



## Health Impacts of Alcohol Consumption: Report on Focus Group Findings

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### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** Alcohol is one of the most widely used drug substances in the world. Most people drink a small or moderate amount of alcohol to make them calm and enhance their social activities. Alcohol have become many individuals' livelihood and that itself is a major catastrophe for some people. This study aims to obtain perspectives in regards to Alcohol consumption among participants of different age groups, education backgrounds, religions, races and social statuses.

**Methods:** A focus group discussion consists of 3 male and 3 female Malaysians with age range from 16 to 45 was conducted. It consists of a mix group of alcohol consumers and non-alcohol consumers, students and adults from different racial backgrounds, genders and age groups. The participants were approached through qualitative research where they were asked both open-ended and close-ended questions based on various themes regarding the subject matter.

**Results:** In this study, peer pressure is one of the root causes that made most of the participants to initially try alcohol. Family's acceptance towards alcohol drinking becomes a confounding factor that gives the child to do as they wish. Those who are still in school or universities showed that they consumed more alcohol. The realization of the younger age group towards health implications of alcohol consumption is still poor compared to those of the older age group. Although participants

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were well aware of the social problems, it is limited to their experiences as well as social backgrounds.

**Conclusion:** Participants' knowledge regarding alcohol consumption has to be improved. Further analysis on the alcohol drinking behaviour on a larger scale might be needed to alleviate all the problems caused by alcohol consumption.

*Keywords: Alcohol; health impact; focus group discussion.*

## 1.INTRODUCTION

As the popular adage goes, health is wealth. In this contemporary era, what more do we need than to be in the pink of our health? However, the sad truth is that individual social behaviours have subsequently impacted health tremendously. One such behaviour is the habit of alcohol consumption.

Alcohol is one of the most widely used drug substances in the world. Most people drink a small or moderate amount of alcohol to make them calm and enhance their social activities. However, people who use alcohol and are prone to have negative effects on any aspects of their lives including health, relationship, work, and studies are considered to have an alcohol menace. The severity of alcohol problems depends on factors including the type of alcohol you drink, how much you drink and how long you have been drinking [1]

Based on 2014 data, the prevalence of current drinker among male and female in Malaysia shows 17.2% and 5.7% respectively and 23.6% of the current drinkers in Malaysia had practiced risky drinking [2]. The findings from NHMS 2011 revealed that Chinese showed the highest prevalence of consumption followed by Indian and Malays showed the least. The highest prevalence of alcohol consumption between 18 to 39 years old and it declined by the advanced

age (Table1).It was seen that around 32 percent of Malaysian respondents aged between 25 to 34 years old said drank functional beverages several times a week according to 2019 survey conducted in Malaysia [3]. However, approximately 13 percent of respondents that were 65 or older drank less than once a month in the United Kingdom. The same age group had the biggest share of respondents (10 percent) that stated that they drink daily [4]. Deaths caused by alcohol in Malaysia for male and female respectively are mostly due to road traffic accidents (17.6% and 10.9%), liver cirrhosis (16.8% and 16.2%) and cancer (2.2% and 0.6%) [5].

Alcohol have become many individuals' livelihood and that itself is a major catastrophe for some people. In Malaysia, alcohol consumers are mostly involved in road accidents that took away so many precious lives who did not do anything wrong. This study is a golden opportunity to explore on the various domains of alcohol consumption that concerns the health of the general populace. The health impacts of alcohol consumption and a public's point of view towards alcohol consumption are discussed through qualitative research approach. This study aims to obtain perspectives in regard to alcohol consumption among participants of different age groups, education backgrounds, religions, races and social statuses.

**Table 1. Alcohol consumption in Malaysia by age**

Age	Current drinker			Risky drinker		
	n	N	Prevalence (%)	n	N	Prevalence (%)
13-17	83	121,053	4.2 (3.3, 5.6)	17	303,305	26.8 (15.9, 41.5)
18-29	504	866,650	14.0 (12.2, 16.0)	142	220,300	26.4 (21.4, 32.0)
30-39	418	568,060	14.5 (12.8, 16.5)	94	126,364	23.1 (18.4, 28.7)
40-49	354	435,155	13.2 (11.3, 15.4)	80	98,166	23.3 (18.3, 29.2)
50-59	250	244,664	10.5 (8.8, 12.4)	39	40,180	17.9 (12.6, 24.7)
>=60	150	158,621	7.7 (6.2, 9.5)	23	25,572	16.9 (10.7, 25.5)

*Source: Alcohol Consumption and Risky Drinking Patterns in Malaysia: Findings from NHMS 2011*

## **2.MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **2.1. Study Design**

Qualitative study in the form of focus group discussion (FGD).The respondents were selected by non-probability sampling.

