

Sexualized Alcohol Marketing, Precarious Work and Gendered Sexual Risks: Explorations of Women Beer Promoters in Benin City, Nigeria

Emeka W. Dumbili and Ediomo-Ubong Nelson

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Abstract

The alcohol industry in Nigeria uses sophisticated marketing strategies to influence drinking, and alcohol marketing regulations do not exist. This study examined the alcohol industry's strategy of using young women to promote beer in Benin City, Nigeria, and how sexualized beer marketing, as precarious employment, creates a context of risk for sexual exploitation.

We conducted interviews and focus groups with beer promoters and their patrons and analysed data thematically. Some of the criteria for recruiting beer promoters include confidence, physical beauty, intelligence, and outspokenness. Beer promoters narrated that young women are mainly employed to promote beer as a strategy to convince men to buy more alcohol. Beer promoters cited the relatively high salary as their motivation for accepting to promote beer but highlighted multiple risks associated with this precarious work. First, promoters close late at night, and no provisions are made for their transport to their homes. Second, most male customers perceive beer promoters as sex workers and thus, attempt to persuade them to spend the night with them. Third, promoters also face physical and sexual harassment through unwanted contact and advances and are instructed to condone such behaviours during training. This strategy 'sexualizes' beer marketing and exposes beer promoters to health and social risks because they may be coerced into unwanted relationships as a condition for some men to purchase their brands (or sell more and meet their targets). There is a need to implement alcohol policies in Nigeria and tailor responses to beer promoters' unique risks.

Keywords: Alcohol Industry, Alcohol, Precarious employment, Women Beer Promoters

Background

Our study aims to explore the marketing strategy of employing young women to promote beer brands, the criteria for recruitment, and the risks associated with working as a beer promoter in Nigeria. We report on interviews and focus group data collected from young Nigerians, exploring the extent to which using women to promote beer brands in masculinist spaces creates gendered risks for promoters. While alcohol consumption is gendered and dominated by men in Nigeria (Ikuesan, 1994), beer is specifically considered men's alcohol (Dumbili, 2015). Therefore, the study is crucial to interrogate why the industry uses women to promote the so-called men's alcohol. The remainder of the article is divided into four main sections. First, we review previous studies on the topic and present the conceptual framework. This is followed by a description of the methodology that guided data collection and analysis. Next, we present the findings and discuss their implications before concluding with policy recommendations.

Women Beer Promoters

The gendered marketing strategy of recruiting young women as 'Beer Promoters' (or 'Beer Girls') is popular in Asia and Africa. In Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia, Lao, Thailand, and Vietnam, studies have shown that multinational alcohol companies use 'Beer Girls' to promote beer brands in leisure contexts such as bars, nightclubs, and 'beer gardens' (Lubek, 2005; Phaiyarom & Chuemchit, 2020; Webber & Spitzer, 2010). According to Phaiyarom and Chuemchit (2020, p.168-169), women beer promoters in Thailand are recruited based on their *attractive* physical appearance and are "forced to wear close-fitting and revealing clothes". Although beer promoters also wear alcohol companies' branded uniforms, research in Cambodia and Lao affirms that they are mandated to wear revealing or so-called *sexy clothes* (Lubek, 2005; Sychareun et al., 2021). Again, they are given a quota of 24 33cl cans of beer to sell every night (Lubek, 2005).

Beer promoters are vulnerable to many workplace harassments and health risks. Verbal and physical abuse, in addition to sexual harassment (some are groped), are some common workplace hazards they face, and these factors are heightened when customers are intoxicated (Webber & Spitzer, 2010). A study conducted among 640 women beer promoters in Cambodia reported that over 94% had experienced unwanted sexual advances while promoting beer (CARE Cambodia, 2005). While 24% stated that sexual touching occurred every night, one-third reported engaging in forced sexual intercourse (CARE Cambodia, 2005).

Beer promoters are trained “to create a pleasurable environment” to encourage male customers to buy more beer (Sychareun et al., 2021, p.12). During their training, they are instructed that sexual harassment is “an inevitable part of the job” (Sychareun et al., 2021, p.7). Also, sexual harassment can emanate from the staff of leisure venues where alcohol companies station beer promoters to sell beer. For example, a bar manager solicited sex from a beer promoter in Cambodia, threatening to give a bad report concerning her if she did not oblige (Webber & Spitzer, 2010).

‘Beer Girls’ are trained and instructed to satisfy customers to make more sales, and how well they perform these duties determines their commission or income and their continued employment (Phaiyarom & Chuemchit, 2020). Consequently, they are exposed to and forced to endure constant harassment from male customers, and some demand that they drink with them (Phaiyarom & Chuemchit, 2020; Webber & Spitzer, 2010). Being forced to drink with customers frequently happens to the extent that one Cambodian promoter was threatened to be shot if she refused (Webber & Spitzer, 2010). Phaiyarom and Chuemchit (2020) found that 51.6% of beer promoters drank alcohol with customers, and 48.4% became drunk in the process. Webber and Spitzer (2010) reported that beer promoters who receive commissions are more vulnerable to drinking with customers and are often exposed to sexual risks. Beer promoters are also pressured to date customers (Sychareun et al., 2016), and most male customers perceive them “as being available for sex” (Webber & Spitzer, 2010, p.8).

