

## Exploring Alcohol Consumption and Coping Strategies among Female University Students in India During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated profound shifts in the lives of individuals globally, necessitating an examination of coping mechanisms and alcohol consumption patterns, particularly among vulnerable populations like female university students. This qualitative study delves into the nuanced interplay between stressors, perceived coping styles, and alcohol consumption habits among 32 Indian female university students during the pandemic. Thematic analysis revealed three major themes: "Factors Influencing Alcohol Consumption" and "Coping Strategies," each comprising distinct sub-themes. Under "Factors Influencing Alcohol Consumption," participants reported an increase in alcohol consumption rates amidst the pandemic, alongside notable decreases, with identified factors including stress, social/familial influences, and individual coping mechanisms. Subsequent exploration unearthed "Healthy" and "Unhealthy" coping strategies, encompassing diverse approaches from online interaction to self-harm. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of responses to stress among female university students in India, shedding light on the complexities of alcohol consumption and coping behaviors during times of crisis. The study's implications resonate across mental health professionals, educators, and families, emphasizing the necessity of tailored interventions to promote adaptive coping strategies and mitigate substance use risks among this demographic. Furthermore, it calls for continued research efforts to unravel the evolving dynamics of coping strategies amidst post-pandemic transitions, advocating for interdisciplinary approaches to address the holistic well-being of university students in India.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Alcohol Consumption Rate, Healthy & Unhealthy Coping Strategies, Students' Perspective

The emergence of the novel coronavirus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), and its associated disease COVID-19, marked a watershed moment in global health, prompting unparalleled responses from governments, institutions, and individuals worldwide. Identified initially in Wuhan, China, in 2019, the virus swiftly spread across borders, necessitating the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (WHO, 2020). By January 2020, India witnessed the initial spread of the virus, prompting governmental

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interventions, including nationwide lockdowns, to curb transmission rates (Ghosh et al., 2020). However, the efficacy of these measures varied across regions, with some states experiencing disproportionate rates of transmission, instigating public distress and economic upheaval.

The ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic extended beyond the physical realm, permeating into the psychological well-being of individuals globally. Research underscored a surge in psychological distress among populations, manifesting as depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Yao et al., 2020). The imposition of stringent lockdown measures precipitated profound lifestyle changes, disrupting established routines and engendering psychological strain (Rawat et al., 2021). Notably, alterations in dietary patterns, physical activity levels, sleep habits, and reliance on social media platforms underscored the profound impact of pandemic-induced stressors on daily life (Chopra et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2020; Nair et al., 2020).

Amidst these shifts, alcohol consumption emerged as a significant concern, given its intricate interplay with stress and coping mechanisms. Alcohol consumption, a global public health challenge, garnered renewed attention amidst the pandemic, with experts predicting varied trajectories influenced by stress triggers and restrictive measures (Rehm et al., 2020; Sohi et al., 2022). Existing literature highlighted the propensity for individuals to resort to alcohol as a coping mechanism during times of crisis, exacerbating the risk of abuse and dependence (Boscarino et al., 2011; Wu et al., 2008). Moreover, the pandemic's disruption to de-addiction programs raised concerns about potential relapse and withdrawal symptoms among vulnerable populations (Dubey et al., 2020; Ornell et al., 2020; Vecchio et al., 2020). Simultaneously, individuals deployed diverse coping strategies to navigate pandemic-induced stressors, encompassing problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches (Anspaugh et al., 2003). The importance of adaptive coping mechanisms in mitigating the adverse impact of stress on mental well-being became increasingly evident (Coiro, Bettis, & Compas, 2017). However, studies also illuminated the differential susceptibility of various demographic groups to psychological distress, highlighting the need for tailored interventions (Moghe, Kotecha & Patil, 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020).

This thesis endeavors to explore the intricate nexus between alcohol consumptions, novel stressors, and perceived coping styles among female university students in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing upon existing literature, this study aims to elucidate the factors underpinning alcohol consumption patterns, delineate coping mechanisms employed by students, and discern potential correlations with psychological well-being. By synthesizing empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks, this research seeks to offer nuanced insights into the multifaceted responses of female university students to pandemic-induced stressors, with implications for mental health interventions and policy formulations. Through an interdisciplinary lens, this study aspires to contribute to the burgeoning discourse on the intersectionality of health, behavior, and societal responses amidst global crisis.

### ***Rationale***

The Coronavirus outbreak has instigated unparalleled uncertainty and distress globally, with university students particularly susceptible to its multifaceted stressors. Emerging stressors such as academic disruptions, career uncertainties, health anxieties, and social isolation have profoundly impacted the psychological well-being of students (Moghe, Kotecha & Patil,

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2020). In response, individuals may resort to maladaptive coping mechanisms, including excessive alcohol consumption, to mitigate emotional turmoil exacerbated by lockdown measures (Chopra et al., 2020; Rehm et al., 2020). This study aims to elucidate the types of coping adopted by university students during the pandemic, with a specific focus on alcohol consumption patterns and their underlying determinants.