A focus group discussion involves gathering people from similar backgrounds or experiences together to discuss a specific topic of interest, whereby it is a form of qualitative research through which questions are asked about their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions or ideas (Baral, Uprety and Lamichhane, 2016).

### **2.2 Selection Criteria**

The first step involved in this discussion is recruiting the participants for the study. In this study, a mix group of alcohol consumers and non-alcohol consumers, students and adults from different racial backgrounds, genders and age groups were selected so that more analysis and exploration on their beliefs, the religious background ,social background and age factor can be done. All the participants were older than 16 years.

### **2.3 Team Members**

A team consisting of moderators, minute-takers, timekeepers and a report writer were formed where a total of 5 members were involved in the team. The team was led by two moderators who can facilitate the entire discussion in a systematic order, and both are fluent in English and Malay.

### **2.4 Themes Involved**

Google form was utilized to garner basic information as it can be easily shared to the participants using emails and WhatsApp. It will also be convenient for them as they can answer them whenever they are available. As for the main five themes, semi-structured questions were asked during the focus group discussion (FGD) where the total duration for the discussion 50 minutes and it was carried out through the Zoom platform.

### **2.5 Methods Used for Data Collection**

As for the finalization of the date and time of focus group discussion (FGD), google sheets were utilized to do availability sensing, this

allowed the researchers to see all the time that is available for the participants and what is the time that everyone corresponded with one another. This method was incorporated as it is easier and highly convenient for the participants.The participants were asked on probing questions revolving around the different themes that were prepared by the researchers. As for the findings and data from the discussion, the researcher transcribed the data from the Zoom recording and recorded it accordingly.

### **2.6 Sampling Method**

Purposive sampling method was utilized for this focus group discussion. Participants in this focus group discussion (FGD) were immensely diverse, where they constituted school students, university students, adults of both genders who both work and do not work. The age range of the participants were also highly variable as opinions from different age groups can be garnered.

### **2.7 Study Design**

Focus group discussion method was chosen as a qualitative study. A focus group discussion involves gathering people from similar backgrounds or experiences together to discuss a specific topic of interest, whereby it is a form of qualitative research through which questions are asked about their perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, opinions or ideas (Baral, Uprety and Lamichhane, 2016). The participants were approached through this qualitative research where they were asked both probing open-ended and close-ended questions based on various themes regarding the subject matter [6]. Total of 6 participants from Peninsular Malaysia were involved in this discussion. Approach of participants was done using common contacts, friends and family members. Different themes in forms of questions were generated and the main focus group discussion revolved around these themes.

### **2.8 Data Compilation**

Participants' backgrounds were systematically organised using the tabulation method. Rough data analysis was done as the first step to get the basic information on the type of alcohol consumed and their frequency, health impacts caused by alcohol consumption from participants' perspectives, financial burdens of alcohol consumption from participants' perspectives, alcohol interference with participants' lives and reasons for participants to continue alcohol

consumption despite knowing its fatality. It was followed by a detailed analysis by compiling the detailed responses.

### 3. RESULTS

In this FGD, the total number of male and female participants were equal, in which there were three males and three females. The age group of the participants varied whereby one participant was a secondary school student, two were university students, and three were adults. In this FGD, there were a total of four alcohol consumers and only two non-alcohol consumers (Table2). The type of alcohol consumed related to their financial background whereby the school student consumes beer whereas others consume whiskey and vodka which are significantly more expensive. Apart from that, in this FGD, there were two Muslims, and despite their religion restrictions, one of the participants consume alcohol as it is how she socializes with her clients in the corporate world she works in. Peer pressure is definitely a key factor that should be weighed in as almost all our participants started consuming alcohol due to this sole reason. Social problems stated by the participants were highly in relation to their specific lives and how alcohol has impacted them or the people around them.