Indeed, research in Lao found that even when beer promoters are harassed, their team leaders or venue owners do not intervene or caution the customer who perpetrated such an act (Sychareun et al., 2021). Women beer promoters are perceived as “indirect sex workers” or “bad girls” because of their night job (Phaiyarom & Chuemchit, 2020,p.169) and thus stigmatized (Webber & Spitzer, 2010). However, there may be blurred lines between performing precarious roles of promoting beer and sex work because previous research

suggests that some of them are pressured and/or compelled to participate in sex work to supplement their low incomes (Lubek, 2005; Webber & Spitzer, 2010). As Lubek (2005) discussed, some did not use protection among those who disclosed engaging in the exchange of sex for money. Lubek (2005) further reported 23.2% HIV/AIDS prevalence among beer promoters between 1995 and 2002. That beer promoters experience coerced sexual encounters, which makes negotiating condom use difficult may explain the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate.

While a growing number of studies have been conducted on women beer promoters in Asia, we identified only two studies in Sub-Saharan Africa (Dumbili, 2016; van Beemen, 2019). In Eastern Nigeria, Dumbili (2016) reported that alcohol companies and their representatives employ female university students as promoters. The study further showed that *physical beauty* is a criterion to be employed, and while beer promoters socialise with male bar patrons to encourage them to buy more beer, some customers purchase their brands on the condition that they will accept a romantic relationship with them (Dumbili, 2016). In addition to sexual harassment, van Beemen's (2019) investigative journalism also reported similar findings regarding Heineken's marketing practice of using Beer Girls in Nigeria and six other African countries. Nigeria has not implemented alcohol policies; thus, alcohol companies rely on industry self-regulation (Morojele et al., 2021). Given the lack of policies, alcohol marketing activities are largely unregulated in Nigeria, and this may account for the work conditions described in this study.

Conceptual Discussion – Beer Promotion and Precarious Work

Precarious work is a multi-dimensional concept that captures objective job characteristics involving insecurity. Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) have defined it as uncertain, unstable, and insecure work in which employees bear risks and receive limited social benefits and statutory protection. Vosko, (2010) proposed a four-dimensional model of precarious work, including a low level of regulatory protection, low wages, high employment insecurity, and a low level of employee control over wages, hours, and working conditions. Work precarity ranges from high to low precariousness, and the level of precariousness depends on work wage and regulatory protection (Cranford et al., 2003). Poorly remunerated jobs where there is a lack of stability and benefits are considered highly precarious.

An example of a highly precarious work is beer promotion, which is the focus of this research¹. Beer promotion is a highly feminized, insecure, and poorly remunerated work, which fosters exploitation by Trans-National Alcohol Companies (TNACs) of poor young women from resource-poor countries (Lubeck, 2005). Precarious work is known to have negative physical and mental health effects (Kim et al., 2008), which disproportionately affects young people who face a greater risk of poverty, temporary employment, and unemployment than the general population (Furlong, 2012; Standing, 2014). Regarding beer promotion, low wages and the lack of regulatory protection exacerbates these health risks and adds another layer of risk in the form of sexual violence and associated social and health harms (Sycharenun et al., 2021).

The feminization of beer promotion reflects gendered inequality in the organization of work globally, where women are over-represented in low-wage, part-time jobs (De Ruyter & Warnecke, 2008; Presser, Gornick, & Parashar, 2008; Young, 2010). In many countries, including those in Africa, adult men dominate formal sector employment while women and youth are over-represented in low-wage work mostly in the informal sector (Banks, 2016). Gendered differences in wages, work hours and security support the view that women experience a greater level of precariousness in employment (Young, 2010). In addition to gender, precarious employment is influenced by age, citizenship status, stage of the life course, skills and alternative employment options (Campbell & Price, 2016; Knox, Warhurst, Nickson, & Dutton, 2015). It also depends on the level and dimensions of precariousness in the employment relations as well as the wider social context, including conditions such as workers' dependence on poor wages for livelihood, family relations, education, and extant social norms (Fleetwood, 2011; Thompson & Vincent, 2010). Similar social conditions are known to surround young women who take up jobs as beer promoters (Dumbili, 2016; Lubeck, 2005; Putten & Feilzer, 2011; Sycharenun et al., 2021).

In many African countries, livelihood conditions are appalling, and most people have to work their way out of poverty. Most of these workers are young people who struggle to enter an oversaturated labour market (Fox & Gandhi, 2021). Many take up precarious jobs with poor pay, job insecurity and lack of social benefits (Hino & Ranis, 2014; Yeboah, 2017). They work longer hours and earn irregular income in insecure jobs that lack written contracts (Yeboah, 2017). Young women face gender-specific impediments to adequate employment, including

¹ In Nigeria, another high-risk precarious work engaged in by young women is street hawking or vending and sex work. Female street vendors face less risk for sexual harassments when compared to beer promoters. Sex workers have a higher risk of sexual violence, and there is an overlap between sex work and beer promotion.

occupational segregation and workplace norms that impede equal pay (Fox & Gandhi, 2021). Some of these young women work as beer promoters for TNACs (Dumbili, 2016), where they face elevated risk of health harms within highly masculinized drinking environments.

