the optimal time. Adeoti (2010) in his study titled *Factors Influencing Substance Abuse among Undergraduate Students in Osun State, Nigeria* observed that substance abuse may reduce students' chances of graduating<sup>12</sup>.

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## **V. Conclusion**

Abuse of alcohol and other drugs among students in higher institutions of learning is rapidly rising across continents. Alcohol, marijuana and other highly addictive psychoactive drugs are some of the substances abused. Some students enter the university already hooked up while others get influenced while on campus. Trigger factors for substance abuse on campus included satisfying cravings arising from addiction; desire to integrate with a social group, to read intensively for higher grades, to navigate stress and problems and for fun. Despite the ecstasy derived from the abuse of alcohol

and drugs, the study found that the ultimate agony was a catalogue of behavioural and medical related problems- poor grades due to casual attitude characterized by missing classes which ultimately increased their chances to dropout or stay longer in school, risk of being bashed by cars on the road due to poor judgement when intoxicated including being a social nuisance to other students. Medical effects included mental health problems, malnutrition, stomach ulcers and liver problems. Preventive Health Education, counseling, treatment and intensified rehabilitation are critical to combating the problem of substance abuse among young people.

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