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## Navigating the Drinking Self: A Qualitative Study of Beer Consumption Among the Working-Poor in Botswana

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### Abstract

Alcohol consumption studies in sub-Saharan Africa have largely focused on social control and regulatory mechanisms in specific settings without particular reference to how drinkers negotiate and navigate their drinking selves. Existing studies do not give enough attention to how consumers enact, make sense and experience drinking in light of state regulatory efforts. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach among twenty (20) beer drinkers, this study identifies how beer drinkers in Botswana experienced alcohol. Our findings demonstrate a theoretical category of *Negotiating the Drinking Self* where beer drinkers constructed and enacted a drinking self throughout the life-course, from the point of exposure at home through adolescence and up to maturity. The drinking self-constitutes an important part of the drinker's identity and adapts to each stage of the life-course. Among the working poor in Botswana, beer drinking is complex, situated and embedded in webs of patterned social interactions.

### Keywords

Botswana, drinking self, beer consumption, grounded theory, meanings

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## Navigating the Drinking Self: A Qualitative Study of Beer Consumption Among the Working-Poor in Botswana

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Alcohol consumption studies in sub-Saharan Africa have largely focused on social control and regulatory mechanisms in specific settings without particular reference to how drinkers negotiate and navigate their drinking selves. Existing studies do not give enough attention to how consumers enact, make sense and experience drinking in light of state regulatory efforts. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach among twenty (20) beer drinkers, this study identifies how beer drinkers in Botswana experienced alcohol. Our findings demonstrate a theoretical category of *Negotiating the Drinking Self* where beer drinkers constructed and enacted a drinking self throughout the life-course, from the point of exposure at home through adolescence and up to maturity. The drinking self-constitutes an important part of the drinker's identity and adapts to each stage of the life-course. Among the working poor in Botswana, beer drinking is complex, situated and embedded in webs of patterned social interactions.

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The consumption of alcohol exists in most societies of the world and almost every society has experience with alcohol. Michael Dietler (2006) refers to alcohol as an “embodied material culture; created specifically to be destroyed but destroyed through the transformative process of ingestion into the human body” (p. 232). He places emphasis on the fact that alcohol cannot be separated from the human body and has a deep connection with the drinker's self-identity. Stressing the pervasive nature of alcohol consumption, Mandelbaum (1965) points out that although “alcohol may be tabooed in some societies, it cannot be ignored” (p. 281). Much work in alcohol research links consumption with the social and cultural fabric of various societies. In essence, “alcohol is a cultural artifact...and it is usually useful to ask what form and meanings of drink in a particular group tell us about their entire culture and society” (Mandelbaum, 1965, p. 281). A number of studies have concluded that alcohol consumption stems from learned behavior (Eadie et al., 2010; Peterson et al., 2018), gives an opportunity for understanding the culture of a given society (Lui & Zamboanga, 2018; Murthy, 2015), and is linked to gender identity (Emslie et al., 2015; Lennox et al., 2018; Lyons & Willott, 2008). Other studies have noted the negative effects of alcohol misuse such as mortality and morbidity (Naimi et al., 2019; Rehm & Shield, 2014) and risk of HIV infection (Cook et al., 2017; Fritz et al., 2010; Letamo et al., 2016). Whilst these studies have been incisive, efforts to understand drinking experiences in non-Western contexts have been few and far between especially in sub-Saharan Africa. This is quite surprising given the rich experiences that Africans have had with beer drinking over centuries. Studies that are theory-driven have largely neglected the everyday experiences of beer drinkers in sub-Saharan Africa.

The current paper reports on the experiences of beer consumers in Botswana, how they go about drinking, and the meanings they attribute to their consumption. Our motivation for this study was that alcohol in Botswana is generally perceived to be a “problem,” yet we do

not know the social and cultural contexts under which people drink alcohol. In this paper, we examined the experiences of beer drinking and offer alternative explanations using the case of Botswana. An understanding of how people experience alcohol in their everyday lives can inform policy interventions. Additionally, understanding the social and cultural contexts of drinking can be used to develop harm-reduction activities associated with alcohol consumption as interventions can be tailor-made to the needs of specific populations.

