

# Beer drinking, resistance and the politics of alcohol tax levy in Botswana

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## Abstract

**Aim:** The study investigated how beer drinkers coped, made sense of, and internalised the effects of the 30% alcohol levy implementation in Botswana in 2008. **Methods:** Constructivist grounded theory guided this study and explored how active beer drinkers ( $n = 20$ ) coped with the new alcohol reforms. **Results:** Beer drinkers resisted the new alcohol reforms through various acts theorised as individualised resistance, social drinking networks and seeking alternative drinking avenues. These resistance(s) are synergistic, fluid and situated. Actions by beer drinkers are culturally framed, enacted through the aegis of time to entrench drinker's autonomy. **Conclusions:** The alcohol levy implementation in Botswana illuminates the intersection of power, culture and resistance. Policies that are perceived to be draconian and not evidence-based are likely to be resisted by consumers. An examination of the interplay between power/resistance is critical for future alcohol policy development.

## Keywords

alcohol tax, beer drinking, Botswana, politics, resistance

Alcohol control measures have been widely documented by social scientists and include taxation, reduction of operating hours, maintaining public order and safety as well as limiting physical ability of alcohol. The *Global*

*strategy* by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010) has particularly endorsed the reduction of alcohol availability to reduce its harmful use. Furthermore, taxation of alcohol products has been identified as key in reducing

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drinking and its associated harm (Chisholm et al., 2018; Fielding et al., 2010; Jiang & Livingston 2015). A systematic review by Wagenaar, Tobler, and Komro (2010) found that doubling alcohol tax significantly reduces various alcohol-related harms such as mortality, traffic accidents, violence and crime. The review further highlights that taxation of alcohol products is beneficial as it generates revenue. Similarly in Australia a recent study by Vandenberg, Jiang, and Livingston (2019) concluded that an increase in alcohol taxes not only reduces consumption but could also be a source of revenue for governments. They further recommend that revenue raised through alcohol taxes be used to fund programmes that prevent alcohol-related harm. Strong evidence also exists that restricting physical availability of alcohol leads to a reduction in social harm (Kolosnitsyna, Sitdikov, & Khorkina, 2014; Sherk et al., 2018). While most studies have focused on Western contexts, Cook, Bond, and Greenfield (2014) concluded that limiting physical availability and restricting hours of operation reduces alcohol consumption levels in lower and middle-income countries. They call for strengthening capacity and infrastructures for effective implementation of alcohol policies in non-Western contexts.

While these bodies of literature have been incisive and provide useful ways to understand social control measures, they do not shed light on how alcohol consumers cope and deal with such measures. There is a dearth of theory-driven studies that flesh out the ways in which alcohol consumers experience, resist, and make sense of alcohol control measures. Noting this gap, d'Abbs (2015) has called for exploring the concept of resistance to alcohol policies as it is a "neglected part and, when not neglected, poorly understood" (p. 126). His contention is that while alcohol studies have demonstrated various acts of resistance to alcohol laws, these acts have not received proper attention and are largely undertheorised. For non-Western countries, this is quite surprising given the vast anthropological literature that has established

how alcohol control was an essential component of the colonial project. In light of this gap, there is a need to disentangle the ways in which alcohol consumers deal with alcohol control measures across various drinking contexts.

### *Contextualising alcohol consumption in Botswana*

In 2008, the government of Botswana imposed a 30% tax levy on all alcohol products to deal with problematic drinking in the country. The levy was initially set at 70% but was reduced to 30% (Pitso & Obot, 2011). Over and above the tax increase, hours of operation for drinking outlets were drastically reduced and selling alcohol from homes was outlawed. The implementation of the tax levy and alcohol regulations ran concurrently. The new developments meant that *shebeens* (places where alcohol was sold in residences) that were previously unregulated, were outlawed in the new regulations. It is important to note that there was no evidence of any scientific study that guided the implementation of the tax increase and its associated regulations. The government of Botswana had not carried out any empirical study that guided the implementation of these reforms. Furthermore, even after implementing these new reforms no nationally representative study was carried out to assess the impact and effectiveness of the levy. Pitso and Obot (2011) contend that without scientific evidence to back the tax increase, it became a challenge to understand what motivated the policy as well as the "magnitude of the presumed impact" (p. 904).

