

Nightlife and Alcohol Consumption Among Youths: The Botellón Phenomenon in Spain

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Abstract

In this article, we approach the botellón phenomenon as a widespread nightlife activity among Spanish youths. Botellón consists of youths meeting up, primarily on weekend nights, in open-air public spaces to talk and consume the alcoholic beverages that they have prepared. The objective of this study was to analyze the motives, attitudes, and consequences related to the practice of botellón during the leisure time of youth. A qualitative methodology has been used and speeches from 80 young people aged 14 years to 24 years have been analyzed in Seville (Southern Spain). These participants were arranged in 10 focus groups selected by stratified sampling from different public and semiprivate secondary schools and one public university. The results demonstrate that youths indicate that their primary motive for preferentially engaging in botellón is to come together and interact, not only with their group of friends but also with other peers. Regarding the societal perceptions of alcohol consumption, they stated that high social tolerance exists. Regarding social consequences, they believed that the legal measures taken to restrict alcohol consumption on the streets are not yielding successful results. In conclusion, we understand that a change in youth lifestyles has occurred over recent decades; hence, we believe that the solution to alcohol abuse is through the establishment of preventive educational programs that are applied from the earliest levels of educational instruction and supported through work within the family.

Keywords

youth, alcohol, leisure, binge drinking, health education

Spain has been transformed from a society of Sunday leisure to one of weekend leisure, and this change has led to a new social and cultural configuration within the country (Comas, 2001). This change has contributed to the consolidation of a society of leisure and culture to one of the new motors of economic development. It has also had an enormous effect on other social arenas, from social and family habits to the ordering of urban spaces in cities. From this context arises what many authors refer to as nightlife culture, and botellón is merely one of its new forms of expression since the late 1990s.

Scholars have not agreed upon a single definition of botellón. Baigorri and Fernández (2004) proposed “a massive gathering of youths, primarily between the ages of 16 and 24, in open-air public spaces, to come together and drink beverages acquired previously from stores, to listen to music, and to talk” (p. 95). Moreover, Cortés, Espejo, and Giménez (2008) believed that this definition and others fail to reflect the inherent dynamism of the practice of botellón. Excluded from this definition are aspects such as the growing presence of younger adolescent women (broadening the age range) as well as the increase in alcohol consumption across all ages. On occasions, because of police activity, the botellón moves

to homes and establishments, disassociating its practice with public spaces alone (Alternativajoven, 2006; Baigorri & Fernández, 2004; Cortés, 2006; Navarrete, 2004).

Undoubtedly, the phenomenon has spread to all cities and towns, and field studies conducted in at least 12 of the 17 regions of Spain provide evidence of this. These studies have allowed us to develop an overview of the pattern of youth behavior as well as of their sociodemographic characteristics, aspects related to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, reasons for consumption, and so on (Aguilera, 2002; Baigorri & Chaves, 2006; Baigorri & Fernández, 2004; Calafat, 2007; Calafat, Gómez, Juan, & Becoña, 2005; Cortés, Espejo, & Giménez, 2007, 2008; Elzo, Laespada, & Pallarés, 2003; Gómez-Bahillo & Ezquerro, 2013; Navarrete, 2004; Romagosa, Clascà, Adell, De Olalla, & Del Vallado, 2010).

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We know that a long history of drug use exists in our country because government administrations have conducted related surveys and studies over the last 25 years. These surveys are repeated biannually and provide us with relatively trustworthy data on the current situation of drug and alcohol consumption among adolescents. In this regard, alcohol and tobacco are the substances consumed earliest, at 16.6 years and 16.4 years of age, respectively, as indicated by the latest drug and alcohol survey of the Ministry of Health (i.e., EDADES; Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad [2017]). Of the 22,541 individuals surveyed between the ages of 15 years and 64 years, 77.6% consumed alcohol over the last 12 months, whereas 40.2% consumed tobacco. Another survey of drug use among high school students (ESTUDES; Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad [2016]) included a sample of 37,486 students between the ages of 14 years and 18 years. The results of this survey were hopeful, indicating that drug use had declined over the last 2 years. However, approximately 33% of high school students had consumed alcohol in the form of *atración* (binge drinking) over the last 30 days, and approximately six out of the 10 (57.6%) engaged in *botellón* at some point over the last 12 months. The survey found a 31.9% risk among students on the weekends. Notably, women consumed a larger share of alcohol than men, and the percentage of girls who become intoxicated is larger than that of boys. The pattern of alcohol consumption in the form of *atración* or binge drinking (five or more drinks in a brief time span) is similar to that of *borracheras* (drunken binges). Approximately 43% of students aged 16 years and half of those aged 17 years have engaged in binge drinking over the last month. The ESTUDES survey has been conducted since 1994, and it allows us to analyze the evolution of the use of substances over time as well as patterns of consumption and opinions and attitudes toward drugs among students. These data help to promote more effective prevention policies.