### **Beer Consumption and Self-Identity**

Research on beer consumption has demonstrated the complexity of drinking identities across the life-course (Willott & Lyons, 2011; Wilson et al., 2013). Anthropologists have particularly been at the forefront of ethnographic studies that examine the role of beer drinking in the social organization of countries in non-Western contexts. Beer drinking has been found to have some symbolic and instrumental value that permeates the social organization and functioning of groups of people (Gee & Jackson, 2012). McAllister's (2003) work among the Xhosas in rural South Africa linked beer drinking to self-identity and community organization. McAllister concluded that the social mechanics of brewing and consuming beer were emblematic of the larger structures of community organization, gender roles and cultural significance. Dunbar et al. (2017) has recently found alcohol use to be beneficial to social bonding. Using a mixed-method approach, their study highlights that drinkers who frequent community bars are more socially engaged compared to those in large cities.

The consumption of beer and other alcohol products have been noted along gender lines. Employing a discursive content analysis, Chapman et al. (2018) observed beer drinking was a "gendered object" that was experienced through "social norms, rules, and expectations surrounding who can drink craft beer, as well as how, when, and where" (p. 309). Their study emphasized that as women drank craft beer and became active participants in the beer culture, they challenged the masculine and feminine cultures inherent in the craft beer spaces. Additionally, some studies have established that drinking identities are not stable; they shift and adapt as drinkers experience alcohol. Emslie et al. (2015) found a shift in drinkers' identities across different stages of life based on drinking expectations among Scottish women in early midlife. Their findings draw linkages between drinking patterns and marital status and highlight that single women are likely to drink more alcohol compared to married women. In this way, drinking identity was heavily associated with familial responsibility. Similarly, in a study among young women (18-25 years) in Newcastle, United Kingdom, Nicholls (2019) found that alcohol played a critical role in female socializing and fostered "togetherness." Alcohol functioned as a source of *communitas*. As women go out together at night, they "do" femininity especially when they consume wines and cocktails.

Although stage of life influences drinking behaviors, some studies suggest that the age of exposure might be context specific (Astudillo et al., 2013; Mundt, 2011). For do Carmo Nerves et al. (2015), Brazilian teenagers are likely to be exposed to alcohol during adolescence. Their findings locate the identity of young drinkers within a group of peers. Alcohol in this sense is a means for interaction and social acceptance for teenagers in Brazil.

### **Contextualizing Beer Consumption in Botswana**

Alcohol consumption is widespread in Botswana and central to the everyday lives of people (MoH, 2017). Beer drinking is particularly popular in Botswana where an average Motswana<sup>1</sup> has some experience with alcohol, either directly as a drinker, or indirectly by being

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<sup>1</sup> Motswana is a singular for Botswana citizen. The plural name is Batswana.

close to someone who is a drinker. In terms of consumption patterns, the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Status report (2018) states 48% of Botswana's population are beer drinkers, while 24% drink wine, 4% spirits and 24% drink other types of alcohol. However, drinking beer is not fixed and explicit, as occasionally most people in Botswana drink wines, spirits, traditional brews, and beer simultaneously.

There are not many studies that examine the social contexts of drinking alcohol in Botswana. The few existing studies depict a society whose socio-cultural fabric is intertwined with the use of alcohol (Claussen et al., 2005; Pitso & Obot, 2011). Molamu (1989) has long argued that drinking was central to the communal nature of life in pre-colonial Botswana, where people engaged in labor exchange to boost food production from agricultural enterprises. The communal nature of life in pre-colonial Botswana allowed communities to share their produce and alcohol consumption was central to these social activities.

Furthermore, David Suggs' (1996) study focused on gender construction and alcohol consumption in the South eastern part of Botswana and chronicled drinking patterns based on patriarchal idiosyncrasies. He highlighted that traditional Tswana weddings usually had copious amounts of *Bojalwa jwa Setswana* (a traditional home-brew), usually made of sorghum and brewed by women (Suggs, 1996). Alcohol in this sense had ceremonial value in Tswana culture and "cemented marriages between patrilineages and rewarded labor cooperation within patrilineages" (Suggs, 1996, p. 598). In the traditional Tswana society, alcohol represented a form of social currency and was consumed by older and more senior men. By being prepared by women, Suggs (1996) argues that it represented "women's productive and reproductive capabilities" (p. 598). The consumption of alcohol has over the years been nested in multiple socio-cultural meanings tied to patriarchy with male figures at the core of power and authority. What these few research studies suggest is that alcohol consumption in Botswana is broad, complex, and permeates social and cultural boundaries across time.