In many cultures, drinking, especially heavy drinking, is a masculine activity (Guttman, 1996; Hunt & Antin, 2017; Messerschmidt, 1997; Peralta, 2007). Heavy drinking and alcohol-related violence affirms masculine identity and upholds male honour (Hunt et al., 2005; Tomsen, 1997). Alcohol constitutes masculinity not only through the act of drinking, but also because drinking is connected to behaviours, such as violence, that constitutes masculinity (Iwamoto et al., 2011). In relation to the precarious work of beer promotion, norms around alcohol and masculinity are aspects of the wider social context shaping female beer promoters' experiences of sexual violence. Studies have shown how sexualized drinking environments reifies traditional norms of masculinity and femininity, creating a context of risk for sexual harassments for female beer promoters (Lubeck, 2005; Putten & Feilzer, 2011; Sycharenun et al., 2021). Our aim in this study is to contribute an African perspective to this budding literature, which is currently dominated by research from Southeast Asia.

Methods

Study Site, Procedures, and Participants

We conducted this study in Benin City, Southern Nigeria. With an estimated population of 1,727,000 people in 2020 (Population Stat, 2021), Benin is a metropolitan city consisting of government offices, higher educational institutions, and private companies. Transnational alcohol companies like 'Guinness Nigeria' and Heineken-owned Nigerian Breweries have production facilities in Benin. To recruit participants, we adopted word-of-mouth and direct recruitment processes. Here, the first author visited two university campuses where he made initial contact with potential participants. Having established a rapport with them, the study aim was introduced to them, and those who indicated interest were recruited for interviews (Flick, 2014). A female Research Assistant also used these processes to recruit student and non-student participants.

Additionally, we used Google Forms distributed through WhatsApp and Facebook platforms to invite potential participants. In the form, we included brief information about the study and the contact numbers of the researchers. We also stated that those interested in the

study could provide their contact number (or email) to be reached. The first author also attended two socio-religious events in the city and introduced the study to potential participants before asking them to help distribute the Google Forms to their contacts. Subsequently, we contacted those who completed the form, which facilitated more participants' recruitment.

Furthermore, we used the snowball method (Ghaljaie et al., 2017) to recruit additional participants. After each interview, we asked the participants to recruit other youth who use alcohol and may be willing to participate. We employed these multi-methods of recruitment to recruit a diverse population, and this yielded positive results. Each participant was incentivised with N1500 (USD 3.94). We have replaced their names and other identifiers with pseudonyms. Brunel University London Ethics Committee granted ethical approval (Reference:16189-LR-Apr/2019-18748-2), and we obtained informed consent from the participants.

The participants include 48 university students and 24 non-students. The non-students included apprentices and hairstylists, and there was also an auxiliary nurse and a plumber. Ten (8 women and 2 men) were beer promoters while others were patrons. The sensitive nature of the topic hindered the inclusion of more promoters, and this may have limited our findings. The criteria for inclusion include being between 18 and 24 years old, having used alcohol at least once in the last 30 days and being a beer promoter and/or patron. We conducted 53 semi-structured interviews and 3 focus group discussions (FGDs, $n=26$) lasting between 30 and 99 minutes with 42 females and 37 males (aged 18-24 years) between February and June 2019. One of the FGDs was solely on women beer promoters, and this was facilitated by the female Research Assistant to create an environment where sensitive or distressing experiences could be shared. Five females and two males participated in both the interviews and FGDs. We conducted the interviews and FGDs in the English language, although five nonstudents spoke in Pidgin English. The sessions were recorded with a digital recorder following the participants' permission.

Analytical Strategy

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2019) reflexive thematic approach, and we combined deductive and inductive approaches to identify rich and detailed patterns of meaning in the data. After verbatim transcription of the audios, we read the transcripts many times, and cross-checked them for accuracy. Having immersed ourselves in the data, we adopted a collaborative

method of analysing data (Richards & Hemphill, 2018) by coding five transcripts independently, using participants' own words and phrases (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Following this, we reviewed and discussed the tentative codes generated manually before developing the coding framework, which facilitated the remainder of the coding and analysis. This was aimed at increasing the analytical rigour, consistency, transparency, and trustworthiness (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Next, we imported the transcripts into NVivo 12 software, which we used to complete the remainder of the analysis (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). Here, parent and child nodes were created, and all the transcripts were coded by collating and categorizing extracts into relevant nodes (Maher et al., 2018). After coding and reading the nodes, we moved incompatible excerpts to more appropriate nodes, or created new nodes for them. Then, we searched and identified themes. For further details on the analytical procedure, see Dumbili et al. (2022). Following these iterative processes, we named themes and subthemes developed before recording their patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Findings

