



Perceived Benefits of Teenage Risky Behaviors. Insights from Bulawayo Vuzu Parties, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to explore the adolescents' perceived benefits of risky behaviors. The phenomenological design and semi-structured interviews were utilized. Thematic analysis was utilized in the study. Ten participants were purposively sampled. The following were the findings of the study, Adolescents attended Vuzu Parties where they voluntarily and involuntarily engaged in behaviors such as alcohol, drug, and substance use and unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners. All participants were aware of the risks associated with these behaviors such as unplanned pregnancies, STIs, HIV and AIDs organ failures, school dropout, and many others. However, adolescents also associated certain benefits with these behaviors such as stimulation, opportunities for social interaction and opportunity for making a living, peer acceptance, adventure. Adolescents perceived benefits from risky behaviors outweighed the risks and thus the knowledge of associated risks did not deter them from engaging in risky activities. The researcher concluded that perceived benefits played a pivotal role in the onset, development and sustenance of teenage risky behaviors.

Keywords: Risky behaviors; Vuzu parties; Teenagers; Drugs

Introduction

Teenage risk taking is a major problem in the city of Bulawayo. Newspapers have been consistent in reporting stories of learners discretely attending parties where girls as young as 13years old are crowned for sleeping with more than 10 men on a single night, whilst boys are rewarded wards of US dollar notes for bedding the highest number of girls during a single function. It is during these parties which are popularly referred to as Vuzu parties that teenagers abuse all sorts of drugs which pose a hazard to health and engage in all sorts of risky and unacceptable behaviors. And indeed so many programmatic interventions have been carried out with an intention to sensitize and raise awareness among

these youths on the dire consequences of their actions, however the trend still persists. It is worrying that these activities are escalating even against the backdrop of efforts by the government and other stake holders to embark on huge sensitization programmes and awareness campaigns to conscientise youths about the pitfalls associated with such behaviors.

Such behaviors transgress societal norms and can compromise adolescents' health and development. The consequences of such behaviors are detrimental to the nation at large since adolescence is a significant age of opportunity for children and a pivotal time to build on their development in the first decade of life and help them to navigate risks

and vulnerability and to set them on the path to fulfilling potential.

Adolescence is a transitional stage of physical and psychological human development that generally occurs during the period from the onset of puberty to early adulthood [1]. It is characterized by an escalated need for independence, pre occupation with self and normative experimentation [2]. This critical stage of transition from childhood to adulthood exposes teenagers to a struggle to make choices and adopt behaviors that have a bearing on both the present and the future health of adolescents [3].

As adolescents search for identities separate from those of their parents, they experiment with new identities by engaging in different behaviours. A number of studies indicate that most risky behaviors are initiated at this stage such as use of substances, abuse of alcohol and unprotected sexual intercourse [4-6]. Amare, et al. [7] postulate that, globally and in Africa, adolescent AIDs related mortality is on an increase. Research has shown that, prevalence of risky sexual behaviours in college students were 26% in Uganda, 63% in Nigeria and 63,9% in Botswana. The Nigerian Demographic Healthy Survey revealed that among women who had sexual intercourse in the 12 months prior to the survey, the proportion of women who engaged in higher sexual risky behaviours was highest among women between 14 and 19years [8-10]. A meta-analysis of 18 studies with 10218 participants reported a pooled prevalence of risky sexual behaviours of 41,62% among college students. According to Amare, Biagdilign, Deribe, Dejene, Tessema, Melaku, Lakew, et al. [11,12], main reasons for engaging in risky behaviours were pleasure, curiosity, being male and peer influence. Amare et al, [7] add that, 19 million cases of new STI infections occur each year among young persons aged between 15 and 24 years and about 750000 teenagers become pregnant in Africa. A study carried out by Ogunde and Leak, et al. [13-15] revealed that percentage of lifetime substance abuse among Kenyan undergraduate university students was 54,7% for tobacco, 84,2 % for alcohol, 19,7% for cannabis and 7,2% inhalants.