The consumption of alcohol continues to be a focus of debate in Botswana today. For instance, in 2008, the government of Botswana imposed a 30% levy on all alcohol products to deal with "problematic drinking." The tax increase was aimed at increasing liquor prices to make them unaffordable to drinkers (Pitso & Obot, 2011) and ultimately reduce consumption. Sebeelo (2020) has recently argued that these interventions were resisted by alcohol consumers in Botswana. To our knowledge, no nationally representative study has been carried out to assess the effectiveness of the 2008 tax levy. Over and above the tax increase, hours of operation for drinking outlets were drastically reduced and residential sales of alcohol were outlawed. The implementation of the tax levy and alcohol regulations ran concurrently.

The current study into the consumption of alcohol was undertaken to illuminate the deep-seated meanings of beer drinking in contemporary Botswana, an issue widely perceived to be problematic, yet under researched and poorly understood. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) How do drinkers experience alcohol consumption in Botswana? (2) What are the meanings that they attribute to their drinking? And (3) Do meanings of alcohol consumption change or vary over the life-course?

## **Purpose of Study**

The current study examined the experiences of beer drinkers in Botswana using grounded theory methods. We carried out semi-structured interviews with beer drinkers in the capital city of Botswana, Gaborone. Our main interest in this theme was motivated first, by the 2008 alcohol levy implementation in Botswana and second, by our realization that we do not have enough alcohol studies in African contexts. Much of the existing alcohol literature focusses on the Western world; there is a dearth of studies on how drinkers experience alcohol.

This study addresses this gap in the literature and most importantly covers an underrepresented demographic in alcohol studies.

### **Role of the Researchers**

The first author is a doctoral Sociology student at the University of Miami and a native of Botswana. He collected, analyzed data, and drafted the initial manuscript. The second author is a Sociology professor at the University of Miami who supervised the study, helped with framing the questions, IRB approval, and assisted with manuscript writing. The data study used in this study was obtained from the MA thesis undertaken by the first author in 2017.

### **Method**

We investigated how beer drinkers experience alcohol and the subjective meanings they attribute to their consumption. Grounded theory methodology fits these research questions, as it gives insights into the human experience (Charmaz, 2014). In a more precise way, grounded theory enables researchers to excavate and study implicit meanings that would ordinarily be “unseen” in other approaches. The strength of this approach is the ability to explicate human experience and interpret complex phenomena (Charmaz, 2014). Since we were more interested in the subjective experiences among beer drinkers in Botswana, grounded theory approach allowed us to answer the research questions of our study.

### **Participant Selection**

The selection of participants was based on seeking active beer drinkers who were 18 years and older. Since the study examined meanings and drinking experiences, active drinkers were selected, and non-active drinkers were excluded. In this study, we were more interested in drinking experience, only individuals who had been continuously drinking beer for a year preceding the study were deemed to be active drinkers. In sum, twenty (20) people participated in the study, twelve (12) men and eight (8) women. On average, participants had completed high school and were mostly employed in low-paying jobs. The strategy of going to bars early meant that most of the participants accessed were the “working poor.” This does not reflect many people in Botswana. The age ranged between twenty (20) and fifty-two (52) years.

### **Study Setting**

The study took place in Botswana in 2017, a landlocked country in the Southern part of Africa with a population of about 2 million people in a land measuring about 581 730 km<sup>2</sup> (about the same size as the state of Texas). It shares its borders with South Africa, Zambia, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. The country is known for its stable democracy, peace, and prudent economic management policies that have transformed the country from being one of the poorest at independence in 1966 to an upper middle-income country by the mid-90’s. While the government of Botswana has made impressive economic strides, the country continues to face challenges including high unemployment (estimated at 20%), poverty and an HIV/AIDS prevalence rate at 20% its adult population (UNAIDS, 2019). These socio-economic challenges have a direct bearing on the everyday lives of the people, including patterns of alcohol consumption.

## **Ethical Consideration**

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Miami, as well as the Office of Health Research and Development Division (HRDD) at the Ministry of Health in Botswana.

## **Procedures**

This study was conducted primarily by the first author, while the second author served in an advisory role. In terms of data collection procedures, participants were directly approached by the first author at drinking spots in Gaborone (Botswana) and asked to give verbal consent before they could enroll for the study. Data was collected through semi-structured intensive individual interviews guided by an interview guide. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. To avoid the commotion in late afternoons, participants were approached around 1400hrs, when drinking spots were about to open and many drinkers were amenable to being interviewed, especially men. All interviews with males were conducted around bars and lasted between 45 minutes to over an hour and a half. For women, a different approach was chosen as women in Botswana do not normally frequent drinking spots unless they are with a male companion (Suggs, 1996). The first author therefore undertook snowball sampling for women, where females known to him were interviewed first, then asked to refer others to participate in the study. Through this strategy, the first author was able to access and interview women mostly in non-drinking spots such as coffee shops and participant's homes. Interviews with females lasted between an hour and two hours.