Recruitment Process and Conditions for Employing Beer Girls

Participants believed beer promoters to be mainly young undergraduates and graduates living in Benin City. Multinational alcohol companies, particularly 'Guinness Nigeria' and Heineken-owned Nigerian Breweries, recruit them to promote their brands in bars and other leisure spaces. Participants reported that they mainly start their work in the evening and close at night (before 10 pm) on weekdays, although they start earlier during weekends. Participants also indicated that they work for long hours for very low wages. Beer promoters noted that they are either used to introduce new products to the market or to encourage the sale of old products that are experiencing a decline in demand. Beer promoters are dubbed 'Brand Ambassadors' (BA) by the drinks industry, but they call themselves 'Amba Girls.' Some participants discussed that they were currently working as beer promoters for alcohol companies in Benin City: *As a matter of fact, I am currently promoting Guinness stout at one bar on this street (Interview Participant 47, Female)*. Some of them also stated that they know some colleagues or relatives who work as beer promoters.

The participants were asked to unpack the recruitment process, with particular focus on the requirements the alcohol industry considers for employment. First, they stated that alcohol

companies' marketing agents advertise through social media platforms. They noted that beer promoters in Benin have a WhatsApp platform, which helps disseminate such information: *We have a group chat where they will paste it (advert), and will be like, there's recruitment for this brand (Participant 6, FGD)*. The quotes below shed more light on the recruitment process, including the instructions *Amba Girls* receive regarding the dress code:

Participant 4 [FGD]: They always call for recruitment, after which they will allocate a bar to each person where she will work. Then, they have Supervisors for different territories. They are in charge of [managing promoters' activities].

Participant 49 [Interview]: They will tell you to just look smart... So, you wear black trousers, Sneakers, and branded shirt to look very smart.

The participants unanimously agreed that *Amba Girls* wear branded uniforms that alcohol companies provide for them. This is one of the differences between them and other staff like bartenders and *Salesgirls*², who also work in some outlets. In Nigeria, alcohol companies maintain a symbiotic relationship with outlets. For instance, they provide free branded signboards, fridges, tables, and chairs for bar owners to facilitate the sale of their products (Dumbili & Williams, 2017). Bar owners apply to alcohol companies for promoters to be posted to them. Therefore, aside from the Supervisors that alcohol companies appoint to oversee the promoters posted to a particular region, outlet owners also provide on-site monitoring. During the recruitment and training, *Amba Girls* are advised to maintain a good relationship with the outlet owners, and this relationship, rather than a legal contract, determines how long a promoter will remain on the job. This characteristic, along with long work hours, highlights the precariousness of this form of employment.

Our analysis also shows that some young men promote beer: *I work with Guinness sometimes for their promo jobs [Interview Participant 46, Male]*. Although some participants indicated that alcohol companies also use young men to promote beer in Benin, both male and female beer promoters indicated that this strategy is a recent development. Additionally, they highlighted that they only use young men occasionally:

Interview Participant 41 [Male] Like the Royal Kingdom [produced by Guinness], when it came out one year ago, they did a promo. I even worked with them, trying to

² Salesgirls are employed by Bar owners, and they are mostly uneducated or secondary school graduates.

convince people in beer parlours (bar) [to buy it]....They [mainly] recruit young girls [but] young boys are occasionally used. They don't use boys [always].

On the qualifications for employing Amba Girls, the participants stated that there are specific features or conditions alcohol companies look out for in a potential promoter during recruitment exercise, and these constitute the criteria for engagement:

Moderator: During the recruitment of promoters, are there any special things they look out for?

FGD Participants echoed:

Participant 1[FGD]: You have to be smart.

Participant 2[FGD]: You have to be very outspoken.

Participant 6[FGD]: [You have to be] smart, intelligent, and have good communication skills.

Moderator: Let's say, for instance, that they have like 100 applicants that are smart, and they need like 50. Are there any other things that will facilitate your employment?

Participant 6 [FGD]: If they are [many] smart, intelligent [applicants].., then, they will now look at [how] tall and good-looking [you are]. They just call for [applicants to appear face-to-face because] they want to see the persons that want to work. They want to see if you are tall... fair, slim... So, most times, they want you to come [to the interview venue]. When you come, they want to see how you are looking [your appearance]. When you're selected, then you will be the one to go to the bars...

The participants discussed extensively that the recruitment process involves a face-to-face process to enable employers to observe whether potential promoters met these conditions. A common practice among alcohol companies in Eastern Nigeria is to employ 'beautiful' young women as beer promoters (Dumbili, 2016), the aim being to leverage their physical or sexual appeal to attract male customers. As referenced above, such a strategy of using 'physical features' as a condition for employing Amba Girls is also common among the alcohol companies in Benin City. This is understandable because multinational alcohol companies often deploy similar successful strategies globally (Dumbili et al., 2022). The participants further shared their perceptions of the reasons for some of these criteria. For example:

Participant 6 [FGD]: Smartness and your communication [skills are the criteria]. If you have good communication skills, you'll be picked because if you are not confident and have no good communication skills, you definitely cannot do an Amba [Ambassador] job.