South Africa is one of the African countries with highest crime rates as of 2018, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation. According to the SAPS data for period April 2018 to March 2019, SAPS recorded 21022 murders in the country, which averages to 57,6 murders each day. The current activities by Western Cape gangsters is also evidence of adolescent risky behaviours. The Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, opined that, high crime rates are due to a subculture of violence and criminality ranging from individual criminals who rape or rob, to informal groups or more formalized gangs. The study team attributed the vulnerability of the adolescents who participates in these

criminal gangs as due to inadequate child-rearing and poor youth socialization.

According to UNAIDS (2013), sub-Saharan Africa is the home to over 70% of young people living with HIV. In Zimbabwe, HIV prevalence rate among adolescents is 5,5% and adolescents account for 42% of the total new HIV infections in people aged 15 years and older. UNAIDS reiterates that in Zimbabwe HIV prevalence is one of the highest in the world at 14,7%. A 2000 baseline survey conducted by Africare in the Mashonaland Central districts of Bindura and Mt Darwin shows that sex is initiated between 9 and 15 years for both boys and girls. A UNICEF baseline survey conducted in 2001 suggests that in Bulawayo which is Zimbabwe's second largest city 80% of school youth had their first sexual experience between ages 11 and 15.

Aim

To explore the perceived benefits from risky behavior by adolescents.

Objectives

- To identify the various risky behaviors that Vuzu Party going adolescents in Bulawayo engage in.
- To explore the risks and benefits adolescents perceive from using alcohol and substances and engaging in unsafe sexual practices with multiple partners.
- To examine the perceived precipitating factors of risk taking by adolescents.

Methodology

Research Approach: The qualitative research approach informed this study. Qualitative research refers to research which seeks to facilitate the understanding of why things are done in the society and why people behave the way they do, Smith, et al. [16]. Qualitative research is idealistic and assumes that the world exists and different people construe it in different ways. The exploratory case study particularly gave an in-depth personal justification of why adolescents attend Vuzu parties and engage in risky behaviours.

Research Design: The study used the phenomenological design. Sokolowski, et al. [17] defines phenomenology as the study of human experience and the ways things present to us in and through such experiences. Smith, et al. [16] regards it as the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first person point of view. Phenomenology was chosen as the basic design for this research because it seeks to understand behaviour and institutions like teenage risky behaviours by getting to know individuals and their values, emotions and beliefs. The use of phenomenology entailed collecting the views of the research participants who attend

Vuzu parties and engage in drug and substance use, alcohol taking and have unprotected sex with multiple partners. The researcher described what their common experiences were with regards to positive outcomes accruing from these behaviours. Creswell, et al. [18] points out that the basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce the experiences of persons with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. In this light the researcher will then collect data from teenagers who have experienced the phenomenon (attending Vuzu parties and engaging in risky behaviours). The data collected is inclusive of what teenagers' experience when they engage in risky behaviours and how they experience the benefits in the behaviours.

Population: The target population for this research was youth between the age of 18 and 25 years who attend local Vuzu parties in the City of Bulawayo and engage in Vuzu behaviors

Sample and sampling techniques: The study comprised of 12 research participants composed of 6 girls and 6 boys who were selected by purposive sampling at the pickup points for Vuzu party goers in the city of Bulawayo. All the participants regularly attend Vuzu parties and engage in risky behaviors that are considered a norm in such parties.

In depth Semi -Structured Interviews: The study utilized the one on one in-depth interviews with the participants so as to get information on the youth perceptions of benefits and losses associated with risky behaving.