One of the effects of the new reforms was the drastic reduction in hours of operations for bars and other entertainment areas. Under the new operating hours, bars opened from 2 pm–10 pm (8 hrs) from Monday to Thursday, reduced from the previous time of 9 am–11 pm (14 hrs). For the weekend (Fridays and Saturdays), the new hours ranged from 12 pm–11 pm (11 hrs), from the previous 9 am–11 pm (14 hrs). On Sundays and public holidays, the hours were reduced to 3 pm–10 pm (7 hrs) from the previous

11 am–11 pm (12 hrs). Nightclubs and discotheques were also subjected to new operating hours from 7 pm–12 am (5 hrs) during the week and 7 pm–2 am (7 hrs) on Fridays and Saturdays.

The introduction of the 2008 tax levy and the associated regulations were not without controversy. There was a lot of pushback from the alcohol industry (Pitso & Obot, 2011). The Kgalagadi Breweries Limited (KBL), a subsidiary of the SABMiller company was one of the fiercest opponents of the tax levy implementation, as it threatened to harm their profit margins. Print media in Botswana were also awash with articles condemning the new regulations. For instance, local newspapers had articles with headlines about the President's "War" and "Jihad" on alcohol consumption in Botswana. These headlines might have influenced public opinion about the new alcohol reforms. Despite opposition, especially from the alcohol industry, the government of Botswana went ahead and increased the tax on alcohol products.

This study examined the ways in which beer drinkers in Botswana coped with the implementation of the new alcohol tax levy and its associated regulations. Participants in this study mostly identified as beer drinkers, but their drinking pattern was not fixed or explicit as most of them drank beer and other forms of alcohol. Beer drinkers in Botswana used myriad *tactics* (de Certeau, 1980) to deal with the effects of the tax increase. These acts are theorised as resistance and range from individualised, seeking alternatives and social drinking networks. The article argues that alcohol interventions that are perceived to be implemented without an empirical grounding are likely to attract resistance by drinkers. Furthermore, reducing alcohol-related harm in non-Western contexts might be better understood by examining the intersection between politics and drinking cultures.

## Materials and method

In this study, I utilised a constructivist approach that emphasises the involvement of both the

researcher and the participant in the research process. Through this approach, I was able to investigate the experiences of beer drinkers and how they dealt with the effects of alcohol regulations. The strength of the constructivist grounded theory approach lies in its ability to explicate human experience and interpret complex phenomena (Charmaz, 2014). The use of constructivist grounded theory methods was relevant to the research questions used in this study as it allowed for the examination of drinkers' experiences over time. It allowed for the analysis of themes as they emerged, and the flexibility to rearrange and reorganise research tools.

## Research venue

The study took place in 2017 in Botswana, a landlocked country located in the southern part of Africa nestled between South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Zimbabwe. The country has a population of about 2.2 million people in a land measuring about 581,730 square kilometres (about the same size as France). The diamond-rich country is known for its stable democracy, peace, as well as prudent economic management policies that have positively impacted the country since its independence in 1966. The Global Peace Index (2018) report named Botswana as the second most peaceful country in Africa after Mauritius.

## Procedure

I interviewed 20 people of whom 12 were males and eight were females. Study participants were approached at bars around the capital city of Botswana, Gaborone. To access potential participants, I targeted the opening times (around 2 pm) so that I could avoid the congestion and, in some cases, extreme intoxication evident later in the evening. The strategy worked well especially for males who were willing and open to a discussion about "drinking booze in Botswana". I used semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Semi-structured

interviews were conversational in nature and gave participants the freedom to share how the government's regulatory efforts had affected their drinking. All interviews with males were conducted in bars and lasted from about 45 minutes to over an hour and half. Accessing females was a challenge because they do not usually go to bars alone in Botswana. They either come in groups or in the company of a male (Suggs, 1996). To counter this challenge, I chose referral sampling where I first interviewed a female friend who drank alcohol, and she subsequently referred her friends to participate in the study. Through this strategy, I was able to interview most females in non-drinking venues and the interviews lasted between one and two hours. All interviews were conducted in English and all words that used the local language, Setswana, were translated to English and transcribed by the author.

### Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out using grounded theory methods and this means that analysis started after the first interview. In analysing data, I first undertook line-by-line coding, which meant "breaking apart" data into small units. At this level, coding was meant to label and see the processes in my data (Charmaz, 2014). Line-by-line coding was followed by focused coding for all interview transcripts. Through focused coding, I used the "most significant and frequent earlier codes to sift through and analyse large amounts of data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Focused coding therefore allowed me to refine my data based on my initial codes. Throughout this process, I used the constant comparative method to "determine adequacy and conceptual strength of my initial codes" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 140). I was then able to map the theoretical direction on the emergent themes, especially those that were relevant to my study questions.

Writing memos was done simultaneously with the coding process. Memo writing was both reflexive and analytic. In between coding

and writing memos, I frequently went back to the data to ensure that the emerging themes were kept close to the data. This process allowed me to theoretically sample the categories as they emerged. In grounded theory, theoretical sampling is used for "seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 192). For instance, in the early interviews, participants' narratives suggested that drinkers were simply expressing unhappiness with the new alcohol reforms. I was then able to explore how this unhappiness manifested for other participants which led me to collect richer data that were aligned to my emergent categories. Sampling categories also ensured that I established systematic checks and rigour in my analysis. By engaging in this process, I was able to achieve saturation, where new categories could no longer emerge. After comparing data to identify relations among themes and categories, a theory of *Beer Drinking as Resistance* was developed. The theory was substantive, manifest throughout the narratives of participants, and allowed for variation between themes and categories.

## Results

Beer drinkers expressed different feelings towards state regulation. Participants' narratives suggested resentment towards the new alcohol regulations, and drinkers vowed to continue drinking to "prove" the government wrong. Resistance involved continuing to drink after bars closed and seeking alternative ways to deal with the effects of the new alcohol regulations. The data demonstrate that these resistance types fed and informed each other in complex and multivalent ways.

### *Individualised resistance to alcohol policy*

Resistance by alcohol drinkers was primarily directed at regulations that led to an increase in alcohol prices, outlawed residential sales of alcohol, reduced hours of operation for bars and

increased penalties for driving under the influence of alcohol. Resistance to alcohol regulations became individualised and, in some cases, personal. Asked about how he felt about the new laws, Mpopi, a male respondent replied:

At 11 pm when the bars close, none of us wants to sleep, so we don't go home, we find somewhere else to continue drinking. I actually don't like the situation where government appears to be telling us how to spend our money. We work hard for the money and we need to enjoy it as much as we want. It's like we are small kids who get told what to do when we are grown-ups.

Some participants spoke about how the new regulations would not work because drinkers would ordinarily go out of their way to get alcohol regardless of restrictions or costs. In other words, an increase in price would not deter drinkers. Glen, a male respondent intimated that:

I want to say that if you love something, you will get it no matter what. You can even go to the extent of doing away with other things so that you can buy alcohol. Like me for instance, ever since the prices of alcohol were increased, I have cut down on my budget for food because I must drink.

Glen further lamented lack of consultation from state authorities and linked it to the protest against new regulations:

We drink a lot in a short space of time. We were not even consulted when these laws were made. I think it is a way of showing the Botswana government that we don't like the new hours by drinking a lot... I think Batswana (plural for citizens) are protesting these laws by drinking too much.

In defying the new regulations, the short time for drinking was blamed for binge drinking. The new operating hours required bars to open at 2 pm and close at 10 pm during the week. For weekends, the time ranged from 2 pm to 11 pm.

Drinking time was drastically reduced especially at the weekend. Considering that before the year 2008, these regulations did not exist, this was dramatic shift in the everyday drinking experience for most people. In a more practical way, beer drinkers would arrive at bars by sunset and gulp as much beer as they could before the bar closes. Drinking beer became a race against time. As Toks, a young man complained:

I think it (closing bars early) has caused us problems because those of us who are working must race against time to come to bars when we knock off. For example, I leave work at 5 pm and must drive home to prepare myself before I come here. By the time I get here its already 8 pm or almost 9 pm. Now when do I have time to drink and chill with friends? Often, I have to get myself a quart of beer and drink fast so that I can get drunk like everyone else.

