**A Study of the Trends and Contributors to the Emerging Drug and Alcohol Problem among Adolescents and Young Adults in UAE**

**Abstract**

The Middle East has long been known to be a region with a low prevalence of drug problem. In the wake of globalization, however, the region has experienced a significant change in its sociocultural values thanks to the increased exposure of the locals to the external world. The problem for the study is the contributors to the emerging trends in drug and alcohol abuse in UAE. The purpose of the study is to establish the social and cultural factors that are involved in the emerging trends in drug and alcohol use among the minors in the Arab country. The study is economically and socioculturally significant. On the economic front, the study will help to reduce the long-term expenditure on the treatment of drug and alcohol addictions. The study hypothesizes that sociocultural environment does not influence drug and alcohol use among the adolescents in the UAE. The study was based on a sample 50 adolescents and young adults drawn from the university. Participation was voluntary and the participants were expected to sign consent forms. Based on the responses from the participants, four major factors were noted to influence their perceptions of alcohol and drug use. These factors were; familial exposure to the drugs and alcohol, peer networks, social media, and limited education. Based on the findings, it is arguable that drug addiction and alcoholism might evolve into a major problem in the UAE hence the need for urgent intervention. It is necessary to conduct parallel studies using larger sample sizes and based on randomized designs.

**Introduction**

Drug and substance abuse is a critical healthcare problem globally and in the Middle East. In the Arab Emirates, thousands of adolescents are affected by the drug problem hence necessitating urgent interventions to protect this vulnerable population (Alblooshi et al., 2016). While studies have since been conducted to understand the scope of the problem, there are limited studies focusing on the role of sociocultural environment on the problem. In particular, it is essential to understand the roles of family and social networks on the addiction trends in UAE. It is also important to understand the levels of exposure of the minors to drugs and alcohol to develop comprehensive and effective interventions (Kim, Marsch, Hancock & Das, 2017). It is thus vital that the core factors behind the drug problem in the emerging drug problem in the UAE are solved to protect the future generations.

The Middle East has long been known to be a region with a low prevalence of drug problem. In the wake of globalization, however, the region has experienced a significant change in its sociocultural values thanks to the increased exposure of the locals to the external world (Alblooshi et al., 2016). The internet and social media platforms have made it easier for the teens from the region to interact with their peers from the outside world, in the process picking up some deviant traits. Studies suggest that minors as young as 12 years have heard about or been exposed to alcohol or drug in the UAE (Issa, 2013). The reports further indicate that there is a growing positive view of drugs among the adolescents, a prospect that might contribute towards increased drug use and alcoholism in the future. Such a development will not only strain the social and cultural fabric of the Emirate society but will also impact negatively on the health and the long-term goals of the younger generations (Issa, 2013). Therefore, it is vital to review the current trends as well as understand the social contexts of the emerging teenage drug problem in the region.

The problem for the study is the contributors to the emerging trends in drug and alcohol abuse in UAE. If the current trends persist, then more adolescents will be affected. This will be both an economic and sociocultural problem (Hisham Elarabi, 2015). As such, it is necessary to understand the contributors to the trends for effective interventions. The purpose of the study is to establish the social and cultural factors that are involved in the emerging trends in drug and alcohol use among the minors in the Arab country (Somani & Meghani, 2016). The study is economically and socioculturally significant. On the economic front, the study will help to reduce the long-term expenditure on the treatment of drug and alcohol addictions (Hisham Elarabi, 2015). The other significance of the study is that it will help to identify the social and cultural factors that are likely to promote the problem. Consequently, it will be easier to identify the at-risk minors and young adults for targeted interventions.

**Research questions and Hypotheses**

The hypothesis for this study is that sociocultural environment does not influence drug and alcohol use among the adolescents in the UAE. The study will be guided by the following research questions;

1. What are the factors that contribute towards the emerging drug and alcohol problem among the adolescents in the UAE?
2. Which populations of adolescents are more susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse?
3. What are the short-term and long-term implications of the drug and alcohol problem among adolescents in the UAE?

**Study Design**

The study was based on a sample 50 adolescents and young adults drawn from the university. Participation was voluntary and the participants were expected to sign consent forms. Convenient sampling method was used to recruit participants for the study. The recruited participants were then expected to provide detailed information on their sociocultural backgrounds, including familial backgrounds and social networks. The student participants were then required to fill in questionnaires highlighting their previous exposure to drug and alcohol, and the environments where they were exposed. The collected data were then analyzed for trends and patterns to establish the factors that influence the exposure of the minors to drug and alcohol abuse. The analysis of the data was through calculation of the percentage of the participants in the various categories of factors implicated in teenage alcoholism and drug use. The findings were summarized in tables and conclusions drawn.