On the attraction to the job, all the participants highlighted that they accepted promoting alcohol because of the pay, which shows how wider socioeconomic precarity influences uptake of high-risk employments:

Interviewer: So, why did you choose to promote beer?

Participant 3 [FGD]: As a student, you'll need extra cash definitely. So, that's why I went into [beer] promotion... At least, I do get something [money] that I use to take care of myself and take care of some minor school stuff..

Although Nigeria is an oil-rich country, most of the citizens live below the poverty line. The wealthiest citizens send their children abroad for higher education, and others can afford the high fees paid in private universities. On the other hand, the children of the middle/lower class and the poor masses attend public universities where little, or no funding exists. As one of the participants noted, the money she receives aided her studies: “the money [they pay]... has helped me as a student to support my studies (**Participant 1, FGD**). Alcohol companies pay them 2500 Naira (USD6) daily: “If it is Guinness, they can pay you 2500 Naira per day” (**Participant 5, FGD**). Although this pay is low relative to the work beer promoters do, it is a reasonably high daily income for a student, especially because the minimum wage per month in Nigeria is 30000 Naira (USD71.63). Although the participants acknowledged that the work is stressful (and risky), like others, Participant 5 emphasised that “we are just doing it because of the pay” (**Participant 5 FGD**). Therefore, it is obvious that despite the challenges involved in promoting beer, Amba Girls accept the job to make ends meet.

On the reason for using women to promote beer brands, interview and FGD participants (including beer promoters and their patrons) unanimously shared nuanced opinions indicating that the alcohol industry primarily uses women to promote their brands to persuade male patrons to buy more alcohol. As noted, alcohol is gendered in Nigeria. While men drink beer, wine and other flavoured alcoholic beverages are seen as women's alcohol (Dumbili, 2015). Our analysis indicates that women beer promoters are also used to encourage women to initiate beer consumption.

Job Hazards Associated with Beer Promotion

This section will highlight covert and overt risks associated with beer promotion. Beer promoters are given targets to meet, and the ability to meet the targets determines how long a promoter retains her job. In the excerpt below, where sales involved an underaged patron, we exemplify how this can sometimes engender dilemmatic situations for promoters:

Interview Participant 47 (Female): ...you sell because you want to meet your target...[But] if you are underaged and I tell you that I cannot sell to you, the bar owner will be angry with me... He will report me to my boss [Supervisor], [saying] that the girl sent to his bar is... chasing customers away because they are not up to 18 [years]. Now, my boss will not look at the fact that the person is not up to 18; they'll be like, 'why are you not selling the product?' That'll be the question; you don't want to sell? You are here to sell; that's what they will tell you.

As referenced in the account above, "you are here to sell" suggests that what is important to both the outlet owners and alcohol companies is making sales, irrespective of the buyer's age. Although in Nigeria, there is no national minimum legal age for on/off-premise sales of alcohol (World Health Organization, 2018), but the industry self-regulatory marketing code stipulates that alcohol should be purchased by persons who are 18 years and above (Dumbili, 2014). Expectedly, this self-imposed marketing code is not obeyed by the industry that developed it; thus, both young and old buy and use alcohol (Dumbili, 2014). From the above account, it can be inferred that promoters face the risk of being reported to their boss (which may facilitate job loss) if they refuse to sell alcohol to the 'underaged,'. Indeed, by not applying formal rules by the supervisors and the bar owners, promoters face more challenging conditions at work.

Other work-related hazards beer promoters face are verbal abuse/attack and insults from male customers. They narrated that during training, they were informed that such abuses are inevitable and that they should find ways of managing abusive customers. Participant 4's account illustrates this further:

Participant 4 (FGD): There was a time I was talking to a man, and he was like, abeg [please] get out of here... I stood there, and tried to converse in pidgin English... But he said, 'I say I no hear you, nah only you go school abi? [I said that I am not interested. Are you the only educated person?] Get out of here. Get out!' I was still smiling but, in my mind, I was boiling (laughs)... So, the experience of that insult is not very nice at all, but at a point, you will get used to it.

As her account indicates, accepting to do the gendered precarious job of promoting beer means that promoters must accept ill-treatments to please customers and employer. Indeed, our analysis indicates that one must develop the ability to tolerate and manage such an intense verbal attack if they must meet the target and retain their jobs. If a promoter fails to handle

such a situation ‘appropriately’, the outlet owner will report her to the Supervisor, which may facilitate a job loss. Again, this highlights the precarious nature of the job and shows how promoters may be unprotected by supervisors or outlet owners.

Another form of risk is that some men will not buy their brands unless the Amba Girl agrees to drink with them:

Participant 4 (FGD): When you serve your customer drink, they’ll be like, ‘hope you will take one bottle with us?’ At times, they will say, ‘I’m not buying your product if you don’t take one bottle’.