In his complaint about reduced hours, White, a young male respondent suggested that beer drinkers usually want to drink without worrying about bars closing early. He buttressed the determination of drinkers when they want to drink alcohol:

Many of us come here and we want to hit sunrise (*all night*) and if we want to do that, you can't force us to sleep.

Beer drinkers also expressed nostalgia about times when people could drink freely, unencumbered by limited bar hours. They constantly referred to the fact that in the past, when there were less restrictions, people could control their drinking and there were less alcohol-related problems. Moss nostalgically lamented:

If I compare these days with the time when these hours were not in place, people had enough time to drink and drank well whilst today we binge drink and it causes a lot of other bad things after the bars close.

Resistance by alcohol drinkers suggested a need by drinkers to exercise their own initiative and

“drink their hard-earned cash” as one respondent emphasised. Generally, responses indicated a struggle with not just the limited drinking times, but the higher prices of beer as a result of the new laws. Beer drinkers came up with new ways that could help them continue drinking alcohol to cushion them against the effect of the new reforms.

### *Social drinking networks and resistance*

One of the coping strategies by respondents was to drink with friends to offset the effects of high alcohol prices. While drinking in groups in Botswana is not a new thing, buying alcohol in bigger quantities and sharing was the result of the new prices. For instance, instead of the usual norm of drinking small bottles of beer as individuals, these groups of friends would buy a bigger bottle (750 ml) of beer and share it amongst themselves. The new prices therefore shifted the patterns of drinking among beer drinkers. It is critical to note these groups were constituted by drinking “buddies” from the same neighbourhoods. In this way, social drinking networks also catered for drinkers without money, such that those who had money would buy for others, and the same process reciprocates itself repeatedly.

Tsogang, a male respondent stated that:

The price increase will not work because people are still drinking. So, now what we do is buy one big quart of black label (750 ml) and share it amongst ourselves. We just buy one bottle and we all drink from there, so it does not make any difference.

Talking about the spirit among this network of friends, Mariah, a middle-aged female remarked:

We all grew up around here and we buy for each other, so alcohol is always “rolling”. If one does not have money, we buy for them, it’s the spirit here.

Due to the price increase, beer drinkers reported drinking more from sharing alcohol with their friends. By contributing for the purchase of alcohol, beer drinkers could buy more drinks and in the process drink more. In a sense, drinking in groups had unintended consequences of excessive drinking.

Lebadi further noted that:

In the past I used to come to bars and get a six-pack. Nowadays I drink a quart (750 ml) because it’s cheaper to do so. I have realised that you drink a lot when you drink quarts with friends. You don’t realise you are drinking a lot.

The drinking networks also brought some benefits to drinkers as some narrated stories of how they managed to get employment and business opportunities from other friends. Some narratives highlight that drinking with friends offered them a balance between their daily responsibilities and getting time with “the boys”, in a way suggesting drinking to be a functional activity that helps strike the work–play balance. For women, the networks offered them protection from harassment, especially from other drunk males. In emphasising the rapport with male drinkers, Mariah stated that,

I drink with men that I know and see just about every day. We drink together almost all the time and I am safe amongst them... they are my buddies.

Social drinking networks are multifaceted forums that enjoin their members with some benefits that they use to either socialise as drinkers or cushion themselves against the high alcohol prices. It is evident from the narratives of drinkers that the new prices fundamentally transformed the type of alcohol that drinkers bought and their drinking patterns.

### *Resistance by seeking the alternative*

In their experiences of dealing with the ramifications of the new regulations, beer drinkers

expressed dissatisfaction with the new operating hours. For most drinkers, 11 pm is too early to go to bed, hence they seek alternative ways to continue drinking including going to *shebeens* that sell alcohol illegally. Prior to the implementation of the new regulations, alcohol could be sold from homes and was the preserve of *shebeen queens* (Molamu, 1989). The new regulations made it illegal to sell alcohol from homes. However, beer drinkers mentioned that some of the *shebeens* had not closed and continued to operate illegally. Thus, after bars close at 11 pm, drinkers seek alternative avenues to continue drinking. While some head out to clubs, many others find their way to *shebeens* to purchase alcohol. Mpopi mentioned that,

For some of us, when we leave here at 11 pm, we go to *shebeens* where we spend the rest of the night drinking our beer.