We examined the conference of the School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs [ESPAD], 2016), which studied alcohol, tobacco, and drug use among students aged 15 years and 16 years across 35 European countries. This comparative analysis was based on a survey of 96,046 students conducted in 2015. We found that 48% of students consumed alcohol during the 30 days prior to the survey. These data demonstrate that alcohol is the substance that is most institutionalized and socially integrated throughout Europe. The dominant pattern of drug use among children and adolescents is linked to leisure and the weekend.

Adolescence consumption of alcohol causes a serious impact on their physical, mental, and social health as their growth is hindered. It also increases the likelihood of becoming alcohol dependent in adulthood. Adolescents' brain is particularly vulnerable to alcohol effects (Carmona, Romero, & Tirado, 2009). In recent years, several scientific studies show the association between alcohol consumption and brain

damage in adolescents (Brown, Tapert, Granholm, & Delis, 2000; Chambers, Taylor, & Potenza, 2003; García, Expósito, Sanhuenza, & Angulo, 2008; Murgraff, Parrot, & Bennett, 1999; Spear, 2002; Tapert, 2007; Winters, 2004). The lack of psychological maturity—typical of the adolescence phase—makes the management of many feelings and effects coming from the consumption of alcohol difficult (Cortés et al., 2007). It reduces attention as well as the reaction capacity and time and hampers the decision making. Violent attitudes, attacks, and disputes with their family, friends, teachers, and classmates may happen, and issues with the schoolwork may arise. It also exposes them to some risk behaviors, such as using cars as the driver or a passenger after drinking alcohol or having unsafe sex that may lead to unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, among other risks (Cortés, Espejo, Martín, & Gómez, 2010).

In light of these facts, social concern exists, as demonstrated in the survey entitled “Los jóvenes ante el alcohol” [“Youths and Alcohol”] conducted by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS; 2007). This survey found that 80% of Spaniards supported measures to prevent minors from drinking alcohol. Thus, a growing awareness exists of the risks regarding the use and abuse of alcohol in our society. In fact, 66.1% of Spaniards are in favor of sanctioning minors who consume alcohol in places where it is prohibited. This proposal has equal support across all age groups, although one in four of those surveyed were opposed. Moreover, two in four of those surveyed agreed that fines should be imposed on parents when children cannot pay. Spaniards believe that alcohol consumption among minors leads to violence (90.9%), poor family relationships (87.9%), poor family outcomes (87.9%), bad moods and irritability (84.2%), future dependence on alcohol (82.6%), and irresponsible sexual behaviors (78.6).

This situation leads us to understand the *botellón* phenomenon as an element of both diversion and conflict among youths because the fun aspects that are involved obscure others related to the problems it creates (Castillo, Morón, & Pedrero, 2009). In general, the problems created by *botellón* and its dissemination do not differ from those generated by the general pattern or trend of alcohol consumption in establishments.

Support for penalizing youth participation in *botellón* exists because it is believed to promote alcohol consumption among participants (i.e., creating accessibility in terms of price and location). It is also argued that *botellón* disturbs neighborhoods, primarily by producing trash and noise (Baigorri & Fernández, 2004). Finally, it is alleged that these massive gatherings are focal points for tensions among youths who often end up engaging in fights or other types of urban violence. However, the veracity of these statements is challenged by the fact that *botellón* does not always revolve around the consumption of drugs because some participants in these street gatherings do not consume any substance or barely drink alcohol (Megías & Elzo, 2006).

It does not appear that measures are being taken to mitigate the negative effects of *botellón*. Politically, such measures are costly or unpopular among the sectors that currently benefit from this type of youth leisure. This discrepancy suggests the need for programs, measures, or strategies geared toward strengthening new leisure and free time alternatives, serious and consistent campaigns to promote preventive action among school-aged youths that strengthen “protective” factors regarding consumption over time, drastic and systematic restrictive measures to reduce the supply of the substance, and so on (Pedrero & Leiva, 2010). The objective of this study is to analyze reasons, attitudes, and consequences for young people of the practice of “*botellón*” during their spare time.

