

# Drug Use and Gender in the Life Histories of young, middle class adults in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Uso de drogas sob a perspectiva de gênero: uma análise das histórias de vida de jovens das camadas médias no Rio de Janeiro

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## Abstract

Drug use by young women has shown rates increasingly closer to those of men, or even higher depending on the substance. Considering the scarcity of research conducted with female drug users, especially those of higher socioeconomic status, this study focused on gender and drug use. Ethnographic research was conducted in bars and nightclubs in the southern and downtown regions of the city of Rio de Janeiro. We argue that unequal gender relations and normative models of femininity and masculinity are reproduced in the initiation and maintenance of drug use, revealing gender specificities, including the harmful health and social consequences of drug use for women. Although drug use by young adults alternates between challenging and accepting gender norms, female users are more stigmatized and socially marginalized, depend on men for access to drugs, and experience gender-based violence from their intimate partners and at drug sales points.

**Keywords:** Drugs; Gender; Young; Middle Class.

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## Resumo

O consumo de drogas por mulheres jovens tem apresentado índices cada vez mais próximos aos dos homens, chegando a atingir índices superiores dependendo da substância em análise. Levando-se em conta a escassez de pesquisas realizadas com usuárias de drogas, em especial com as pertencentes às camadas socioeconômicas mais altas, a questão central neste trabalho é o gênero no uso de drogas. Pesquisa etnográfica foi realizada em bares e boates da Zona Sul e Centro da cidade do Rio de Janeiro - homens e mulheres - pertencentes às camadas médias cariocas. Argumentamos que as relações desiguais de gênero e os modelos normativos de feminilidade e masculinidade são reproduzidos na iniciação e manutenção do uso de drogas, o que evidenciará particularidades de gênero, inclusive no que diz respeito às consequências danosas à saúde e sociais do uso para as mulheres. Identificamos que o uso de drogas por jovens é feito num ir e vir de contestações e acomodações em relação às normativas de gênero, no entanto, usuárias são mais estigmatizadas e marginalizadas socialmente, dependem do homem para acesso a droga e experienciam violência de gênero por parte parceiro sexo-afetivo e nos pontos de venda de drogas.

**Palavras-chave:** Drogas; Gênero; Jovens; Classe Média.

## Introduction

The literature indicates an increase in drug use by women, especially young women<sup>1</sup>, revealing rates of use increasingly close to those of men, reaching even higher rates depending on the substance under analysis, such as benzodiazepines, analgesics, and orexigenics (Bastos et al., 2017; UN, 2018; Malbergier et al., 2012). In Brazil, according to the III National Survey on Alcohol and Drugs (Bastos et al., 2017), women showed a higher prevalence than men regarding alcohol consumption in association with at least one non-prescription drug. Studies also indicate that, worldwide, women develop problems associated with drug use faster than men in different areas of life (INPUD, 2014; UN, 2018).

Considering the scarcity of research conducted with female drug users of higher socioeconomic status, this study contributes to a gender-based analysis of drug use by analysing the life histories of middle class, young adults in the city of Rio de Janeiro. We seek to understand how normative gender relations pervade the use of drugs, analyzing factors related to the onset and maintenance of use, up to the harmful consequences for the lives of the young adults researched. This study uses gender as a constitutive element of social relations and a primary form of power relations (Scott, 1994), an approach that highlights the sociocultural and historical character of gender differences and the very social construction of sexual difference. The gender-based inequalities socially established manifest themselves in different aspects of life, and therefore in drug use itself.

In Brazil, the National Drug Policy is more strongly aligned with the prohibitionist paradigm, which arbitrarily attributes a licit or illicit character to certain substances, judicializing the different uses of drugs (Passos; Souza, 2011). In its latest version, the policy assumes an even greater prohibitionist character by removing harm reduction from its text and focusing on total

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<sup>1</sup> Most research on drugs uses the World Health Organization's age classification, which defines adolescents as individuals between 10 and 19 years old and youth as those between 20 and 24 years old. In our study, however, we adopted the age group according to Brazil's 2013 Youth Statute: (Law 12.852), which defines youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 29 years.

abstinence and on therapeutic communities, which operate by performing hospitalizations, as the privileged device in healthcare (Brasil, 2019). This war on drugs is reflected in everyday life in a war on people, especially the poor and black populations, making women more vulnerable to harm, from the consequences of police violence, the illegal drug trade, to the exponential increase in female incarceration (Sestokas; Oliveira, 2018).