Interviewer: But the *shebeens* were closed by government authorities . . .

Respondent: Some are but the ones that were closed are those that were known. But again, it has not stopped the illegal ones from operating. What happened is that when the government closed the big *shebeens* many people started looking for opportunities to illegally sell beer to us and they are doing that in large numbers.

In seeking alternative drinking avenues, some drinkers travel outside the country, especially to neighbouring South Africa, to buy cheap alcohol. In their experiences, they emphasised the liberal alcohol policies in South Africa and how people can “drink freely there”. In an angry tone, Haena a young male, lamented,

At 11 pm, none of us wants to sleep, so when they close bars we do not go home we find somewhere else to continue drinking. I sometimes cross the border to Mafikeng (South Africa) where beer is cheap, and I can drink without problems.

It is implicit from the narratives of participants that seeking alternatives was a way of resisting alcohol regulations and suggested an intentional need to continue drinking.

### *Resistance and power in context*

The issue of power dominated the accounts of beer drinkers in Botswana. There was a widely held belief that the government of Botswana was hell-bent on “fighting” alcohol consumption with whatever means at their disposal. Other respondents expressed concern about what informed the alcohol policy when no empirical study had been undertaken to determine whether alcohol was indeed a problem in Botswana. Views about lack of studies or scientific evidence might have been influenced by newspaper reports that extensively covered the issue. Morasta pondered:

How are we sure that alcohol consumption is the cause of all these social problems? Maybe it is the roads or inept drivers . . . I think the government did not really take time to understand this issue.

Some drinkers mentioned that the way the tax increase and associated regulations were implemented might not work. They suggested that state authorities might have been directed by the President to implement the regulations without thorough consultations. As Sharon remarked:

I still don't know why these people were quick to implement these laws without consulting us. Anyway, we know that *Rraetsho* (the President) does not like alcohol, maybe it was his directive but we will continue to drink no matter what.

Beer drinkers felt that the regulations were unfair and inconsiderate. While some drinkers desired the “freedom” to drink, others directly linked the regulations to the former President and his disdain for alcohol. All these experiences influenced how drinkers enacted resistance to the new regulations.

## Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine how beer drinkers in Botswana coped with the new alcohol tax levy and associated regulations that were implemented in 2008. The key theoretical finding of *Beer Drinking as Resistance* was central to the drinkers' experiences. Beer drinkers defied the new taxation measures and sought alternative ways to continue their drinking. The agency displayed by beer drinkers relates to their "abilities and capabilities to make independent, enlightened, and good choices, and to realise them with intended effect" (Hellman, 2017, p. 359). The main finding of the study aligns with existing studies. In a recent study investigating unintended consequences of alcohol restrictions in Alaska, Ogilvie (2018) found that alcohol consumers used several strategies to cushion themselves against alcohol restrictions. These strategies included, "traveling to hubs and other communities where alcohol was legal, utilizing sources of illegal alcohol, including importation and manufacture and consuming products that contain denatured alcohol" (p. 4). Overall, the study concluded that subverting alcohol restrictions and seeking other avenues of intoxication was more harmful to Alaskan communities.

It is important to note that the concept of resistance is elusive and variegated (d'Abbs, 2015). One of the challenges of demonstrating whether social acts could be termed resistance is to demonstrate the level at which a given behaviour could be viewed as resistance. In other words, in the complex continuum of individual acts, at what point do we pause and say herein lies an act of resistance? In the case of the current study, a question could be asked whether these are not simply mundane acts and normative responses to alcohol regulations. Is it not better to refer to these acts as unintended consequences of taxation measures as Ogilvie (2018) has done with her study in rural Alaska? I argue that the narratives of beer drinkers in Botswana suggest resistance. Study findings are grounded on Hollander and Einwohner's (2004)

core elements of resistance that include, *action* and *opposition*, *recognition* and *intent*. These elements were consistent across the tales of beer drinkers and demonstrated agency, action and opposition to power. In conceptualising resistance, Armstrong and Murphy (2011) argue that a resistant individual is one who identifies a position that is compatible to their interests in the face of domination. Drawing from a Foucauldian tradition, they propose that "techniques of domination and techniques of the self interact to produce individual subject positions" (Armstrong & Murphy, 2011, p. 317). In other words, resisters are aware of their social positioning in a relationship of power and seek alternative ways that favour their interests. The experiences of beer drinkers suggest intentionality and a strong will to continue drinking despite the constraints brought by the new alcohol reforms. Phrases like "We need to enjoy our money", "We drink in a short period of time" and "We are not kids to be told when to drink" were personalised and suggest resistance; beer drinkers wanted to exercise their autonomy with less "interference" by the state.