Method

Measurement Instrument

Once the latest published studies about “*botellón*” in Spain were reviewed, (Aguilera, 2002; Amezcua & Palacios, 2016; Baigorri & Fernández, 2004; Calafat et al., 2005; Cortés et al., 2007, 2008; Elzo et al., 2003; Gómez-Bahillo & Ezquerro, 2013; Gómez-Fraguela, González-Iglesias, Romero-Triñanes, Villar-Torres, & Luengo-Martín, 2012; Megías & Elzo, 2006; Navarrete, 2004; Romagosa et al., 2010) we decided to “listen to” young people through these focus groups. We developed a qualitative analysis methodology based on several variables that we considered the most explanatory for this phenomenon. Both the variable and the category choices are based on a deductive research approach, as the analysis process started with a default list of topics to explore and a predefined category system. Under the assumption that real knowledge in social research comes from dialogue (Moral, 2006), objective validity (of traditional and modern periods) turns into communal validity through the reasoning from participants. This communal validity is never fixed or invariable, but it is created by the community and influenced by the moment in time and history where the community lives. This validity is also associated with a number of moral grounds about emancipation and the pursuit of what is genuinely human (Lincoln & Guba, 1999). To guarantee the validity of our qualitative research, a set of procedures was followed (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002): (a) long-term observation of the phenomenon, (b) triangulation, (c) peer reviews, and (d) verification by different members of the research team. The qualitative analysis was developed with the software ATLAS.ti 7.

We created a measurement instrument *ex professo* that served as a script for the formation of the focus groups. The instrument consisted of 11 questions gathered in three categories related to the practice of *botellón* (e.g., age of initiation, alcohol intake, frequency of behavior, motives, consequences, and so on), consumption (e.g., attitudes

toward consumption, tolerance, type of leisure, and so on), and the social consequences derived from them (e.g., regulatory measures, alternatives to consumption, and so on).

The instrument was piloted with an intentional sample that had the same profile as the reference population of this study. We first created a focus group with students aged 16 years to 20 years, but we found differences regarding the type of nightlife that they practiced. Therefore, we decided against mixing secondary school and university students. This is the reason why the final sample consists of secondary school students aged 14 years and 17 years on one hand and young adults aged 18 years 24 years on the other hand.

Questions made for the focus group were validated by two different processes: the first version of the script was discussed with two nationwide experts in youth consumption of substances. Some grammar rephrasing was suggested to amend some questions that implied a certain answer. After the reformulation, a focus group was set up on a pilot basis with six students aged 16 years to 20 years—nonparticipants of the sample—that expressed their opinion with regard to clarity, relevance, suitability, and time required to complete it. Suggestions expressed by the students regarding the script for the focus group were taken into account.

Sample

A stratified sample was created to recruit students to participate in 10 organized discussion groups. Both the number of focus groups and the sample size were previously chosen. For 14- to 17-year olds, a public high school and a public-private high school in Seville were chosen at random. Twenty students from each school were chosen at random from the third and fourth years of compulsory secondary education (*Educación Superior Obligatoria*) and the first and second years of upper secondary education (*Bachillerato*; five students from each year) to reach a total of 40 students for inclusion in the discussion groups.

For 18- to 24-year olds, students were chosen at the Universidad Pablo de Olavide de Sevilla from the degree programs with the highest enrollments in each academic track (i.e., two programs in the natural sciences and two in the humanities and social sciences). Thus, the students selected were chosen from the following programs: environmental science, physical education and sports, social work, and business administration. Ten students participated from each program, and the total was 40 university students.

Ten focus groups were created and coordinated by a member of the research team. Focus groups were audio and video recorded, which was transcribed afterward. Sessions lasted about 1 hr and 30 min. The investigator formulated the questions from the script and the participants gave their opinions. The same script was used for all focus groups.

Of the five groups composed of secondary school students, two included students exclusively from a public school (one with students from third and fourth year compulsory secondary education, and another with upper secondary education students). Another two groups included students from the public–private school (with the same distribution across years). The final group included four students from the public school and four students from the public–private school. Of the 40 secondary school students, 22 (55%) were girls, and 18 (45%) were boys. The age distribution was as follows: 20% were 14 years old, 32.5% were 15 years old, 30% were 16 years old, and 17.5% were 17 years old.