A notable gap in the literature exists regarding the factors influencing alcohol consumption among Indian students amidst the pandemic. Despite growing research on the psychological impact of COVID-19, scant attention has been paid to the unique socio-cultural context of India and its implications for coping behaviors (Moghe, Kotecha & Patil, 2020). Therefore, this study seeks to fill this void by investigating the contributing factors to maladaptive coping styles and the role of alcohol consumption among Indian university students during this unprecedented crisis.

In summary, this research is driven by the imperative to comprehend the intricate dynamics of alcohol, stress and coping among university students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. By elucidating the factors influencing alcohol consumption and coping within the Indian context, this study aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of adaptive and maladaptive responses to pandemic-induced stressors (novel stressors). The findings have implications for targeted interventions and policy formulations to support the well-being of university students in India and beyond.

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Objectives*

- To explore the factors influencing the rate of alcohol consumption among Indian University students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To determine the change in alcohol consumption rate among Indian University students during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To investigate how university students dealt with novel stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To analyze the coping strategies adopted by Indian University students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Sample:** The study involved 32 female university students aged 18-26, fluent in English, and Indian citizens from middle socio-economic status. Exclusion criteria included drug dependence and illegal substance consumption.

**Sampling Technique:** Purposive Sampling Technique was employed to select participants meeting specific criteria essential for the study's objectives.

**Research Design:** A qualitative research design was utilized to delve into the depth of the study area, focusing on verbal data collection and analysis. Transcriptions of recordings were manually analyzed thematically.

**Procedure:** Post survey, participants who fit the studies objectives were contacted for interview, developed through collaboration with experts and existing literature, comprised of 13 semi-structured questions targeting key areas of interest. Interviews were scheduled based on mutual convenience with participants; post-interview opportunity was provided for

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query. Thematic analysis was conducted on transcribed recordings to derive insights into alcohol consumption and coping strategies among university students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The study utilized an e-survey form to screen participants based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, followed by online interviews conducted via platforms like Zoom. Transcriptions of participant responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model. Firstly, familiarity with the data was established, followed by the generation of initial codes. Themes were then identified through a systematic search process, reviewed for coherence, and defined to capture key insights. Subsequently, data interpretation involved synthesizing themes to derive meaningful interpretations. The development of a 13-item semi-structured interview schedule facilitated targeted data collection, ensuring alignment with the study objectives. Thematic analysis enabled the identification, analysis, and understanding of patterns within the data, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of alcohol consumption and coping strategies among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Informed consent was taken from each of the participants verbally as well as non-verbally. It specified that they had every right to negate from answering the questions they have been asked to if they felt uncomfortable. Participants were debriefed before the study. Participants were provided with a brief outline of the subject matter that is to be discussed, and the type of information required from the participants and how the collected information would be used. A mutual consideration was achieved to set comfortable timings for the interview. The interviewer maintained an empathetic and a non-judgmental attitude towards the questionnaire as well as while interviewing. No kind of harm was caused to the participants in this study. The participants were also mentioned to feel free to contact the researcher via the email provided if they had any queries about the research study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the factors influencing alcohol consumption and coping strategies among Indian university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion will delve deeper into each major theme, drawing from existing research literature to contextualize and enrich the understanding of the study's findings.

The first major theme identified in this study was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lifestyle of university students. This theme encompassed various aspects such as accommodation, family environment, physical health, mental health, academic stress, relationships, and uncertainty about the future. These findings align with previous research highlighting the multifaceted effects of the pandemic on individuals' lives (Bao et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020).

The sub-theme of Perceived Academic Stress reflects the challenges faced by students in adapting to online learning and the disruption of traditional academic structures. Research by Son et al. (2021) found that university students experienced increased levels of stress and anxiety due to uncertainties surrounding online education and academic performance during the pandemic. Similarly, a study by Cao et al. (2020) identified a significant association

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between academic stress and psychological distress among Chinese college students during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Physiological Changes, another sub-theme, underscores the adverse effects of the pandemic on physical health and well-being. Research has shown that reduced physical activity and disrupted sleep patterns, both common consequences of lockdown measures, can exacerbate stress and contribute to negative mood states (Ammar et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2020). Moreover, the lack of access to recreational facilities and outdoor activities may further impact students' overall sense of well-being (Lesser & Nienhuis, 2020).