#### **Theme 1: First consumption of alcohol and the reason**

The glaring reason to start alcohol consumption is that they learnt it from their peers or friends. Hence, peer pressure is seen to be a pivotal and cardinal root cause on why our participants first started with alcohol. Another reason presented was due to their work requirements as that is the way they interact with their business clients. On the other hand, when family themselves do it, it allowed our other participant to try it out as well where it was accompanied by immense amount of inquisitiveness in himself.

#### **Theme 2: Perception of the family towards alcohol consumption**

Based on the second theme, a few factors weigh in as the experience of every participant is different. An Indian housewife in this study said that "My family is not against alcohol because my father is also an alcoholic, and they are also aware of my habits because I usually drink during family occasions as well". It indirectly shows the acceptance of alcohol drinking in her family. A 16 years old Indian alcohol drinker

stated that "My family is totally against alcohol consumption. So, when they got to know about my alcohol consumption they scolded and even beat me up. Now, they are not aware of my habits. I know how to hide things".

As we are all well aware of, those of the Islam religion are forbidden from drinking alcohol however, one of the Muslim participants(R5) consumes alcohol and her husband(R6) also comes from the same religion where they are perfectly acceptable of that habit, as they call themselves as the modern Malays. On the other hand, another participant of the same religion, says that his family is completely against it and his reasons were the obvious, which is due to religion restrain. Some participants' families are completely against this alcohol consuming habit where they even resorted to physical violence as a form of punishment while others are perfectly fine with it. As such, we truly believe that one's influence towards alcohol may arise from family itself where they get direct exposure when they are given the permission to do so.

#### **Theme 3: Challenges being faced by alcohol consumer in the circle of your non-alcohol consuming friends**

Most of the respondents tried not to consume alcohol when non-alcohol consuming friends are around to avoid the uncomfortable environment. The findings were significant where it showed that most of them had problems with their friends and some even went on to the extent of getting into fights.

#### **Theme 4: Awareness of health issues related to alcohol**

It was found that some of the participants of the older age groups are diagnosed with some health conditions, however they do not think that their health concerns are totally related to their alcohol consumption. Most of the respondents aware of common health problems related to alcohol like liver disease, hypertension, heart failure, mental health problems but almost all believe that these negative consequences can be happened only if they drink too much. However, they do not have sufficient knowledge on how much alcohol is safe to drink per day. Awareness towards high risk of injury and fall was the most ignorant part among the older respondents and the adult consumer willing to consume alcohol because of better night's sleep and feeling more at ease in social situations. As

for the younger age group, they are all perfectly healthy and they believe that alcohol related health issues can be occurred only if they consume it for long-term. Young alcohol consumers in this study express to enjoy more positive effects of drinking than negative effect like risk of accident from drunk-driving and alcohol poisoning. They do not aware the fact that brain of adolescent is not sufficient to tolerate the larger amount of alcohol intake compared to adult brain.

#### **Theme 5: Social problems related to alcohol consumption**

All the participants are well aware of the various social problems that occur due to alcohol consumption. From the respondents' perspective, they all related to social problems that occurs around them. For students, they related to themselves where they felt that consuming alcohol was the reason for them to perform poorly in their studies and that was why their grades deteriorated as well. As for the older age groups, they felt that they can neglect their work responsibilities and obligations towards their family. Two participants were also extremely concerned about irresponsible driving where alcohol consumers who are drunk are more prone to road accidents.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

According to this study, it was alarming that almost each and every participant started this habit due to peer pressure. This finding supports the qualitative studies in UK which explored peer pressure played a big role in alcohol consumption. In that study non-drinkers and moderate drinkers reported regrettable experiences because of aggressive or persistent peer pressure [7]. This clearly makes sense as nowadays we spend most of our time with our friends and thus prone to adhere their behaviours easily. Risk of developing alcoholism is high if a person takes a few drinks to get a buzz or feel relaxed to socialize with people who drink a lot [8].

Perceptions of peer pressure are likely to continue till adulthood. One of the female participants at age of 40 consumes alcohol despite being a Muslim as she claims it is due to her work requirements, Acceptance of alcohol drinking is encouraged by peer attitude and society attitude, role models and through social media [9]. The environment in which people live

and work heavily affects their attitudes and behaviour related to alcohol. According to the largest study that has been carried out by researchers at the University of Liverpool, they type of job and alcohol consumption are closely related, especially after-work drink. Women of age 40 to 69 are more likely to be heavy drinkers when in managerial professional roles. The same study also identify reasons for alcohol consumption among working women are it can act as a coping mechanism for long hours, stress on their job and other environmental work factors [10].