**Results**

Based on the responses from the participants, four major factors were noted to influence their perceptions of alcohol and drug use. These factors were; familial exposure to the drugs and alcohol, peer networks, social media, and limited education. Based on the above factors, it was evident that the measures put in place to educate the adolescents and young adults on the dangers of alcohol and drug use have been relatively ineffective. It was also notable that the adolescents from families in which either or both parents were active drug or alcohol users were more likely to develop the problem. The summaries of the results are as tabulated below.

**Table 1.**

***Percentage Popularity of Predisposing Factors***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Predisposing Factor** | **Percentage Popularity (n=50)** |
| Family environment | 30% |
| Peer Networks | 44% |
| Social Media | 48% |
| Limited Education | 25% |

**Table 2.**

***Suggested Interventions to Fight Drug and Alcohol***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Intervention** | **Number of Respondents Proposing it (n=50)** |
| Social media surveillance | 22 |
| Public education | 21 |
| Peer counselling programs | 32 |
| Family Therapy | 12 |

**Table 3.**

***Summary of Previous Exposures***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Number of Previous Exposures to Alcohol and Drugs** | **Number of Respondents Exposed (n=50)** |
| < 3 Occasions | 15 |
| 3-5 Occasions | 23 |
| > 5 Occasions | 12 |

**Discussion and Limitations**

The determination of the patterns and the predisposing factors that are involved can help to develop elaborate and effective structures to protect the at-risk youths and adolescents from developing an addiction. Also, the determination of the sociocultural risk factors can help to identify the adolescent and youth populations that are already affected by the drug problem hence roll out targeted treatments (Somani & Meghani, 2016). More importantly, the study focuses on identifying some of the measures that have since been adopted to contain the emerging problem.

If the current trends, in addition, are left uncontained, it is likely that millions of adolescents might be affected leading to a national catastrophe. In such a case, the country would be forced to channel more resources towards fighting addiction, a prospect that will be costly and will strain the national budget. Therefore, the study is significant as it helps to identify the appropriate areas for early intervention. The other significance of the study is that it will help to identify the social and cultural factors that are likely to promote the problem. Consequently, it will be easier to identify the at-risk minors and young adults for targeted interventions.

Based on the findings of the study, drug and alcohol use is emerging as a critical problem. The study focused on the population of the adolescents and young adults who had used the drugs at some point in their lives. According to the findings, the adolescents were more likely to use the drugs repeatedly. For instance, the results showed that 35 of the respondents had been exposed to the drugs or alcohol at least thrice. The study further showed that almost a quarter of the respondents had used the drugs and alcohol at least five times. This is a worrying trend since the multiple exposures are more likely to trigger addiction and drug dependence (Al Ghaferi, Ali, Gawad & Wanigaratne, 2017). Such cases could subsequently affect the academic lives of the minors negatively.

There are different channels through which the adolescents are exposed to drugs and alcohol in the UAE (Alhyas et al., 2015). Based on the study, the major routes of exposure include family environment, peer networks, social media, and limited education. Social media was the leading channel through which the minors were exposed to drugs and alcohol. Most of the respondents shared that social media platforms subjected them to western culture hence most of them associated their initial drives to use drugs and alcohol as primarily aimed at emulating the western cultures. This observation supported the findings of Costello and Ramo (2017) which highlighted the negative influence of social media on drug use. The other worrying aspect is that more students believe that limited education is to blame for the problem. This necessitates active public education programs targeting the at-risk adolescent populations as well as their families. Ignoring the problem could only worsen the situation and lead more minors to the drug and alcohol use catastrophe. Some of the interventions that can be adopted include peer counselling, family therapy and social media surveillance as proposed by Kim, Marsch, Hancock and Das (2017). However, the aspect of social media surveillance might not be easy in an open society with a liberal mindset (Costello & Ramo, 2017).

The major limitation of the study, however, is the small sample size. Future studies on the sociocultural factors involved in the emerging drug and alcohol problem should be based on larger samples. Also, the convenient sampling approach could have led to biased responses hence the need for future studies based on randomized trials.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

In summary, the emerging drug problem in the middle east will have negative implications on the health and social wellness of the adolescents and young adults. Based on the data, western influence is a key contributor to the current problem. The findings also showed that expatriate students were more likely to develop drug and alcohol abuse problems. In the context of globalization and internationalization of sociocultural values, it is likely that the students will experience more negative influence through social media platforms and through their physical interactions with affected adults. Besides, peer-influence will be a key factor that will promote drug and alcohol abuse among the adolescents. It is thus essential that the government puts in place elaborate measures to protect the populations from the negative influences.

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