The sub-theme of Disrupted Routine highlights the challenges faced by students in maintaining a sense of normalcy and structure in their daily lives. Disruptions to routine can disrupt circadian rhythms and lead to feelings of disorientation and distress (Blume et al., 2020). Studies have shown that maintaining a regular routine is essential for promoting mental health and well-being, particularly during times of uncertainty and stress (Cellini et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020).

The second major theme identified in this study was the coping strategies employed by female university students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants reported using a combination of healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. These findings resonate with existing research on coping strategies during times of crisis and adversity (Horesh & Brown, 2020; Taylor et al., 2020).

Healthy coping strategies, such as engaging in hobbies, connecting with others online, and pursuing online courses, have been associated with better mental health outcomes during the pandemic (Killgore et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020). Research by Liu et al. (2020) found that engaging in meaningful activities and maintaining social connections were protective factors against psychological distress among college students during the COVID-19 outbreak. Similarly, studies have shown that exercise and physical activity can help reduce stress and improve mood (Meyer et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2020).

Unhealthy coping strategies, such as smoking, binge eating, self-harm, and masturbation, were also reported by participants in this study. While these behaviors may provide temporary relief from distress, they can have detrimental effects on physical and mental health in the long term (Wang et al., 2020). Research has shown that individuals may turn to maladaptive coping mechanisms as a way to cope with overwhelming emotions and feelings of helplessness (Holmes et al., 2020). Interventions aimed at promoting adaptive coping strategies and addressing underlying psychological issues are crucial for supporting individuals in times of crisis (Gao et al., 2020).

The third major theme identified in this study was the factors influencing alcohol consumption among university students during the pandemic. Sub-themes included an increase in consumption rate and a decrease in consumption rate, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of alcohol use behaviors observed among participants. These findings corroborate previous research highlighting the complex interplay of individual, social, and environmental factors in shaping alcohol consumption patterns (Clay & Parker, 2020; Patrick et al., 2020).

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The sub-theme of Increase in consumption rate revealed several factors contributing to heightened alcohol use during the pandemic, including stress relief, social influences, and heightened sexual experiences. Research has shown that individuals may turn to alcohol as a way to cope with stress and negative emotions, particularly during times of uncertainty and isolation (Khan et al., 2020; Rehm et al., 2020). Moreover, social factors, such as peer pressure and the availability of alcohol, can influence drinking behaviors among young adults. Studies have also found a link between alcohol use and risky sexual behaviors, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address alcohol-related harms (Beresin, 2020; Lewis et al., 2020).

Conversely, the sub-theme of Decrease in consumption rate identified factors associated with reduced alcohol use during the pandemic, including permissive family environments, adoption of healthy coping methods, exacerbation of symptoms during menstruation, and lack of socializing opportunities. Research has shown that family attitudes and behaviors regarding alcohol play a significant role in shaping individuals' drinking patterns (Ryan et al., 2020). Moreover, individuals may adopt alternative coping strategies in the absence of alcohol, such as engaging in healthy activities and seeking social support (Maugeri et al., 2020).

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study offer valuable insights into the factors influencing alcohol consumption and coping strategies among female university students during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. By understanding the underlying mechanisms driving these behaviors, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions and support systems that promote resilience and well-being among students in times of crisis. Further research is needed to build upon these findings and inform evidence-based practices for addressing mental health challenges in the context of global crisis.

#### *Implications of the study*

The present study adds on to the existing pool of literature by emphasizing on how youth of our country experienced and adapted from their stressors, feelings and emotions while the world was shut down by a biological crisis. It raises a concern for academic curriculum, extent of awareness among families as well as communities. It will help inform students about the effects of consuming any substance and dealing with stressors of their lives effectively. Mental health professionals can utilize present findings to address the root of substance consumption and adoption of unhealthy coping strategies. Additionally, it helps inform educators about the effect of online learning and initiative towards more structured modules to help lower academic uncertainty and stress. The study will help design interventions to help, lower consumption of substances and stand as a base study for further research. Future researchers can recruit a larger population to increase generalizability of the findings.

#### *Suggestions for future research*

The findings of this study have important implications for mental health professionals and educators involved in supporting student well-being during the pandemic. Mental health professionals can use the insights gained from this study to develop tailored interventions and support services that address the root causes of substance use and promote healthier coping strategies among students. Additionally, educators can implement strategies to

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alleviate academic stressors and create a supportive learning environment that fosters resilience and well-being.

For future research, there is a need to further explore the long-term effects of the pandemic on alcohol consumption and coping strategies among diverse populations. Incorporating a mixed-methods approach and longitudinal study design can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex factors influencing individual behaviours during crises (Clay & Parker, 2020). Additionally, research should examine cultural influences on coping behaviours and develop culturally sensitive interventions that address the unique needs of different populations.

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***Conflict of Interest***

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