Insecurity is another serious work-related risk beer promoters face. While most beer promoters discussed that they close by 9 PM, some work a little beyond 9 PM. Alcohol companies do not provide means of transportation for them, neither does their salary compensate for these hazards. Beer promoters face the risk of travelling at night to their homes or hostels with public transport and the associated risks:

FGD Participant: The risk is closing at night... Sometimes, we close [by] 9:00, and I will just put off my phone and hide it. There was a day I was coming from my work... it was a cab I boarded, and two guys were inside. I didn’t know that I didn’t switch it off; it was on vibration. They were like, ‘give me your number’. [Out of fear] I now called my number to them; they were calling my number, and it was vibrating. I was like, ‘I didn’t go with my phone’. They were like, ‘what’s vibrating?’ I was really scared...

Traveling at night in Nigeria is generally fraught with risks due to pervasive insecurity, but for women, it is riskier. For example, a 22-year-old woman who boarded a Lagos State-owned public transport facility on the night of February 26, 2022, was kidnapped and murdered by yet-to-be-identified men; the driver is now the prime suspect (Akoni, Adelaja, & Sessou, 2022). If government-owned facilities are not safe for women to use at night, one could imagine the state of privately managed buses/taxis that are scarcely registered. While she was scared due to perceived harassment/harm, another participant discussed how she narrowly missed an armed robber who was robbing passers-by in her street:

FGD Participant 6: There was a time I was going home, and they were chasing an armed robber... There is an uncompleted building we usually pass [before heading] to the house. The guy was [there] robbing people that were passing, [and] harassing them. It was while we entered the street that the people in the area were chasing the armed

robber. So, if they had not chased him at that time, we would have actually been harassed, and something would have happened. So, the risk is really crazy.

The participants shared detailed accounts describing that the job is risky, to the extent that if a promoter is robbed on her way home, and, in consequence, loses her property such as a phone or money ‘*the company won’t pay for the phone*’; *I’ll just say that the work is at your own risk* (**Participant 5 FGD**). Together, these accounts have highlighted some security risks and job-related hazards beer promoters in Benin City face, which further underscore the precarious nature of the job.

Risk of Sexual Harassment

Perception of Beer Girls as available for Sex

Aside from the risks described above, beer promoters also suffer sexual harassments that occur in different forms. As indicated, alcohol is gendered and male-dominated in Nigeria (Dumbili, 2015). Men have often occupied public drinking spaces from the traditional era until multinational alcohol producers like Heineken and Guinness started brewing beer in 1946 and 1962. Although these alcohol companies and their aggressive marketing practices have facilitated a shift in drinking norms, some people, especially men, still perceive women who use alcohol or occupy public/masculinist drinking spaces such as bars and clubs as transgressors of gender boundaries (Dumbili, 2015). Relatedly, most Nigerian women are socialised to accept passive femininity, making some perceive bars as men’s spaces. This is further echoed in the account below:

Participant 4 (Female FGD): Let’s say you go to a bar now, and you see one lady taking a hard drink, you’ll be like ‘ah! Look at that lady o!’ Most definitely, you’ll frown upon it. That’s the way it is in our society; we don’t accept female in the bar setting at all. It’s not acceptable.

Given this widespread negative perception and stigmatization of women who use public drinking spaces, it is common for such women to be seen by men as sex workers. This perception dominated the accounts of the FGD participants: For example:

Participant 6 [FGD]: I’ve been in a situation where most persons actually viewed it that most of these “Amba Girls” [are available for sex] because if you are an Amba

Girl, people feel like we are all irresponsible. They feel like we do tend to follow men [home]; that's one view they always have. Like 'as far as she's a girl doing this Amba job, if I talk to her as a guy, she will definitely follow me home, she will agree'...

All beer promoters discussed the manifestation of heterosexual power relations in bar contexts and how male customers often enact *sexual sociality* (Riach & Wilson, 2014). That is, most male bar patrons often perceive them as being available for sex and as an *object* of 'purchase' by the *highest bidder*. The following nuanced account demonstrates this reality:

Participant 2 (FGD): They see you as a prostitute or a girl that is very irresponsible since you are working in a bar serving alcohol. Some of them will just come and be like, 'hi, you are beautiful. Should I wait for you? What time do you close?' If you tell them 9pm, [they will say] 'okay, I will wait for you so that we will go home together'. If you tell him, 'Sir, I didn't come with you; I came alone, he will say, 'don't worry, I will take care of you. How much are they paying you?' I will double it. That's the most annoying question [they ask]... They always try to harass you...

Similarly, another participant shared a detailed account of how a male patron who perceived her to be available for sex verbally abused and called her a sex worker. The man asked for a phone charger which she gave. When she asked him to return the charger, he called her names:

Participant 1(FGD): When they see us in the bar, they believe that our primary aim here is prostitution. I could remember a promo I did; I was attending to a customer, and he started with 'please, help me with your charger'. I brought my charger to him... So, when I was about to leave, I said 'sir, my charger', he said, please be with me. I said, 'sir, I don't understand'. He said, 'be with me, I will bring you back tomorrow'. How much [will I pay]? You've been here since; how much [are they paying you]? I will give you times five of it'. I said, 'I don't understand you!' He said, take your charger Ashawo [prostitute]... I took my charger and left.