Another five focus groups were created composed of university students. In this case, eight students participated from each degree program, and a final group included two students from each program. Regarding distribution by sex among the 40 university students, 53% were female, and 47% were male. In terms of age, students aged 18 years to 20 years accounted for 57.5% of the sample, and the remaining 42.5% were aged 21 years to 24 years.

A review committee regarding the protection of human participants approved the study protocol.

Variables

The variables listed below were considered upon analyzing the youth discourse.

Type of consumer. Based on the four levels of consumption established by Megias and Elzo (2006), we differentiated among adolescent and youth discourses based on the following categories: nonconsumers, experimental or sporadic consumers, nightlife or weekend consumers, or habitual consumers.

Motives for engaging in botellón. Taking into account the study by Navarrete (2004) regarding the motives for engaging in botellón, we analyzed the discourses based on the following reasons: having fun, saving money, talking with friends and connecting with other people, drinking or, to flirt, experiencing new sensations, and so on.

Effects of consuming alcohol and other drugs. The effects on the body, effects on academic or work performance, and social effects included the trash and noise generated by the practice of botellón, and so on.

Social perception of alcohol consumption. This variable was applied to distinguish between acceptance within a peer group and social acceptance/tolerance among other sectors, including one's family, teachers, and society as a whole.

Alternatives to botellón. This variable measured the knowledge or lack of knowledge regarding the possible alternatives to the practice of botellón at both social and institutional levels.

Results

We presented the most relevant results from the focus groups. The topics discussed were decided upon beforehand, so both coding and clustering were easier when analyzing and interpreting data based on the initial category script (Gil Flores, 1993).

Based on the variables mentioned, we found that 92% of the youths surveyed in the focus groups considered themselves to be sporadic or weekend consumers of alcohol or drugs, engaging in botellón at least twice per month and consuming only institutionalized or legal drugs (tobacco, alcohol, and occasionally marijuana).

The conversation in the focus groups was divided into three blocks of questions referring first to the practice of botellón and the motives for which youths engage in this activity.

After analyzing the results, we attest that the youths interviewed understood nightlife as a way to come together and interact, not only with their group of friends but also with other peers. Importantly, however, another segment of youths considered botellón as an excuse to drink. Thus, we perceived clear differences among the interests linked to different ways to experience and perceive leisure time. The youths highlighted with great emphasis the issue of saving money as the primary reason for this activity, although it was not the only one. In this sense, the motives or reasons that youths employ for consuming alcohol or drugs are the same as those observed by other, similar studies (Cortés et al., 2007, 2008; Navarrete, 2004).

Regarding the social consequences of engaging in botellón, the youths cited both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspects primarily included the issue of saving money because it is less expensive to buy drinks and prepare them themselves on the streets than to frequent pubs. Regarding the negative aspects, they cited the dirt, trash, and noise that disturb the neighbors.

Regarding the physical effects of alcohol consumption on the body, they indicated that alcohol is less harmful than tobacco and justified their actions by saying that “everyone drinks” or “it’s socially acceptable,” thereby downplaying the long-term consequences of drinking.

Regarding the second block of questions, we alluded to the social perceptions of alcohol consumption and the practice of botellón. We distinguished between different positions based on the age of participants.

The youngest participants stated that alcohol abuse is viewed favorably among their peers, stating, “it’s considered cool.” Older participants did not consider alcohol abuse in the same way, indicating that “If your friend gets drunk once, it’s funny, but many more times, and it gets tiresome.” The youths believed that alcohol is viewed favorably by society in general and that a high tolerance exists for alcohol consumption. This point of view influenced them because they acquired the habit unconsciously and no longer considered it detrimental to their lives because adults also drink.

One young person commented, “Alcohol is very ingrained in Spanish culture, such that even if you don’t drink, you have to toast with alcohol.” Moreover, the youths believed that consuming alcoholic beverages does not affect their normal lives or their studies; they think that it is not a problem if they only drink on weekends. Others stated that it does affect their daily lives, depending on the frequency with which they drink and quantity that they consume.

Finally, in the third block of questions, we asked for the youths’ opinions regarding the different measures adopted by government administrations in response to the botellón phenomenon.