This ethnographic study was conducted in bars and nightclubs in the southern and downtown regions (Lapa) of the city of Rio de Janeiro, where young adults socialize. Through field visits and participant observation of Narcotics Anonymous (NA) groups in the early stages of research and of places where young adults socialize, we selected 11 young middle-class adults<sup>2</sup>, between the ages of 18 and 29 to participate in the study, collecting their life histories and conducting semi-structured interviews with them. We identified that unequal gender relations and normative models of femininity and masculinity are reproduced in the initiation and maintenance of drug use, revealing gender specificities, including harmful consequences for women.

## Women, alcohol and other drugs

Brazilian research on alcohol abuse by women has indicated that such use is often meant as an escape from normative standards of femininity that impose docility, domesticity, and fragility, rather than adherence to normative male standards such as aggressiveness, freedom, and strength. In this respect, consumption is perceived by female users as something liberating; on the other hand, the perceived damages linked to drug use are associated with failure to fulfill stereotypical female roles, such as wife, mother, and homemaker (Campos; Reis, 2010; Fernandez, 2007; Medeiros; Maciel; Souza, 2017; Silva, 2002). Women feel ashamed and guilty over episodes of intoxication for they do not find consonance between drunkenness and the normative standards of femininity. Such data are not found among male users, for whom drug

use seems consistent with male socialization itself (Lima, 2012; Moraes, 2008).

In a study with women undergoing treatment for alcohol abuse in São Paulo, Campos & Reis (2010) observed that the social representations elaborated by the interviewees, summarized in the expressions “alcohol abuse” and “loss of control over drinking,” trigger a system of accusations based on a logic governed by gender relations. They reveal the different modes of alcohol consumption between men and women, by which the latter are identified as “women who abuse alcohol,” that is, women who do not fulfill their social obligations as “mothers,” “housewives,” and “workers.”

In an ethnographic study that sought to understand the patterns of inhaled cocaine use in the city of São Paulo, Fernandez (2007) concluded that young and adult women experience greater social vulnerability when compared to male users, experiencing violence in intimate relationships established with men, drug users or not.

The pioneer research by Nappo et al. (2004), conducted with female crack users in São Paulo, unveiled the vulnerability of these users who sold their bodies to buy the drug. Given the extreme need to obtain crack, users lacked any bargaining power for safe sex and exposed themselves to sexually transmitted infections, including AIDS.

Reports of rape and domestic violence are much more common among drug users than among women in general (INPUD, 2014). National studies show that many female drug users have relationships with men who are also users, increasing the risk of violence. In such contexts, women’s drug use is used to justify the violence they suffer from partners and family members (Campos; Reis, 2010; Simonelli; Pasquali; De Palo, 2014).

The biomedical literature underscores to the *telescoping effect*, a term that refers to how women recall establishing a problematic drug use pattern more quickly when compared to men who also present losses associated with substance use, even if they started using drugs later than men. This telescoping effect is not fully explained

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<sup>2</sup> This study considered access to consumer goods, monthly income, schooling level, family of origin, place and type of residence, and self-classification to define middle class.

by the organicist perspective, so psychosocial studies are necessary for its understanding (Greenfield et al., 2010).

We must also examine how the telescoping effect relates to gender, since all dimensions of stigmatization over drug users, such as race, social class and generation, are informed by gender and result in greater stigmatization for women, leading them to adopt strategies to maintain the use that can increase their vulnerability (Fernandez, 2007; Greenfield et al., 2010; Medeiros; Maciel; Souza, 2017). Women experience a greater need to cover up their drug use and therefore often fail to seek treatment when needed. On the other hand, the dissociation between drug use and the normative model of femininity contributes to health professionals not detecting problems related to it.

In Brazil, most studies on drug use is carried out with a biomedical approach, targeting men from the lower social classes, who are institutionalized in treatment centers or units from the security and judicial system. When present in these studies, gender is used as an empirical category, revealing similarities and differences in the drug use trajectories of men and women, without employing a critical analysis that discusses the data in their intersection with other social markers of difference such as social class and generation. Research like ours, involving young middle-class women with different profiles regarding the types of drugs used and trajectories of use, can therefore contribute to our current understanding and point to new questions.