In Malaysia, alcohol is generally prohibited for Muslim consumers by Malaysia's Sharia Law, especially in Kelantan and Terengganu. The World Health Organisation (WHO) named Malaysia as the world's 10th largest consumer of alcohol despite its small population and size and large number of Muslims in 2011. However, beer, alcohol and wine are widely available at Western-style hotels, bars and restaurants. These areas are usually packed with youngsters including Muslim Malays. Many of them wish that the religious authorities should consider this as private issue and they want freedom of choice for their lifestyle [11].

Although legal drinking age for Malaysia is 21 years old and above [12], one of the respondents in this study has already started drinking at the age of 16. More teenagers in Malaysia are starting to drink alcoholic beverages at an earlier age and 45% of Malaysian youths under the age of 18 consume alcohol regularly. Of all the legal and illegal drugs, alcohol is by far the most widely used drugs by teenagers, and according to a national survey many are regularly drinking to excess [13]. Malaysia is the tenth largest consumer of alcohol and many adolescent consumed alcohol because of peer pressure and also because of enjoyment. Extensive advertising and promotion drive more Malaysians to drink [7]. Binge drinking is highest among the Indian youth, followed by Chinese youth and lowest in Malay youth based on the study done in Kuala Lumpur [14].

Family's perception on alcohol consumption is also important. Study shows that family alcohol consumption is strongly associated to youth alcohol consumption and association is stronger than alcohol consumption due to peer pressure [8]. Regarding the family environment, 13% of Australian children are exposed to an adult who is a regular binge drinker. Parents imposing strict

rules to alcohol consumption can prevent negative consequences of alcohol related risk behaviour of their children [15]. Low educational achievement and high absenteeism rates if students exposed to alcohol at early age. It is important that parents should be more friendly to their children by attentive listening and talking. They can also participate their children's activities so that they can avoid a gap between parents and children. It will help them to keep monitoring their child's activities and easy guiding them on good habits.

Social impacts of alcohol are numerous where alcohol consumers were often discriminated and biased from the social circle of those who do not do the same. Having small fracas with friends maybe something sweet for us to look back and cherish perhaps ten years after we have graduated from our respective alma maters, but what if alcohol itself leads one to a dire situation of getting into fist fights with their own friends they often call their clan. Deterioration of academic performance is a severe implication of alcohol as it does not only involve them but their families as well.

Road accidents are a serious implication that is caused when driving under the influence of alcohol. Many people lose their lives because of drink drivers in Malaysia. Statistics between 2010 and 2018 showed that there were 2,364 accidents related to drink driving, with 1,196 people killed. Organisation even marked Malaysia as one of 35 nations with a "high" rate of drink driving accidents [16]. Most of the teenagers unable to determine their capability of driving and insufficient knowledge concerning how the body respond to alcohol consumption. Impaired motor functions related to alcohol make people to make reckless decisions. In the United States, a combined education and enactment of zero tolerance laws help to reduce the number of drunk driving accidents by almost half [17]. Transport Ministry in Malaysia is also serious about tackling drunk driving with maximum enhancement of punishment. It is also important to balance the criminal justice system and the rights of responsible social drinkers in a progressive contemporary [18].

The study shows that the older participants and university students are aware of the problems that alcohol consumption can cause to their health. However, the school student was not aware of it at all. According to National Health and Morbidity Survey 2017 by the Health Ministry, at least one out of five adolescents in

Malaysia (19.3%) has tasted alcohol before in their lifetime. The survey also found out that 4.7% of adolescents are involved in social problems like fights, school absenteeism or getting into trouble with family or friends [19]. The adolescents are already binge-drinking at such young age, imagine how severe their health implications would be when they are older. It will simply be fatal.

Looking from a financial point of view, almost all the participants have issues with a budget when it comes to purchasing alcohol. One of the participants even stole money in order to get what he wanted. These findings are so significant that it shows that alcohol addiction can force an individual to the extent of indulging in social menaces. Each year, Malaysians spend over RM 2 billion on alcohol in the form of beer and cheap spirits known locally as Samson Alcoholic drinks are so easily available in coffee shops, supermarkets, sundry shops and plantations, together with aggressive advertising and promotions driving more Malaysians to drink [8]. Instead of the basic needs and essentials that they must purchase, the lower socioeconomic group sometimes spend most of their money indulging in alcohol. It is clear that alcohol consumption can in turn be a burden to one financially.