Procedure

The researcher met the key informants when she was called to facilitate psychosocial support to a group of teenage girls who were mourning their friend who had committed suicide after attending one of these Vuzu parties. These teenagers arranged for the researcher to meet the other Vuzu party goers at their pick up point for the parties at the Bulawayo Centre where they were informed about the research and requested to participate. Arrangements were made with those who expressed interest after the researcher explained to them about the nature of the research, issues of confidentiality and their right to choose whether to participate or not. The participants were given informed consent forms to go and complete and sign at home and bring them the following day when they came for interviews.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was adopted in this study. The researcher audiotaped all interviews. The audio contents were analyzed relying on the grounded theory with three linked stages. In the first stage open coding was done so as to identify themes emerging from key sentiments captured in the expressions, responses, ideas, words and phrases used by the respondents. When all ideas had been absorbed into

index themes the researcher continued to the next phase where she explored theme properties and relationships. Theme properties were elaborated to identify cross cutting ideas and issues. Emerging categories were examined using constant comparison so as to guarantee the mutual exclusivity and specificity of their content. In the final phase themes were organized around prioritized core categories of the adolescents' engagement in risk behaviors and their beliefs about the risks and benefits associated with engaging in risk behaviors. The researcher constantly quoted verbatim responses on relevant issues and themes.

Results and Discussion

The benefits that the research respondents associated with risky behaviors revolved around socialization, popularity, stimulation, therapeutic healing, and self-esteem. Respondents posited that taking drugs and substances and engaging in unprotected sexual behaviors met their socialization needs by affording them the opportunity to interact with teenagers from all backgrounds an opportunity which was rare in any other types of interactions as found in the church, school and community settings where teenagers said they were usually judged according to social status and other things used to discriminate against them.

"sometimes you are in real need for entertainment, you want to enjoy yourself and you look at the neighborhood and it is so dull and sleeping, but you know you have to do something so you have to find out where all the action is, and usually action is where the parties are" When you attend the party you also have to do what others are doing, you know what I mean."

Another respondent described the thrills of sex marathons, likening it to a wild horse ride.

"ngokuphazima kwehlo igazi livutha selangabi, inhliziyoyabe ingani izadubuka, uzwa engani uyatsha, leyananto ngingayifanisa lobunandi bokugada ibhiza elimpampayo phakathi kwezintaba"

Some said when they were drunk they got the guts to confront teacher and abusive parents and care givers and tell them their thoughts. One respondent said

*"ngingadakwa ngibatshela indaba zabo zonke omalume"
"When I am drunk I confront my uncles over their actions"*

Another participant said

"kungenza ngibe lesibindi sokukhuluma okusemoyeni wami esikolo langekhaya"

A female respondent narrated,

"nxa sengibubhudlile ngiba lesibindi sokujikela khatshana le izigqoko ngisale nginjalo nje ngibhunyumunyu okwangelanga lokuzalwa, ngihambahambe ngizitshila ukuze obhudi babone"

ukuthi iparcel saphiwa thina

"when I am drunk I can move around naked and show off my bosom to the guys since I am very attractive"

"the queen competition is a real tough one you know, it's a clash of the tycoons in sex so you need something maybe some tablets or a nice long smoke to give you the energy to give an exciting ride to as many men as possible and at the same time adopt daringly sensational sex positions and styles, you have to be very innovative and active. When you are sober you can never achieve that."

Popularity was also a factor that sustained teenage engagement in risky behaviours. Some pointed that constant reprimands at school and in the community made others think that they are daring and thus they were highly regarded by age mates.

"igenga lonke emaariyeni liyangincanywa, bathi ngiyamangalisa njalo ngilesibindi, bonke bafisa ukuba njengami"

"wake wayibona phi indoda elala umfazi oyedwa, kuyakwenza udeleleke"

"yikho obonwa zintombi ubudoda bakho zibe sezixoxelana ngawe"

In studies by almost similar findings were revealed with all the teenagers reporting that drugs saved a social and cultural function in their social lives [19-22].