## Methodology

Over a 12-month period, ethnographic research was carried out for a doctoral dissertation at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro<sup>3</sup>. Young adults were first approached in fieldwork to NA groups located in the neighborhoods of southern Rio de Janeiro, due to the researcher's familiarity

with self help groups from previous research in this field. This focus was subsequently expanded based on the researcher's professional network, through which emails containing information about the study, eligibility criteria, and contact details for interested parties were sent. This strategy led us to a young woman who became a key informant, facilitating contact with other users via the snowball technique, in addition to the NA groups.

After carrying out participant observation in bars and nightclubs in the southern (Botafogo and Laranjeiras) and downtown (Lapa) regions of the city, we collected life histories and conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 young middle-class adults - six women and five men - between the ages of 18 and 29. Four interviewees were selected by visits to NA groups and seven to places of sociability.

As the definition of ethnography is diverse (Peirano, 2014), this study, considered ethnography as an interpretive method (Geertz, 2008), to search for meanings, in an intellectual effort towards a "thick description" of the phenomenon under study focused on the lived experience, transforming the intensity of the fieldwork into a vivid and analytical text (Peirano, 2014). Such practice requires the researcher to establish a relationship of trust with research participants and to analyze their implications and the most telltale signs of their otherness, learning the language and norms of the group studied (MacRae; Simões, 2006). The methodological requirements of this immersion into the field and the establishment of bonds of trust make ethnographic research especially interesting for accessing hidden populations such as drug users (MacRae; Simões, 2006).

Regarding the profile of the interviewees, five participants had complete higher education (three lawyers, one psychologist and one social worker), three were undergraduate students (engineering, graphic design and business administration), two took a leave of absence from their undergraduate studies, and one had only completed middle school.

<sup>3</sup> Research was funded by a CAPES doctoral scholarship and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee under CAAE registration 0021.0.249.000-10. Despite a difficult negotiation process due to the illegality of drug use and their middle class origin, interviewees signed the Informed Consent Form. Interviewees' names were replaced by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

At the time of the interview, seven participants were unemployed and four had stable jobs - surf teacher, saleswoman, hostess and bartender. Of the 11 interviewees, ten were single and one was married, but separated from her husband and living with her mother at the time of the interview. One participant had been living with his girlfriend for less than six months; the others lived with their parents. As for family income, five respondents reported having between 9 and 12 minimum wages, three between 18 and 20, two between 4 and 8, and one above 21<sup>4</sup>.

The interviewees used different drugs - marijuana, cocaine, crack, amphetamines, ecstasy, LSD and/or anabolic steroids - through different routes of administration, being common to all its concomitant use with alcohol and tobacco. In either case, we considered the interviewees' drug use as abusive, classification that defines not a diagnosis, but a pattern of drug use associated with risks and harms such as: missing classes or work; quarrels with family, friends, or intimate partner; involvement in situations of violence; suicide attempts; drug driving. For women in particular, common risks included going to the points of sale alone, although they recognize the risks involved. All interviewees described their substance use as not "normal," and NA participants called themselves addicts.

## Results and discussion

Gender issues constitute and permeate the interviewees' drug use histories, with their processes of experimentation and maintenance of use being influenced by peers, family, and intimate partners. Although these young adults refer to drug use as a transgression, what we observe is rather a use as a yearning to comply with traditional gender expectations.

While young women reported choosing boyfriends or husbands who are also drug users, young men revealed not choosing female drug users as partners. These are perceived as eligible for casual, uncommitted intimate relationships, the so-called *rolas* (hook-ups).

The male interviewees' history of experimentation and maintenance of drug abuse is marked by the influence of "older friends," recounting how they earned respect from their peers by "hanging out with older people". For these young men, drug use with these friends meant proving to themselves and to others that "he is a man," that "he is the man"; it would confirm those attributes related to the normative model of heterosexual masculinity.

For the female interviewees, alcohol and tobacco use started in the home environment, under the influence of family members or adult caregivers. The use of other drugs, especially marijuana and cocaine, was motivated by trying to impress a man who they sought to be intimate with or to maintain an ongoing intimate relationship, with their use being discontinued when the relationship ended.

Although young women understand drug use as a break with norms of control over bodies and over femininity itself, the use seems to take place within social gender norms that assign women the role of caretakers (of others and of intimate relationships), thus reinforcing hegemonic patterns of femininity.