Beer promoters engage in 'affective labour'. Thus, the alcohol industry in Nigeria trains and positions them in bars to enact "subjectivities, social relationships, and sensations" (Coffey, Farrugia, Adkins, & Threadgold, 2018, p.729) that will engender more sales and shore-up profits. From our analysis, it is clear that promoters must tolerate subtle and more traumatising harassment to keep their jobs of performing *feminized* affective labour. However, such conditions positioned them as precarious workers (with associated social and health consequences).

Outright Sexual Advances and Harassment

Aside from the negative perception and harassment described above, participants also referenced overt sexual harassment they experienced. For instance, they discussed that some men make unwanted sexual touches like *smacking* their buttocks under the influence of alcohol. Unfortunately, beer promoters are instructed to expect and tolerate such sexual harassment in the guise that customers are ‘insulting the brand’:

Participant 5 (FGD): [We face] harassment! Like if you get to a bar and the person has drunk a lot, the person can just come and spank your ass when you are walking and since you are promoting a brand and you want that brand to sell, you can’t say anything. You are just there to tolerate the excesses; everything they do, you just take it. Like they’ll always say [during training], ‘they are not insulting you, they are insulting the brand’. But you are the one standing there, you have feelings but what can you do? You’ll just smile or just walk away and let it go.

Other participants supported the view that promoters are seemingly helpless when they are harassed in order not to offend both customers, outlet owners, and the industry:

Participant 3 (FGD): when it comes to the harassment, you cannot shout, you cannot insult that person; if not, you are even putting yourself in more danger.... You don’t retaliate when things like that happen. You try to say in a very pleasant manner: ‘please, can you stop doing that?’

Indeed, *you are even putting yourself in more danger*, and having to say ‘please’ to a customer who made an unsolicited sexual touch suggests a state of helplessness and the fear of losing your job- a factor that casts light on the precarious nature of working as a beer promoter.

While all the beer promoters discussed that sexual harassment was inevitable, the data show that it can be perpetrated not only by customers. For example, Participant 3 (FGD) shared an experience where the bar owner’s husband sexually harassed her. On one occasion, she raised her voice, which attracted his wife’s attention. Having been warned by his wife, he stopped harassing her. Although none of the participants agreed to have engaged in sexual intercourse with either customers or Supervisors, they nonetheless reported that some of their colleagues might not be able to resist. For example, Participant 3 (FGD) shared an account of how a Supervisor initiated a sexual relationship with her colleague who appeared to oblige:

Participant 3[FGD]: ...when she started working in the bar, it was the boss [Supervisor] himself that started chasing her; like wanting to come to her house... I was like, 'tell him not to come'. She said no... 'is it not to come to her house? Is it not to sleep [with her]? He will sleep with her, so far as he will buy her a phone, that she doesn't care'...

Given the advantaged position the Supervisor in the above account occupied, it may be difficult for most promoters to resist in the context of performing *sexualized labour* (Poulston, 2008). This is primarily because of the consequences of losing a source of income, which shows how the precarious work of beer promotion could create a context of risk for sexual exploitation.

Discussion

This study examined the strategic use of young women to promote beer brands in masculinist spaces like bars in a Nigerian city- a strategy that sexualizes beer marketing. While some of the findings align with previous studies, others markedly departed from existing research. We found that although the multinational alcohol companies occasionally use a few young men to promote beer, the strategy is a recent development, which may be to further their denial of still using young women as beer promoters in Africa, following van Beemen's (2019) important work. We found that young women are primarily and strategically employed to perform what Poulston (2008) described as *sexualized labour* for the industry. That is, young women are purposefully deployed to perform 'feminized' affective labour (Coffey et al., 2018) of socializing with and encouraging men to buy more drinks, which increases the industry profit. This dynamic, which has been reported in previous research (Dumbili, 2016), shows how precarious work creates gendered risk for sexual exploitation of poor young women. That young women are mostly employed to promote beer corroborates previous research indicating that women outnumber men who perform precarious jobs (De Ruyter & Warnecke, 2008; Presser et al., 2008; Young, 2010).

On the criteria for employment, the findings highlight that, among other qualities, being smart, outspoken, and good-looking were paramount to the alcohol industry before employing young women to promote beer brands. Using physical attractiveness as a condition for employment confirms previous research in Nigeria (Dumbili, 2016) and Thailand (Phaiyaron & Chuemchit, 2020). The finding also echoes Sychareun et al. (2021, p.12), who deftly noted that "employing attractive young females as beer promoters, who are trained in how to interact

with customers, deliberately sexualises young women and reinforces unequal power relation''. Undoubtedly, such criterion not only contributes to the sexualization of the job, but also facilitates the objectification of female beer promoters whose physical features are exploited for industry profits. Like most service work, particularly in the hospitality industry, "the monitoring of styles of dress, appearance, and comportment which align with 'fun', light-hearted femininity is crucial in this sphere of work" (Coffey et al., 2018, p.730). This was evident in our study, in that beer promoters were authorised to dress 'smartly' on branded uniforms. Although *Amba Girls* in Nigeria wear branded uniforms, they were not mandated to wear revealing clothes like their counterparts in Asia (Phaiyarom & Chuemchit, 2020). Nevertheless, mandating them to wear branded T-shirts to easily identify the products they promote (a popular marketing strategy in Nigeria) turns them into *walking billboards*.