Informants also said that risk taking saved as a ladder up the social status within their spheres. Being a sexual marathon King and constantly attracting attention of the significant authorities due to misbehaving yielded similar desirable results that made the teenagers to be regarded as daring and admirable especially for the boys. Engaging in sex with multiple sexually partners was also regarded as a symbol of manhood implying that the teenagers believed that only such daring activities could earn them respect from their peers. These study results echo findings by Izugbara and Modo, et al. [23] where engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners was regarded as a means by which males asserted their virility and gained respect from their peers. Consistently Nesvarg, et al. [24] revealed that participants referred to drug use community members as possessing higher status and possessing special skills. Samuelson, et al. [25-27] suggests that various kinds of pressure weigh on young males to show and prove themselves.

Narratives from respondents also revealed that using substances and engaging in unsafe sexual practices afforded them thrilling and exciting physical experiences and they regarded the thrill desires as normal for adolescents, in fact lack of desire for thrill and danger in adolescence was an indicator of something not right, most participants pointed

out that they used substances so as to have fun and enjoy the physical sensations associated with drug use.

The current results concur with studies that postulate that adolescents use drugs for fun, euphoria and other short term benefits [28-33]. Studies by Zuckerman and Kuhlman, et al. (2008) show a significant association between risky taking and sensation seeking. According to these studies high sensation seekers may take risks without regard for potential adverse consequences. Similarly Studies by Gordon H, et al. [34,35] revealed that pleasant intoxicating effects, hedonistic drive were factors behind teenage risky behaviors.

Some teenagers revealed that they derived therapeutic healing from drug use and risky sexual behaviors.

"ukunatha izidakamizwa kwenza ngingezwa imizwa ikakhulu nxa ngihlukumezekile kumbe ngithethiswa"

"taking drugs often assist me to temporarily forget my problems and painful experiences such as abuse"

Similar findings were revealed by Nesvarg, et al. [17] where teenagers with substance use disorders narrated that that drug use assisted them to overcome boredom and other negative feelings. Similarly, the current study reveals that drugs, substances and alcohol save as a quick fix to psychological problems.

Interview narratives also revealed that adolescents are well aware of the negative consequences associated with their actions.

"We learnt about drug and substance use from the guidance and counselling teachers at school during our school days. There were also several organizations such as grassroots, FHI 360, Schools psychological services, PLAN international, ministry of health who held outreach campaigns and thus how we got all the information"

"it is a risk that you sometimes have to take, at least nowadays no one dies from HIV and AIDS, the ARVs are very effective and very soon they are likely to discover a cue for the disease and after all we are all going to die there is no need to amplify this issue of HIV and AIDS as if it is the only disease."

Their greatest fear was pregnancy because they saw it as a threat of an abrupt termination of their exciting partying life styles. Female respondents revealed that they used the control pill and morning after tablets so as to guard against pregnancy whilst boys reported that resorted to the traditional withdrawal methods, however this still leaves them exposed to STI infections. All the respondents were well aware of other consequences such as STIs, HIV and AIDS, mental health disorders, organ failures and many others. However, there were no clear strategies of how they manage these risks or guard against them. This revelation of

teenage awareness of the risks associated with their actions challenges the dominant school of thought adhered to by other researchers which assumes that adolescents engage in risky behaviors because they are not aware of the risks associated with such actions. These results confirm Izugbara and Modo, et al. [24] results that awareness that a particular behavior is risky does not appear to be a sufficient condition for young people to avoid it, since the same behavior might be regarded as having some benefits.

The study also revealed that there were generally two factors responsible for the first attendance of Vuzu parties. Some respondents reported that they had first attended such parties out of curiosity of wanting to know what actually took place there and the desire to know the experience of using drugs and thus how they ended up hooked up. Yet other participants reported that they had innocently attended these parties thinking that they were similar to ordinary parties, however they had their drinks and food laced with drugs and sex enhancers out of their knowledge [36,37].