### Experimentation and maintenance of use: family and intimate partners influence

In our study, the young women interviewed tried alcohol and tobacco between the ages of 7 and 10 in the home environment, often offered by family members, nannies, godparents, and or godmothers. Marijuana, cocaine and synthetic drugs were first used between the ages of 14 and 25, with boyfriends and "hook-ups" who were already users. The men interviewed, in turn, tried alcohol, tobacco and other drugs at the age of 12-15 in moments of sociability with friends.

The National School Health Survey points out that alcohol use begins for girls at age 12-13, while the average age for tobacco use is 16 for both genders (IBGE, 2015). Other studies correlate drug use under the age of 13 with the establishment of an abusive consumption pattern (Silva, 2002; Vargas et al., 2015), also present in our research:

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of research, the monthly minimum wage in Brazil was approximately 300USD.

*Since I was 7 or 8 years old, I drank beer foam from my father's, my godmother's and I think from my grandmother's glass. It was during parties, like Christmas, New Year, birthdays, those things. They actually offered it to me, you know? They thought it was funny. But I got drunk for the first time when I was nine years old; I was with my father. He was an alcoholic and was always drinking at parties. He gave me a glass of beer, then another, and another and I got kind of drunk. He thought it was funny.* (Bianca, 29 years old, alcohol, tobacco and cocaine user, social worker, living with mother and 6-year old daughter)

The statement above illustrates situations of experimentation in childhood, in a domestic environment and with family encouragement or approval. Male interviewees who had tried these substances with their peers, on the streets and at parties did not report similar situations.<sup>5</sup> Our data confirm the family influence on young women's drug use (Guimarães et al., 2004; Vargas et al., 2015), while other drugs were used to attract attention or impress an intimate partner:

*He arrived and said he had brought marijuana. Everyone was like: Hurray! I was afraid to use it. I was afraid of the smell, of the neighbors! But then I thought, "I'm not going to embarrass myself. I'm not going to refuse it, am I?" [...]. I really wanted to impress that guy.* (Poly, 27 years old, alcohol, tobacco and marijuana user, lawyer, unemployed, living with mother)

Trying, continuing to use drugs or ceasing use was closely linked to a romantic relationship for women:

*He drank a lot [the first boyfriend], so I really started drinking! Every weekend, it was a lot! That's when I started getting high with him a lot. I wanted to keep up with him, you know? I thought it made me more interesting, more fun to him and his*

*friends.* (Cristiane, 27 years old, alcohol, tobacco, amphetamines, cocaine user, incomplete university education, unemployed, living with parents and maternal grandmother)

Having a first boyfriend who was a drug abuser marks the love history of our female interviewees. Another example is that of Bianca, who started smoking marijuana regularly with her first boyfriend - "the school stoner" - at the age of 15. She stopped when the relationship ended and only resumed it at the age of 23, when she started a romantic relationship with a marijuana user. Wanting to please and keep up with the partner, to become more interesting to the partner, to improve the relationship, and to maintain the romantic relationship were the reasons cited by the female respondents for drug abuse within an intimate relationship.

Among the male interviewees, on the other hand, we identified important peer influence on experimentation and maintenance of use. The "older friends," young adults 4 or 5 years older than the participants, are seen as positive references "because they knew everyone," but mostly because they accepted, valued, and acknowledged these young men. Using drugs within these relationships also meant asserting attributes of masculinity.

*You see these dudes, full of swag. They're the guys in charge! They are the boss, the ones who get all the girls [...]. You're going to want to be the same, right? You're not going to say, "No, I don't want to." I have to prove I'm boss too!"* (Gustavo, 25 years old, alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, cocaine and crack user, studying business administration, unemployed, living with girlfriend for 4 months)

For young men, the peers' main role is to validate the behavior of each of their members, reaffirming the attributes of hegemonic masculinity (Lima, 2012; Moraes, 2008). For young women, in turn,

<sup>5</sup> Its absence from the male interviewees' narratives does not mean similar experiences did not take place. The young women reported their family functioning during childhood in more detail than the young men, whose narratives focused on the period of peer association. This difference relates to gender socialization in which men become men by developing attitudes and practices opposite to those of women, and vice versa.

experimentation and continued drug use meant reinforcing certain traditional female gender beliefs and behaviors, such as: pleasing their partner and investing in the romantic relationship, believing themselves capable of changing their partner, helping them to control their drug use and violent behaviors, for example. The female interviewees felt “needed” in these relationships.

