



Alcohol Use Among Young Adult Women: Predictors, Patterns, And Psychosocial Correlates

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I. ABSTRACT

Alcohol consumption has shown a steady rise globally, particularly among women and older adults. Understanding these trends is essential for designing effective interventions. The present paper synthesizes demographic patterns of alcohol use, gender-specific differences, and the psychosocial factors associated with alcohol consumption among women. Historically, societal norms have discouraged women from drinking, resulting in stigma and limited research attention. However, emerging evidence indicates that women constitute a significant proportion of alcohol users worldwide. Although parallels exist between alcohol and illicit drug use, notable distinctions highlight the need for independent investigation. Women who consume alcohol often face heightened stigma, which acts as a barrier to treatment and increases vulnerability to social and health-related harms.

Keywords: Alcoholism, risk factors, women, psychosocial correlates

II. Introduction

Alcohol consumption has evolved across historical periods, from ritualistic and medicinal use in ancient societies to widespread recreational use in modern times. During the Mughal era, alcohol use was prevalent, although Emperor Babar later prohibited drinking within his army after recognizing its detrimental effects on military functioning. In pre-independence India, the Indian National Congress advocated for alcohol prohibition in 1937 to protect vulnerable populations. Several Indian states—including Nagaland, Gujarat, Manipur, Lakshadweep, and Bihar—continue to enforce restrictions on alcohol sales, although illicit consumption remains common.

Alcohol use typically begins during adolescence and peaks in early adulthood. Initiation at ages 14–15 is associated with persistent patterns of heavy drinking in later adolescence (18–20 years). University students of both genders exhibit high-risk drinking behaviours, and recent studies suggest that heavy alcohol use during early adolescence may impair brain development.

Women's drinking patterns vary widely. While some consume alcohol socially without adverse consequences, others engage in harmful drinking that affects physical and psychological well-being. Researchers now conceptualize alcohol-related problems along a continuum, ranging from low-risk drinking to severe dependence.

III. Conceptual Framework of Alcohol Use

A. Alcohol Abuse and Dependence

Diagnostic frameworks such as the DSM and ICD define alcohol abuse and dependence using behavioural, physiological, and psychological criteria. Abuse involves recurrent failure in responsibilities, legal issues, hazardous behaviours, interpersonal conflicts, and excessive drinking. Dependence includes tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, impaired control, unsuccessful attempts to reduce drinking, and significant time spent consuming or recovering from alcohol.



B. Habituation and Psychological Dependence

Habituation refers to learned patterns of alcohol use in specific contexts, such as social gatherings or stress-relief situations. Unlike physical dependence, psychological dependence is a learned behaviour and does not meet medical criteria for addiction.

C. Binge Drinking

Binge drinking—defined as consuming five or more drinks on a single occasion—is the most common form of alcohol misuse. Although not always indicative of dependence, binge drinking has severe social and behavioural consequences and poses significant risks during pregnancy, including fetal alcohol syndrome.

Stages of Alcoholism

Alcoholism progresses through four stages:

1. **Contact Phase:** Initial exposure to alcohol, often accompanied by psychological reliance without physical withdrawal.
2. **Prodromal Phase:** Increased tolerance, blackouts, and concealment of drinking behaviour.
3. **Crucial Phase:** Loss of control, failed attempts to regulate drinking, and escalation of harmful consequences.
4. **Chronic Phase:** Persistent drinking, severe social deterioration, unemployment, and potential hospitalization.

Alcoholism vs. Social Drinking

Not all individuals who consume alcohol qualify as alcoholics. Social drinkers typically maintain self-control, adhere to low-risk drinking guidelines, and avoid harmful consequences. In contrast, alcoholics exhibit impaired control, persistent dependence, and recurrent relapse despite attempts to reduce consumption. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) defines low-risk drinking as ≤ 7 drinks per week for women and ≤ 3 drinks per day.

DSM-V Criteria for Alcohol Use Disorder

DSM-V conceptualizes alcohol abuse and dependence under the unified diagnosis of Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD). A minimum of two symptoms—including impaired control, craving, hazardous use, withdrawal, and social impairment—indicates AUD. Severity is categorized as mild (2–3 symptoms), moderate (4–5), or severe (≥ 6).

Environmental Correlates of Alcohol Use

Environmental factors significantly influence alcohol consumption. Parental drinking patterns, peer norms, and social modelling contribute to early initiation and continued use. Young individuals often begin drinking to conform to peer groups, and permissive parental attitudes increase susceptibility to alcohol and other substances.

IV. Literature Review

Empirical studies highlight multiple predictors of alcohol use:

- **Parental Monitoring:** Lower parental supervision increases the likelihood of drinking, smoking, and drug use (Borawski et al., 2003).
- **Parenting Style:** Negligent parenting correlates with higher experimentation with alcohol and drugs (Adalbjarnardottir & Hafsteinsson, 2001).
- **Neurocognitive Factors:** Alcohol dependence is associated with anomalies in brain regions governing impulsive decision-making (Claus et al., 2011).



- **Impulsivity and Reward Sensitivity:** Hazardous drinking is mediated by positive alcohol expectancies and low refusal self-efficacy (Gullo et al., 2011).
- **Self-Esteem:** Lower self-esteem is linked with substance use, including alcohol and heroin (Khajedaluce et al., 2013).
- **Gender Differences:** Women with low self-esteem show greater concern about drinking risks after exposure to prevention messages (Neumann et al., 2009).
- **Stress Exposure:** Higher stress levels correlate with increased AUDIT scores and impulsivity (Reed et al., 2012).
- **Peer Influence:** Sensation-seeking adolescents are more susceptible to peer pressure for substance use (Slater, 2003; Yanovitzky, 2006).
- **Parental Supervision:** Reduced parental control indirectly increases risk-taking behaviours in early adolescence (Wang et al., 2013).

V. Objectives of the Study

1. To identify predictors of alcoholism among young adult women.
2. To compare predictors between social drinkers and alcoholic young adult women.
3. To examine interrelationships among sensation seeking, impulsivity, self-esteem, spiritual well-being, academic achievement, family environment, and peer pressure.

VI. Research Methodology

Sample

The study comprised 550 young women aged 20–25 years from ten randomly selected colleges/universities in Punjab. Participants represented diverse academic disciplines. Using AUDIT scores, 180 women were identified as alcohol users: 90 social drinkers (scores 0–15) and 90 alcoholics (scores above 15). Snowball and purposive sampling techniques were employed.

D. Tools Used

- Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT)
- Severity of Alcohol Dependence Questionnaire
- Sensation Seeking Scale Form V
- Barratt Impulsiveness Scale
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale
- Spiritual Well-Being Scale
- Family Environment Scale
- Emerging Adulthood Peer Pressure Inventory

VII. Conclusion

Alcohol use among women is rising, with initiation occurring at increasingly younger ages. Gender differences in drinking patterns have narrowed, and heavy drinking is strongly associated with early initiation, smoking, and cannabis use. Although prevalence remains higher among men, women represent a growing consumer base—an insight recognized by the alcohol industry, which increasingly markets flavoured and light beverages to attract female non-drinkers. Despite this trend, research in India continues to overlook women drinkers, underscoring the need for focused investigation and gender-sensitive interventions.



VIII. REFERENCES

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