Existing studies have concluded that alcohol reforms and policies are likely to be resisted by individuals who are directly impacted by alcohol control measures (Parry, Trangestein, Lombard, Jernigan, & Morojele, 2017; Tobin, Moodie, & Livingstone, 2011). In the context of the Nordic countries, Sulkunen and Warsell (2012) have argued that tax increases and reducing availability of alcohol are likely to be unpopular because they "interfere with the freedom of consumers to choose" (p. 218). In Botswana, bars are places where people socialise, intermingle and engage in leisure activities. They are an important part of leisure, hence placing limits and controls on them affects not just the drinking but the broader social activities of people. It negatively affects drinkers' *communitas*. Resistance therefore comes about not only as a result of limits placed on drinkers' choices but also on how they "do" leisure. The kind of resistance(s) illuminated in



this study were a result of dealing with processes that disrupted drinking as a social activity. Resorting to individualised acts of resistance, searching for alternatives and social drinking networks was a consequence of the interference by state control.

In the current study, individualised acts of resistance, seeking alternatives and social drinking networks were enacted in different yet symbiotic ways. In this case, seeking alternatives might be a function of the networking aspect of drinking, since drinkers “must be in the know” about the specific locations of *shebeens* in their neighbourhoods. Through these mundane acts, beer drinkers in Botswana found “a consciousness of opportunity” (Ewick & Silbey, 2003, p. 1336). There was a purposive, tactical, and well-calculated situational analysis that propelled drinkers into action after bars were closed. This finding aligns with what James Scott (1989) calls “tactical wisdom”: acts that are directed to the state but away from the roving eye of state surveillance. Their effectiveness “lie[s] in their anonymity” (Scott, 1989, p. 49) as they neatly mesh into the quotidian lives of beer drinkers. One of the reasons why these acts of resistance are not easily detectable is that bars in Botswana are located in specific neighbourhoods and drinking networks are patterned through people living adjacent to those bars. The type of resistance that does not employ violence and confrontation is not unexpected in Botswana, a country that is considered one of the most peaceful countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike other African countries, Botswana does not have a history of rapacious colonialism. In the words of Good and Taylor (2008, p. 753), “the experience of popular struggle was wholly absent”. It is argued here that by engaging in hidden acts of resistance, beer drinkers were effectively drawing from existing normative cultural tools. Using culture to enact resistance mirrors what Sorenson and Vinthagen (2012) call “borrowing”, that entails the use of “cultural elements that are already part of either mainstream culture or an established culture of

resistance” (p. 449). Beer drinkers therefore do not have to alter their behaviour but rather integrate resistance into their everyday lives.

Seeking alternative drinking avenues, especially cross-border shopping for alcohol, is well established in the alcohol literature (Siiskonen, 1994; Ye & Kerr, 2016). Sulkunen, Alasuutari, Natkin, and Kikunen (1985) have long documented the rampant smuggling of alcohol in Finland after the introduction of the prohibition act in the early 20th-century. In their seminal book, *The Urban Pub*, they view these alcohol smuggling acts as a “revolt against the authorities” and state that “drinking became associated with protest and defiance” (p. 30). Cross-border purchases mainly occur where drinkers live near borders and feel they could have easy access to cheaper alcohol in the neighbouring country (Karlsson & Österberg, 2009). Bygvrå (2009) reached similar conclusions in a study that examined cross-border purchases in Denmark and Germany between 1986–2003. She noted that Danes living within a 10 km radius of the German border crossed almost 25 times per year. Distance was an important determinant of cross-border shopping for alcohol. Noting the impact of tax cuts on cross-border purchases between Denmark, Finland and Sweden, Hellman and Ramstedt (2009) argue that “distance to the cheaper goods and the amount that can be purchased per visit are crucial factors affecting the logic of cross-border shopping” (p. 113). While they do not attribute these acts to resistance per se, they highlight that the pricing of alcohol products was the reason behind most cross-border purchases. In the current study, when drinkers crossed the border to South Africa, they were motivated by the shorter distance as well as cheaper prices. By engaging in cross-border purchases, beer drinkers were rebelling against the early closure of bars and seeking alternative spaces where they could “drink without problems” as one respondent suggested.

