

Some young Nigerians say heavy drinking is fun: Controls must keep pace with culture

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Alcohol consumption has a long history in Nigeria, especially in the southern region, where it was not forbidden by religion. In the past, only adult men were culturally allowed to drink. It was taboo for young people to drink alcohol because it was generally believed that "drinking was a sign of being an [elder](#)".

Alcohol served multiple societal functions in the past. It flowed during celebrations and significant events. These included chieftaincy enthronements, new yam festivals, child naming ceremonies, and even funerals. Although [drinking](#) was central to almost every social gathering, intoxication was forbidden. Intoxicated drinkers were punished by the community elders, as a deterrent to others.

With help from the British colonial government, Nigeria's drinking culture changed, ditching abstinence and moderation. The British colonial government relied heavily on revenue from [alcohol taxes](#) and levies. To increase their cash-flow, the British encouraged the availability and [heavy drinking](#) of imported alcoholic beverages. When Heineken-owned Nigerian Breweries and Guinness Nigeria were established in [1946 and 1962](#), their marketing targeted women and [young people](#). Their marketing departments drove sales by associating [alcohol](#) consumption with modernity and sexual [enhancement](#).

Nigeria is a key market for competing multinational alcohol companies. To gain [market share](#), these companies have developed sophisticated and aggressive marketing methods targeting young people, including adolescents. Alcohol availability has tripled, and so has the number of heavy [drinkers](#). Consequently, alcohol-related problems are also [rising](#). Alcohol is associated with problems such as [cancer](#), violence, sexually

transmitted [infections](#) and truancy.

Nigeria lacks alcohol control [policies](#). Alcohol production and marketing are largely unregulated. Multinational alcohol producers often employed marketing strategies outlawed in their countries of origin, to sell their brands in Nigeria. The results are [evident](#). [Research](#) has shown that abstinence and moderate drinking are now uncool, and heavy drinking and intoxication make good badges of [honor](#) in Nigeria.

In my recent [research](#), I examined why adolescents and young adults in Nigeria drink heavily, and why they consider it a source of fun or pleasure. I also recorded whether they saw heavy drinking as rebellion against traditionalist values. My research is important because it shows treating alcohol use as pathological, and denying pleasure-seeking as a motive for drinking, is no longer tenable in contemporary Nigeria. The study also shows that understanding these changing motives for drinking could inform interventions that target harmful drinking practices.

Deliberate intoxication for fun and pleasure

I interviewed 72 young people aged 18–24 years, who live in Benin City, Nigeria, to understand their perspectives. Most of the participants were students. They all agreed that drinking alcohol was fashionable in communities of young people. Sobriety was considered obsolete, and deliberate over-consumption of alcohol was common. The reason they gave was that young people just want to feel drunk.

According to my study, fun and excitement—directly and indirectly—were acceptable reasons for heavy drinking and intoxication. Individuals didn't consider the associated reduced mental control a big deal. "I took whisky; I wanted to drink to stupor. I wanted to see how it felt like to be really drunk and misbehaving; that was my aim of drinking that way. So I drank and drank and drank until (I became drunk). "

Another added: "There was a day I took one full glass of (Johnnie Walker) Red Label (40% alcohol by volume), and in less than 10–15 min, I couldn't feel myself again. I could barely walk, my friend took me home ... To me, it was fun. I felt the way I have never felt before, so that is fun ... it was exciting because friends will now remind you that this was what you did and you cannot remember. "

There are also gender aspects to youth drinking culture. Female participants who were filmed while drunk considered the clips hilarious. Male participants said they took turns in providing alcohol for members of their friendship networks. This practice is generally believed to strengthen friendship bonds. Although providing alcohol may in part be a means of reenacting the male-dominated traditional drinking practice in contemporary Nigeria, it also led to heavy drinking and intoxication.

Surprisingly, these youths believed they had not breached any social norms by drinking to intoxication. But they did admit it all came at a cost. Some had experienced negative events like hangovers, injuries, violence, and missing key academic tests while passed out from [alcohol consumption](#).

Solution to drinking problems

The current lack of alcohol policies in Nigeria only serves the interests of alcohol producers to the detriment of public health. Even though alcohol is a legal drug, increasing [evidence](#) has shown that no amount is risk-free.

Policymakers should focus on providing information on low-risk drinking measures for legal drinkers. Tailored, evidence-based interventions that discourage heavy drinking and support safe drinking norms or abstinence should be developed in Nigeria.

Interventions should draw from the elements of local drinking cultures that prohibit heavy drinking and intoxication. Given the prominent role of friendship networks, policymakers should develop interventions using such platforms to promote safe consuming cultures and other pleasurable activities with zero or low risk.

The World Health Organisation has also developed effective strategies called [SAFER](#) to reduce alcohol abuse and related harm. Nigeria could also adopt similar measures.

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