## **Data Analysis**

In this study, data analysis began in the first interview since we were guided by grounded theory methods. Semi-structured individual interviews guided by an interview guide were done with twenty (20) respondents. The first author used an audio recorder for all interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Most interviews with males lasted between 45mins to over an hour and half. Interviews with females lasted a longer and some stretched to about 2hrs. In analyzing data, the first author openly coded and identified meaningful categories from transcribed data. As suggested by Charmaz (2012), coding at this level was "inductive, comparative and interactive" (p. 4). Furthermore, Corbin and Strauss (1990) advise that open coding at this level is critical as it breaks down data in an analytic way. It also "stimulates generative and comparative questions to guide the researcher upon return to the field" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). To achieve this, the first author first undertook descriptive line-by-line coding to flesh-out ideas that could form the basis of learning the data and building on conceptual ideas. Charmaz (2014) stresses line-by-line coding in grounded theory is critical as it gives an indication of what data to collect next. At this level, coding was done with gerunds. After line-by-line coding, initial codes were refined and focused to the study theme. These subsequent codes were deemed to be meaningful to further explore the experiences of beer drinkers in Botswana and "advanced the theoretical direction of the study" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). The constant comparative analysis and memo-writing was done along the coding process. The initial memo writing was reflexive and allowed for a comparison of the first five interviews. Subsequent memo writing became analytic and was an in-depth exploration and iterative process of going back to the original data to ensure that the analysis was kept close to the data. Charmaz (2012) suggests that memo writing in grounded theory is very important as it "gives you a handle on your material and a place to consider, question, and clarify what you

see happening in your data” (p. 9). Analytic memos also gave us an opportunity to build emergent categories into theoretical ones.

Since our data analysis began with the first interview, theoretical sampling was built into the interviewing process. Theoretical sampling refers to “seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 192). In our study, we used theoretical sampling to explore tentative categories with our early interviews. This process allowed us to ask focused questions that gauge progress (Charmaz, 2012). Through theoretical sampling we were able to build systematic checks in our analysis and assure ourselves that our data was robust (Charmaz, 2012). After carefully studying analytic memos, sorting, and raising conceptual codes to theoretical categories, we developed a theory of *Negotiating the Drinking Self*. Clustering and diagramming was done to show the relationship between study categories and themes as seen in Figure 1 in the next section. In our study, and as Charmaz (2014) suggests, diagramming showed the “relative power, scope, and direction of the categories in analysis as well as the connections among them” (p. 218). We found that the theory was central to our analysis, brought together initial findings, and was manifest throughout the narratives of participants. Beer drinkers constantly negotiated their drinking selves throughout their life as they were dealing with efforts to control their drinking by the government. In the next section, we discuss each category and complement it by direct quotations from participants. Pseudonyms are used for all participants quoted below.

## Results

### The Core Category: Negotiating the Drinking Self

The theory that emerged from the study and is consistent with the data is labelled as *Negotiating the Drinking Self*. Participants’ narratives demonstrate a constant negotiation of their drinking selves, from the first point of contact with alcohol through adolescence and up to their adulthood. Through negotiation of meanings, identity construction is central to the experiences of all drinkers in the study.

**Figure 1**  
*Model for Study Findings*



## Family Exposure in Childhood

For many participants, the first point of contact with alcohol was with their families in childhood. The participants either directly witnessed or were exposed to behaviors of one of their family members after they had been drinking. These behaviors were learned through observation and emboldened drinkers to experiment with alcohol.

### First Alcohol Exposure

Parents feature prominently as the main influence on alcohol related behaviors for many participants. Anita spoke of her family:

I grew up in a family where my dad used to drink alcohol almost every other day, so when he left something in the bottle, I would finish it off. Even with my mother, there was a time when she used to drink and made me drink *Storm*<sup>2</sup> and at the time I was around 11 years old.