There are a number of studies that link resistance with power (Foucault, 1982; Mona, Baaz, Schulz, & Vinthagen, 2017; Vinthagen &

Johansson, 2013). In the current study, the influence of President Khama on the messaging of the alcohol reforms in Botswana was undeniable. This is because the President, a self-confessed teetotaler, appeared to be at the forefront of the “alcohol war” and many people were convinced that the new alcohol reforms were introduced for political expediency. Politicisation of alcohol policies has been noted in the alcohol literature (Karlsson, 2012). Data from the current study suggest that resistance was defined primarily by seeking autonomy, especially against a powerful government. As I have argued in this study, the power to regulate drinking was met with resistance, and beer drinkers exercised their own agency to continue drinking. In a way, resistance was shaped by the form of power (Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). The way the alcohol tax levy and its associated regulations were implemented also entrenched beliefs that the levy was more of a political tool than a pragmatic intervention meant to reduce alcohol-related harm. For instance, by 2017 the alcohol levy had accumulated an estimated P2.6 billion (Government of Botswana, 2017) which is equivalent to USD245 million. While the initial promise was to use the revenue generated from the levy for public education, curbing alcohol abuse and establishment of rehabilitation centres among others, none of these promises had been achieved by 2017. There was no single rehabilitation centre that had been built in Botswana for the 10-year period that the government had collected the alcohol levy. Furthermore, as stated earlier, no nationally representative study has been carried out to examine the effectiveness of these tax measures. Over the years, the money from the alcohol levy has been used on non-alcohol-related activities by the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture that include skills training, agriculture and recreational activities for young people (Pitso & Obot, 2011).

### **Limitations**

The study has some limitations. The setting was an urban area and the same approach might

yield different results in a rural setting. The composition of women in the sample was also a shortcoming of this study. While going early to bars was successful in accessing potential participants, it attracted participants with similar characteristics: youth, unemployed and relatively poor drinkers. The result was that a different stratum of drinkers (especially the more affluent) were missed in the sample, and that could have given the study richer data. Wine, spirits and whiskey drinkers were not part of the study because they do not frequent bars. Researchers intending to use this strategy might want to devise alternative recruitment methods to be able to capture the more affluent drinkers. Since the study used a small sample, caution must be exercised in generalising the findings to other contexts.

### **Conclusions**

The findings presented in this article suggest that resistance to alcohol taxation and reform measures in Botswana was complex, intentional and linked to power. Beer drinkers personalised resistance due to the belief that the President was behind the alcohol reforms. The form of power essentially informed the nature of resistance. In this way, alcohol policy development might benefit from a critical examination of the power/resistance interplay. It is important, as Mona et al. (2017) have stated, that “there is a lot to gain if power and resistance are understood as interconnected and entangled” (p. 45). In this article, I have argued that in cases where alcohol control measures are perceived to be irrational, and driven by political expediency, they are likely to be sternly resisted by alcohol consumers.

Resisting the effects of the alcohol levy and its associated regulations was primarily enacted through the aegis of time, place and context. The influence of culture in framing resistance has significant policy implications for sub-Saharan Africa and holds immense potential for further research. In this study, meanings attached to beer drinking were inextricably

bound up with the “resistant self”. In this sense, formulating effective alcohol interventions might benefit extensively from a critical analysis of the cultural scripts that drinkers employ to resist alcohol control measures and their relationship to power. The intersection of power, culture and their linkage to resistance remains under-researched and undertheorised in the alcohol literature. The themes illuminated in this article provide a good foundation that other alcohol researchers can expound with more theoretically informed approaches, and answers a recent call by d’Abbs (2015) and others to examine the concept of resistance in alcohol studies.

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