Our findings indicate that beer promoters face multiple work-related hazards. Verbal abuse/attacks, insults, harassment, and stigmatization were reported as some of the *inevitable* risks associated with the job. For instance, beer promoters close late at night, and unlike in Lao, where company vans are provided to transport them to their station and return them home after their shift (Sychareun et al., 2021); promoters in Nigeria are not provided with such services. As such, they travel at night in public transport facilities that are mainly unsafe for women in most Nigerian cities (Akoni et al., 2022). One serious implication of this finding that highlights the precarious nature (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018) of the job is that if a beer promoter loses personal properties or suffers harm while returning from work, she will not be compensated by the industry. This and other risks cancel out the benefits of the little pay that is the attraction of these jobs for beer promoters.

According to Sychareun et al. (2021), alcohol companies in Loa expect beer promoters to socialize with bar patrons, although the expectation does not include drinking with them. Unfortunately, some men will not buy their products if they refuse to drink with them. Given that beer promoters must meet their daily targets (Lubek, 2005), they face the dilemma of drinking alcohol with customers against their wish or failing to make enough sales, culminating in losing their jobs. This highlights the extent of this precarious, femininized, and sexualized labour (Poulston, 2008), and how this contributes to alcohol consumption in the context of products promotion. Future research could investigate how alcohol consumption in the context of product promotion contributes to the risk of sexual exploitation for female beer promoters.

In bars, nightclubs, and other night-time leisure spaces, “sexuality is often ‘read’ by customers through employees’ bodies and looks where the employee’s body is seen as a site of aspiration or desire” (Coffey et al., 2018, p.734). Coffey and colleagues added that “these heterosexualised processes are strongly gendered along historical lines in which female service workers have been seen as sexually available to male customers” (Coffey et al., 2018, p.734). Our findings align with these analyses, highlighting the manifest sexual objectification of female beer promoters’ bodies by male bar patrons in Nigeria. Given that “masculine power and domination” propel sexual harassment (Coffey et al., 2018, p.740), male bar patrons in Nigeria not only perceived women who work in bars as sexually available to them, but they went ahead to sexually harass them through unwanted touches (e.g., hitting their buttocks) and demands for promoters to spend the night with them. Of course, sexual harassment is rife in the hospitality industry, especially because it emphasizes the need to satisfy customers, but this, to a large extent, is to the detriment of female employees (Poulston, 2008). This makes evident the link between work precarity and sexual health risks for young women engaged in beer promotion.

As Good and Cooper (2016) argued, the culture of and the precarious nature of service work constrained employees (including bartenders) in Australia from seeking justice when sexually harassed. Given these constraints, they had to develop “informal coping strategies *to manage* the situation” (Good & Cooper, 2016, p.447). We found similar issues in this study, where Nigerian women beer promoters, who were instructed to expect and bear sexual and other forms of harassment, had to smile, and walk away from men who harassed them. Indeed, smiling and walking away from male customers after being sexually harassed is to avoid offending employers, but this heightens work-related hazards these promoters suffer and ‘normalises’ sexual harassment (Coffey et al., 2018, p.735). This is significant, especially as it further emboldens men who adhere to (traditional) masculinity, which views women bar workers as “performing feminized caring work” (Coffey et al., 2018, p.740) to continue perpetrating such acts.

Conclusion

In this study, we have shown the extent to which the alcohol industry strategy of using young women as beer promoters facilitates job precarity in Benin City. We have demonstrated that

women who promote beer in Benin face multiple insecurity and harassment, which they endure or tolerate to avoid losing their jobs and how these dynamics shape risk for sexual exploitation. The study has some limitations. First, we included a small number of beer promoters. Although we did not aim at the generalizability of our findings, studying more women who promote beer would have yielded more robust findings. Second, we relied on the verbal accounts of the participants without observing their activities in bars. Future ethnographic research is warranted to observe the day-to-day experiences of beer promoters. Such studies could include outlet owners and, possibly, industry representatives. Despite these limitations, the study highlights the myriad risks associated with the job and the need to protect women beer promoters from such risks. There is a need to implement alcohol policies in Nigeria to properly regulate the industry's marketing activities, and to tailor responses to the gendered dimensions of alcohol marketing. Given that the industry claims to have improved the conditions of beer promoters in Africa (van Beemen, 2019), the Nigerian government should closely monitor its activities to avoid the exploitation of young women employed to sell beer brands in Benin and other Nigerian cities. Further, improving the living conditions of youths in Nigeria through job creation and government support for small and medium scale enterprises could provide viable alternatives to precarious employments that seem to create more problems for young people than they solve.

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