“Finishing off” the remnants of alcohol implied that even at that young age, participants were curious about alcohol due to observing parents drinking. The curiosity was raised when children observed their fathers drink alcohol. In recounting his story, Haena, a middle-age male, spoke about how he saw his father drink, “I was raised by a man (*my father*) who drank and smoked all the time at home. Sometimes I would steal some of his drinks and he would not say anything.” Another young man, Moss, observed his father’s regular drinking:

For me, my dad and almost all his friends drank, and I always saw them happy. In my mind, I thought, “those men are always laughing when they are drunk, I need to try this too.” I would sometimes follow them and hide to see where they were going and most of the times, I saw many people laughing and appearing to be happy at the bar. I wanted to be like them.

Fathers provide the first contact point for many participants and part of it could be attributed to the patriarchal nature of Botswana, where masculinity is tied to drinking patterns.

### Extended Family Influence

Uncles, cousins, and grandmothers feature prominently in the stories of first exposure to alcohol among many participants. Toks, a young male, reported that his uncle exposed him to alcohol:

I was in primary school and had one of my uncles who was a senior teacher in Masunga<sup>3</sup>. So, every time he came from Masunga, he would pick me up so that we can come to Gaborone together. On the way, he would buy alcohol and it happened that one December he bought some beer and gave me one to taste. After that, I started drinking, especially sweet beers.

The influence of uncles was especially noted, and some participants’ stories suggest that most of the drinking took place when their parents were away. In other words, parents might not be

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<sup>2</sup> Storm, a form of alcoholic beverage

<sup>3</sup> Masunga, a place in Northern part of Botswana that is approximately 140 miles from the capital city Gaborone

aware of some of the behaviors that their children were exposed to, that influenced their drinking. Morasta's drinking tale prominently features his uncle:

In fact, uncles are worse because they have a habit of always making us taste alcohol especially when our parents are not there...my uncle would actually send me to buy Shake-Shake<sup>4</sup> for him and I would sip it along the way and even though he found that the box was half-empty, he would not say anything. That is how I learnt how to drink.

Extended family influence is also through grandmothers, who in some instances brewed and sold traditional brews from their homes. Motiler a young male remarked:

Sometimes it is about how you grew up. You grow up in a family where there is alcohol and when you start drinking, it is no big deal...Well my grandmother used to do traditional brews at home, and I would ask her to give me some and she did. By the time I tried beer, I was confident, unlike my other friends.

A young female, Katly grew up in a home where alcohol was sold:

I grew up in a shebeen<sup>5</sup> that is still operating to this day. That is where I learnt how to drink. So, when my mother sent me to sell *Khadi*<sup>6</sup> to someone, amounting to P5.00<sup>7</sup>, I would give them an equivalent of P8.00, then drink the difference. It became a habit and that is why I still drink to this day.

Coupled with the immediate family, members of the extended family also expose children to alcohol when they are young. The notable role of members of the extended family lend support to the communal nature of family structures in Botswana.

### **Adolescence and Experimentation**

Adolescence marked another important period in the lived experiences of drinkers. While the family provided the first exposure with alcohol for some participants, for others it was not until they were in their teens that they started experimenting with alcohol. Peer influence on drinking behaviors is most prevalent around this period. Participants experimented with alcohol and in some instances engaged in dangerous drinking. The excitement meant that sometimes drinking became a risky activity. Anita recalled an incident in high school:

One time when I was still a high school student, I went out with a group of friends to buy alcohol. I remember there was an event, something like a fashion show, so we got drunk and the teachers found out. We were disciplined.

Drinking escapades with friends and pressure to drink were common and entailed some form of risk-taking. Peer influence could also be due to a desire to fit-in with friends. Alcohol consumption in this instance is used as a conduit for sociability.

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<sup>4</sup> Shake-Shake is the name of a popular sorghum beer.

<sup>5</sup> Shebeen is a residential dwelling that sold alcohol. Traditionally, it was operated by women called "Shebeen Queens."

<sup>6</sup> Khadi is a form of traditional brew that is popular in Botswana.

<sup>7</sup> P5.00 denotes the Botswana currency, the PULA. One PULA is equivalent to about \$10.

## **Risky Drinking**

Stories of being excited and curious about drinking for the first time permeated the narratives of some drinkers. Mpopi a young male, intimated that:

It is all about growing up and just being curious about a lot of things. It was like that for me. In fact, one of my friends once had a blackout when we were doing Form 2<sup>8</sup>. Another friend brought whiskey to school and it was our first time to drink it. Since we were curious, we just drank it undiluted and that is when one of my friends had a black out.