“ukuya emacansini angavikelekanga sikwenza ngoba siyabe sifuna ukuzwa ukwehlukana kwesiwiji esisephepheni lesingekho ephepheni lokuthi ubekwazi ukuthi amankazana atshiyeneyo awudlala njani umdlalo”

“we engage in unprotected sex so as to determine the difference between unprotected and protected sex and also to find out whether different girls give differently exciting sexual experiences”

“ukubhema ugwayi ngakuqalisa ngoba ngangifuna ukubona ukuthi intuthu iphuma njani emuntwini”

“ngiyabe ngifuna ukuzwa okuzwiwa yilabo abahlala bekwenza”

“I want to feel what is felt by smokers”

“I never knew I had been taking drugged juice until after I had attended Vuzu parties 3 times and started feeling a crave for substances, it was at this point that I discovered that someone had been lacing my drinks with drugs, I did not know where to go for help since I had been attending these parties without the knowledge of my parents”

“I did not understand what was happening to me, suddenly I had an intense uncontrollable desire to engage in sex, I had never had sex before in my life but I could not control myself or my body, nothing could tone down the desire, I know I offered myself to that boy and that is how I lost my virginity, I can't stand the thought of how I lost my virginity so I have to continuously seek solace in these drugs to get rid of those thoughts.”

The effects of these drugs had led them to engage in such behaviors as unprotected sex. Others reported that they only

became aware that they had used substances when they had a huge uncontrollable crave for drugs. Since most of them sneak out of their homes to attend these parties it became impossible to tell anyone what was happen. They had no option but to turn to the party friends to seek solace so thus how risky behaving was sustained. Other participants revealed that they continued risking so as to manage and leave with what they had done, such teenagers pointed out that they felt dirty and useless for their actions yet they could not stop [38,39].

Another critical aspect unearthed by the current study pertains to the intention by adolescents to cease engaging in risky behaviours. Most risk takers argued that they had no intention to quit attending Vuzu parties and engaging in Vuzu behaviours unless they had other equally exciting alternative activities. Participants claimed that their lives would be void without the entertainment associated with Vuzu parties.

“During Vuzu parties we interact with friends we are free from the tight reins and leashes that our parents and the school system imposes on us. Thus a teenage party is a necessity, whether it's a Vuzu Party or something else. The key word is party, partying is an adolescent need that has to be met one way or the other. You can't replace partying with churching, sporting etc. Partying is partying”

“you know when we leave home for these Vuzu parties we call it 'jailing out' or escaping from jail. So yes I may want to stop all the other activities but I can't stay confined at home forever, I need a certain degree of independence and freedom. I want to enjoy my youth among other youths. So if Vuzu party is the only way to give me that, then Vuzu Party it shall be.”

One boy who revealed that he is the current reigning sex king and he had scooped the trophy two times challenged the researcher,

“show me another activity that is as trilling as participating in the sex marathon and winning it too and I will immediately stop this, you will never understand what a name I have made for myself, whenever I go my peers say nansi indoda emadodeni”

Recommendations

After an analysis of the findings, the recommendations are made:

Parents, should appreciate that adolescents have needs for adventure and fun thus should always try to provide environments that can assist in this. This will go a long way in curbing experimenting with risky activities such as drug, alcohol, substance use and unprotected sexual activities.

The government and stakeholder organizations should also have programmes that provide safe alternative platforms and programmatic interventions that will yield similar results to what the adolescents seek by risky behaving.

Psychologists and health professionals should offer interventions that also take into consideration the issue of benefits associated with risk behaving. It is important to consider the issue of benefits of risky taking when making psychological interventions since failure to do so will be wasted effort as these behaviours will continue to thrive. For example, equip adolescents with information on safe ways of relieving stress and negative feelings such as relaxation methods. Stir them towards safer exciting activities for meeting their popularity needs.

The researcher recommends that future researchers to consider carrying out a study on safe alternative forms of entertainment that could be provided so as to satisfy adolescents needs for excitement, popularity and peer acceptance.

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