It is important for both government and concerned citizens to encourage to formulate effective public health policies that can minimize the harm caused by alcohol. As responsible citizens, each and every individual should educate the general populace about the problems that are caused by consumption of alcohol. People should prepare to say 'NO' to drugs or alcohol, even in small quantities. This is especially important for people who have detoxed and are trying to prevent themselves from ever falling back into drug or alcohol abuse [20]. They can instead go for numerous healthy choices such as photography, exercising, going for a job, painting and so forth.

As for the family approach, parents should provide effective parental monitoring, consistent rule setting, and have clear educational communication about alcohol with their children. Family members should avoid modelling heavy drinking or intoxication in front of children or adolescents. Parents should avoid portraying violence due to alcohol in front of their children and they should never use alcohol as a reason to physically harm the child.

**Table 2. Background of the respondents and their perspectives on health impact due to alcohol**

No.	Age	Gender	Race	Occupation	Drinker or not	Type of alcohol use	Frequency of alcohol intake	Health impact caused by alcohol from respondent's perspective
R1	23	Male	Indian	University Student	Yes	Black label, Dalmore, Martin, Royal Stag	Every weekend and minimum 1 bottle	Heart and liver disease, Gastric
R2	24	Female	Chinese	University Student	No	-	-	Not sure
R3	43	Female	Indian	Housewife	Yes	Macallan, Jack Daniels, Hennessy	Every day and 1 shot	Not sure maybe headache but doctor advised not to drink during pregnancy
R4	16	Male	Indian	School student	Yes	Tiger beer, Golden 99	Daily and 4/5 cans	I don't know
R5	40	Female	Malay	Businesswoman	Yes	Macallan, Martin	Monthly thrice and 3 shots	Liver problem
R6	45	Male	Malay	Farmer	No	-	-	Heart failure, brain and intestinal damage

*R= respondent*

Targeted school-based prevention programmes should be introduced in the early adolescent years, ideally before initial exposures to alcohol [21]. Setting up a peer support group and allowing students to share feelings among themselves will help students let their guard down as they can easily open up to those of their own age group. Campaigns in school regarding the health hazards of alcohol and its various social impacts should be done frequently, where it should involve every student so that it can instil awareness in them.

## 5. LIMITATION OF STUDY

Since this is the student's project, the researchers were under time constrain and lacked manpower as such only one focus group discussion was able to be conducted at that particular time. Hence, the findings are only a reflection on specific group and definitely not a bigger population. As such, more exploratory studies on the subject matter will help the community further understand the health impacts of alcohol consumption.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this study, peer pressure is one of the root causes that made most of the participants to initially try alcohol. Family's acceptance towards alcohol drinking becomes a confounding factor that makes the child to do as they wish and sadly, they end up becoming addicted to alcohol habits. Those who are still in schools or universities showed that they consumed more alcohol and they portrayed a daily basis of alcohol consumption. Adults' findings varied where they either consume alcohol daily or only for professional requirements where it is consumed casually with their respective clients. The realization of the younger age group towards health implications of alcohol consumption is still poor compared to those of the older age group. The younger age group are not aware of it where their frequencies of consumption are much higher and as for adults, they did practice casual drinking. Participants were well aware of the social problems or dilemmas caused by severe alcohol consumption. Participants' knowledge regarding this subject has to be improved and it has to be done immediately to prevent the various social dilemmas that some participants got into. Further analysis on the alcohol drinking behaviour on a larger scale might be needed to

alleviate all the problems caused by alcohol consumption.

## CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

This study was carried out as a Year 3 medical student project, and it was approved by Asian Institute of Medicine, Science and Technology University Ethical Committee. Moreover, a written, informed consent was obtained prior to the discussion via emails and WhatsApp. The confidentiality of participants was maintained by not exposing the video recording of the participants. Instead, their videos were substituted with blank canvases along with the background used during the zoom session. To secure participants backgrounds for some specific data, the researchers utilized participant codes in order to maintain confidentiality of the information. As such denotations of R1, R2, R3, R4, R5 and R6 were used. The participants themselves are not aware of the denotations and it will be kept anonymous throughout the discussion.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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