Drinking alcohol as an adolescent also meant getting into trouble, especially when hanging with the wrong crowd. Makepe, a young male narrated how he spent time in jail as a 16year old because of beating-up someone:

We got into an argument with this guy and we beat him up and afterwards he was involved in another fight with different guys who beat him to death. They then threw his body at the sewage ponds near Tsholofelo<sup>9</sup>. The police later came to arrest us.

The adolescent stage is significant in the experiences of drinkers in Botswana and is probably where a lot of experimenting with alcohol happens. Peer influence and curiosity to experiment with alcohol are pervasive during this stage, mainly because most adolescents experience freedom for the first time. The adolescent stage is predominantly filled with fun, experimentation, and sometimes risk taking, which poses the greatest challenge to the drinking self.

## **Problematic Drinking**

Problematic drinking is closely related to risky drinking as both occur during the adolescent stage. To address the issue of problematic drinking, participants were asked the question, “Has alcohol ever caused you problems?” Heavy drinking and encountering some problems were a result of lack of maturity and youthful exuberance. Moss shared such an experience:

I stole Autumn-harvest<sup>10</sup> bottle and drank it all undiluted. I then “blacked-out” in the yard, the next thing I wake up in hospital. I didn’t even tell anyone about this experience.

Some of the issues around problematic drinking had to do with the context of drinking in Botswana where people patronize bars adjacent to their neighborhoods. This means for most of the night there are many drunk people walking home after bars closed, which has in some instances exposed them to muggings from petty thieves. In his tale, White reported being lost many times while walking home: “I remember leaving the bar and trying to walk home only to realize that I am the other side of town. It was only after I told people where I lived that I was taken home.” Closely linked with taking risks, problematic drinking was a constant feature

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<sup>8</sup> Form 2, is a level equivalent to junior high school in the United States.

<sup>9</sup> Tsholofelo is a working-class neighborhood in the capital city, Gaborone.

<sup>10</sup> Autumn-harvest is a cheap South African wine made from red grapes.

during the adolescent and experimentation stage and participants' stories demonstrate that for the most part, drinkers lacked experienced.

### **Drinking as Maturity**

Maturing as a drinker came after participants had been drinking for quite some time. Changes to life circumstances are central to maturity and entailed moderating and controlling one's drinking patterns. Many drinkers came to control their drinking once they were beyond adolescence.

### **Moderate Drinking**

Moderating drinking was a feature for many participants especially as they became experienced as alcohol drinkers. White narrated that, "When I was young, I used to drink almost all the time and was really excited about alcohol. Nowadays I drink sometimes, three months can pass without any alcohol because I have better things to do." For Kukie, having children gave her a different outlook on life and led her to moderate her drinking:

I have since reduced my drinking because now I have kids, and I am older. When I have money, I think about my kids first instead of alcohol. Besides when you have kids, you have challenges to think about rather than alcohol.

### **Age and Self-Control**

The experiences of participants suggest the meaning of alcohol shifts over time. Growing older was a significant marker of self-control and maturity. Sometimes maturity appeared after some changes in life, such as marriage. Quickie, a middle-age female stated that, "My reasons for drinking have changed, like today I cannot be influenced by friends. I make my own decisions. The other thing is that I am now working and have other priorities compared to in the past." Maturity and self-control were sometimes induced by a bad drinking experience. Moss told a story about how his drinking caused trouble for him. As a result, he had to moderate his drinking, "We were all drunk and had a head-on collision with another car. All my friends died, and I am the lone survivor. It was only then that I realized I had to change my drinking habits." Haena commented, "I have had a series of car crashes. Seven to be specific, and I have been charged with driving under the influence of alcohol many many times. I realized I have to change, otherwise I would get into trouble." In general, the shift in meanings and self-control were prominent in the experiences of participants. Having a family also had an impact on how participants (especially women) dealt with alcohol consumption. Negotiating drinking permeated the experiences of drinkers and demonstrated that as drinkers become mature, or were faced with new challenges, their drinking selves shifted and adapted to new situations.

### **Gender and Construction of Drinking Identity**

Participant narratives suggest that drinking is patterned along gender lines. There are indications that for some women, motherhood led to changes in their drinking selves. Drinking at bars was a risky activity for some women as men took advantage of their drunkenness. This becomes more perilous in a country with one of highest HIV rates in the world. Anita mentioned women should always be careful when drinking in bars especially as men constantly offer to buy her beer and expect sexual favors:

I am never comfortable (*in bars*) because men are always calling me and proposing love. Some of them are rowdy and rude... They only have one intention that after he buys me alcohol then we should leave together to their houses after the bar closes. That's what I don't like.