Of the measures being applied to restrict alcohol consumption among youths, we highlighted that some are geared toward prohibiting the sale of alcoholic beverages from businesses or establishments after 10:00 p.m. and to minors. However, these norms do not function, according to youths, who stated that many underage people (i.e., younger than 18 years) can drink and buy alcohol whenever they want; first, they try to buy it themselves in stores, and if they cannot, then they ask a friend or acquaintance who is of age to buy the alcohol. Thus, the youths believed that administrative measures designed to restrict alcohol consumption are not yielding successful results.

Regarding alternative programs offered by the municipalities, the youths believed that these measures are failing to yield positive results in terms of alternatives to discourage botellón. They argued that botellón has become a starting point for going out at night, and even if other activities are planned (e.g., music or other events), they will still find part of the night to participate in botellón.

Regarding the possible future ways to stop the problems associated with botellón, the participants stated that the best way would be to raise awareness among future generations about healthier practices with regard to the consumption of alcohol. This action would mean assigning a positive value to drug prevention education in different arenas, not only among government administrations but also families and schools.

The youths stated that botellón is not conducted because of the lack of leisure time alternatives, given that the Government of Seville provides informational activities regarding the consumption of alcohol and other substances as well as cultural activities, sporting events, and concerts for youths. They have not noticed a decline in alcohol consumption because botellón occurs before or after such activities.

Therefore, we believe that this situation represents a complex social problem that requires difficult work and a long process of raising awareness among different sectors of society, not only youths but also educational institutions, families, and the media.

Discussion

With the description of the situation, we do not expect to act like those social sectors experiencing the problem of

addictions from an alarmist perspective, which sometimes criminalize substances and demonize behaviors (Aguilera, 2002; Amezcua & Palacios, 2016; Baigorri & Chaves, 2006; Baigorri & Fernández, 2004; Castillo et al., 2009). Alcohol and drug issues cannot be addressed from that point of view. We shall find a personal and social commitment balance so those deadlocks and impotence situations sometimes experienced due to a social alarm are avoided (Cortés, 2006; Elzo et al., 2003).

Concerning consumption, we found that the latest surveys conducted in Spain show a gender similarity between secondary school students and university students in relation to the amount of alcohol consumed regardless of the age range. It is particularly relevant the fact that female and male secondary school students have reached these consumption levels within a shorter time of period, which translates into a remarkable health issue (CIS, 2007; Cortes et al., 2010; Gómez-Bahillo & Ezquerro, 2013).

In the case of both secondary school and university students, male students consume larger quantities of alcohol (Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad (2016). With regard to leisure and spare time, we can conclude by stating that there is a youth lifestyle change as a general transformation—from a traditional community-based lifestyle toward a more secular, educated, and individualist one, (ESPAD, 2016). The consumption of alcohol and cannabis has entered a phase of progressive social normalization given that a high percentage of youths use them. The information and knowledge regarding the effects of drugs, the perceptions of risk, the motivation to begin consuming alcohol or drugs (or not begin using them) are intimately linked to one’s group of friends and the immediate environment (Gómez-Fraguela & Cutrín, 2014; Pedrero & Leiva, 2010).

The initiation of alcohol consumption occurs in a very different way than it did years ago. It is concretely linked to consumption on the weekends and in uncontrolled spaces (outside of the family and away from the world of adults) where youths feel comfortable and independent. Youths claim “an absolute right to fun” in heterogeneous groups with common identifying elements: alcohol consumption, occupation of public spaces in an exclusive manner, large interpersonal gatherings, the appropriation and prolongation of leisure time at night, and specific routines and rituals centered on alcohol (Rodríguez, Hernán, Cabrera, Romo, & García, 2007; Romagosa et al., 2010). The physical space is presented as one of the most important statements when shaping youth nightlife and it is the foundation of major conflicts between young people and residents. Anyhow, we shall understand that the social phenomenon “botellón” is a matter difficult to cope with (Cortés et al., 2007). What is not difficult to assume is young people gathering together in a space where they can socialize and share the same interests.

This phenomenon is indeed made of very different elements, such as cultural, social, educative, clinical, pharmacological and public order components, among others. These

elements are mixed and interconnected, which create a high number of situations and raise many questions dealing with different visions and interpretations of the phenomenon (Elzo et al., 2003; Gual, 2006).

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