Sharon narrated an incident when some men bought them beer and demanded sexual favors but were helped by a male companion:

Sharon: I never agree to take their alcohol because I know they will give me trouble after that.

Interviewer: So, have you ever taken alcohol from a stranger? Like a man unknown to you?

Sharon: They [*men*] once bought beer for us and gave us trouble and lucky enough we were with our male friends who helped us get out of that situation.

Katly, another female remembers an incident of drunkenness that landed her in a stranger's home:

I once found myself naked in a man's house one morning. I did not even know how I got there or what happened that night, so it is issues like these that happens to us [*women*]. The sad part is that some of these men are heartless. Even when they see that you are incapacitated, they still want to use you.

In general, women's stories suggest drinking in bars was a risky affair. Bars and other drinking spots are "male spaces" and provide several risks for women including unwanted sexual advances. It is when females and in the company of their partners or male friends that bars become a safer place for drinking.

## Discussion

The primary purpose of the study was to investigate the social and subjective meanings of alcohol among drinkers in Botswana and to understand how they experience their drinking. Our analysis indicates a study theory of *Negotiating the Drinking Self* that permeates the narratives of participants. Beer drinkers in Botswana undergo multiple shifts in how they perceive, make sense, and internalize beer consumption from the point of contact in their respective families until they become adult drinkers. The shift in meanings of drinking aligns with the notion of the self as a "process" (Blumer, 1969) that is reflexive and changes when an individual undergoes various experiences. Consequently, selves change as people move into new patterns of relationships, especially those that carry new responsibilities, so that employment can lead to moderation in drinking. This happens as a person's self-changes to a responsible, employed self. In our study, we found out that the drinking self becomes a product and a producer of social relations throughout the interaction process. This finding lends itself to the symbolic interaction perspective that locates meaning-making through a process of social interaction (Gusfield, 1996). Our findings highlight that at each stage of drinker's lives, drinking is a situated, reflexive, and creative activity.

Data from the current study reveal young people's first exposure to alcohol was often through their families, a finding consistent with existing research (Fergusson et al., 1994;

Peeters et al., 2016). The family unit is the focal point of exposure where most participants observe, develop interest in, and in some cases, try drinking for the first time. This finding aligns with existing research that have focused on drinking that occurs away from bars and other licensed premises (Callinan et al., 2014). It is also critical to note that for some participants, exposure to alcohol might not come until they were teenagers. Our data reveal initial meanings and drinking-selves are constructed at the family level. Some research studies examining the association between drinking and familial exposure suggests that the availability of parents at home could serve as a protective factor (Komro et al., 2007). In other words, when parents want to act as role models to their children, they might drink at home, but not in the presence of their children.

In our study, participants narrated stories of parents who allowed them to sip alcohol within family contexts. While it is unclear why parents in Botswana would let their children sip alcohol, some studies suggest it could be harmful whilst others conclude it could benefit children. Evidence exists that some parents allow children to sip as they believe it has protective effects for their children (Friese et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2012). That is, parents believe that allowing children to sip will make them resist alcohol when they are adolescents. Wadolowski et al. (2016) for instance, suggests that some parents might supply a small amount of alcohol to their children to protect them when they are out drinking with peers. The idea is to normalize drinking so that children can control themselves in the absence of parents. On the other hand, some studies suggest that when parents provide children with alcohol it leads to alcohol-related harm such as binge drinking and alcohol use disorders (Degenhardt et al., 2015; Mattick et al., 2018; White et al., 2020). We are not aware of any existing empirical studies that have investigated drinking contexts in families in Botswana, and we believe that more studies in this area are warranted.

Extended family influence on drinking behaviors permeated the stories of participants who reported tales of their grandmothers brewing and selling traditional brews from their homes. This finding lends support to the communal nature of African families, where it is not uncommon to have members of the extended family living in a single homestead. Consequently, influences to drink extend beyond biological parents to other extended family members. This influence might probably be because some extended family members, like uncles, might not have a normative urge to act as role models compared to biological parents. Contrary to Eitle et al. (2013) findings that extended American Indian families provide protective effects against alcohol use problems, our study suggests that members of the extended family in Botswana might expose children to alcohol. Our data point to a different direction in terms of children's exposure to alcohol, which many alcohol studies in non-Western contexts might not have previously considered. More precisely, in societies that are predominantly communal, consideration must be given to the fundamental role played by extended family members in exposing children to alcohol.

Participant narratives were also imbued with tales of risk taking and problematic drinking during the adolescent stage. Most young people reported engaging in risky behaviors with their peers, a finding consistent with existing studies that note risk-taking during adolescence (do Carmo Nerves et al., 2015; Kelly et al., 2012; Niland et al., 2013). It is important to note that while previous studies (see Boekeloo et al., 2011; McDonald & Sylvester, 2014) have noted a distinction between drinking to get drunk and sociability, our data suggests that among beer drinkers in Botswana, the fault line might be permeable, and the distinction is not as clear as previously found. Beer drinkers set out to drink because of the need to socialize and get drunk in the process. Getting drunk becomes an unintended consequence that comes with socializing with friends.

While themes around gender and construction of identity were sparse, there were some issues worth noting that emerged from our data. One of the key issues was how motherhood

transformed drinking patterns for some women participants. Being a mother and raising children became a significant marker of a shift in drinking behaviors. The salience of maturity becomes important for temperate drinking. Moderating drinking behavior due to motherhood and other responsibilities have been reported elsewhere (see Laborde & Mair, 2012; Matusiewicz et al., 2016). In a study among Australian mothers, Killingsworth (2006) concluded that drinking was a marker for positive new identities that depicted women as independent. Drinking allowed women to demonstrate their agency that aligned with their roles as mothers. In our study, women participants told stories that highlight gendered drinking patterns. For instance, some women reported feeling insecure and being subjected to unwanted sexual advances in bars. Some studies have concluded that bars and many drinking outlets are “male spaces” (Brooks, 2011; Thompson & Cracco, 2008). Suggs (1996) explains that one of the reasons why women might feel unsafe in drinking spaces is that the “bar is considered a male domain” (p. 600). This does not necessarily mean that women in Botswana do not drink beer. They do so in the comfort of their homes away from bars and other drinking outlets. In this way, women in Botswana feminize their drinking selves and produce their own identities away from mainstream bars.

### **Limitations**

The current study has some limitations. The setting of the study was in an urban area and similar research might yield different results in rural settings. Few women were interviewed and most of them were unemployed or among the working poor. This means issues of gender could not be adequately thrashed out. While going to bars early was successful in accessing potential participants, it attracted individuals with similar characteristics: young and relatively poor drinkers. The result was that a different set of drinkers (especially the more affluent) were missed in the sample. Researchers intending to use this strategy might come up with alternative recruitment methods to capture more affluent drinkers. Due to the small sample, caution must be exercised to generalize study findings to other contexts.

### **Study Implications**

In this study, we explored the meanings of beer drinkers in Botswana and we believe that our findings contribute to the alcohol literature in various ways. First, while alcohol studies have largely placed limited emphasis on the social-self and neglected cultural contexts, our findings position the social-self at the center of drinker’s social lives. That is, at each of stage of the drinker’s experience, there is constant negotiation, meaning making, and shift of the self for beer drinkers in Botswana.

Second, our findings thrust to light the salient role of the family and its influences on drinking patterns in Botswana. Specifically, we found extended family members to be central in exposing children to alcohol within family settings. Based on these findings, we suggest that linkages between non-immediate family members and alcohol exposure provide a fertile ground for further research, especially in non-Western societies. Furthermore, we propose that studies that thoroughly examine the integrated nature of families in non-Western contexts and their effect on drinking behaviors among young people are warranted. There is a need to investigate parental involvement in children’s exposure to alcohol to determine if it cushions them against risky drinking.

Lastly, allowing children to sip alcohol provides an interesting theme that has not been adequately captured by alcohol researchers in sub-Saharan Africa. Future research might examine the contexts under which parents allow their children to sip alcohol within family contexts, and the impact it has on the children’s drinking patterns. The study found problematic

drinking to be more prevalent around the adolescent stage, a finding consistent with existing literature. We propose that more qualitative research efforts in Botswana might be leveraged to alcohol use among young people in order to examine meaning-making, self-identity and the nuances of consumption in these age cohorts. These measures will ideally facilitate evidence-based policy initiatives that are relevant to young people and their patterns of drinking. In sum, we believe that the paper has set the tone for further research on the subjective meanings of alcohol consumption in non-Western contexts and could be further explored using more rigorous sociological techniques.

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