### **“Women who do drugs are a car bomb”: sexual relationships with female drug users**

While the women interviewed reported being in an ongoing romantic relationship or being married to male drug users, their male counterparts showed the opposite: preferring not to date or commit to female drug users. Men described female drug users as only fit for ephemeral, uncommitted, casual sexual relations. In our understanding, these young male users saw the relationship established differently from the women involved, that is, what the latter saw as a committed relationship, the men regarded as a simple “hook-up” because female users “only bring trouble,” are “unreliable,” “sluts,” “unpredictable” and capable of causing as much havoc in a man’s life as a “car bomb”.

*[...] I was hooking up with her and she smoked [marijuana]. She lived alone, in Copa, in a penthouse. For me, that was a temptation, you know? A house where I can use dope. [...] and she could sell it for me. She supported me. [...] but she kept saying we were in a relationship and I was like, “no, we’re not” [...] I had a girlfriend. I was never going to leave my girlfriend for her. (Igor, 22 years old, alcohol, tobacco, cocaine, ecstasy and LSD user, incomplete higher education, unemployed, living with parents and siblings).*

The relationship ends with Igor physically assaulting her, justified by not wanting to jeopardize his “true romantic relationship.”

Male respondents prefer dating non-users, because this way they have someone to take care of them, to *segurar sua onda* (literally translates as “hold their wave” meaning to restrain their drug use). Thus, young men have expectations

that non-user girlfriends and wives play a role in contributing to the reduction or cessation of drug use, or at least contributing to the reduction of harm associated with use. Young men state that relationships with non-users bring fewer problems when compared to those with drug users. To these young men, their girlfriends’ role is that of subservience and care, a role that female drug users are, supposedly, incapable of fulfilling. These are labeled as “problematic” and “whores,” revealing, once again, the greater social stigmatization that befalls women users.

Outraged, Poly recounts that while smoking with a group of friends, a boy next to her said “every woman who smokes [*marijuana*] is a whore.”

*[...] Write it down [she said to the researcher], because it is nonsense, dude! I really wanted to say that. I never forgot. I was shocked, because besides being completely absurd, man! The guy was smoking, too! Also, the guy simply ignored my presence there, right? He must have really thought that I was a whore and didn’t deserve any respect. (Poly, 27 years old, alcohol, tobacco and marijuana user, lawyer, unemployed, living with mother)*

The women interviewed pointed out that “a female drug user is seen as a whore, a slut, a ‘loose woman,’” both by non-user women and by men, users or not - data that corroborate the literature on the greater social stigmatization and violence to which female drug users are subjected (Fernandez, 2007; INPUD, 2014).

### **Violence and drug use**

The intimate relationships of the women interviewed with young male drug users are pervaded by gender-based violence. Cristiane and Bianca mentioned several episodes of physical violence by their partners:

*You know [...], of course I don’t think it’s right. It is not right! But I kind of get it, because it must be hard to have a girlfriend who drinks, right? I went overboard sometimes. I know it must be very complicated for a man to date a woman that gets*

*out of line, gets blind drunk [...], I think he put up with it and then wanted out.* (Bianca, 29 years old, alcohol, tobacco and cocaine user, social worker, living with mother and a 6-year old daughter)

Women justify their partners' violent behavior by rationalizing that their inability to fulfill traditional gender roles posed a problem for the relationship.

The young men also revealed episodes of violence in relationships established with female drug users. Gustavo told us that his great love was a young marijuana user, with whom he lived for a few months and whose relationship was fraught with violence: *"I would get pissed seeing her there every day smoking with her friends, right? We fought all the time. I would throw her friends out. I knew it wasn't going to work. We would kill each other"* (Gustavo, 25 years old, addicted, studying business administration, unemployed, living with his girlfriend for 4 months).

The relationship ended violently when Gustavo went to the young woman's apartment, where they lived together, and physically assaulted her. This account reveals the violence to which the user girlfriend was subjected and that we identified in the life histories of our female interviewees.

Sexist violence in intimate relationships with violent user partners, in the lives of female drug users is also present in the literature (Simonelli et al., 2014).

Although drug use is defined by young women as transgressive behavior regarding traditional female gender norms, it perpetuates male gender based violence. Disobeying the rules established by the male partner for use (or non-use) can justify violence.<sup>6</sup>

### **Access to illicit drugs: social dependence on men**

Women have greater difficulty in obtaining drugs, even if they can pay for them. In the places observed, the financial resources for purchasing drugs usually came from the group, through an *"intera"*, practice in which each person contributes with the amount they can or want to. But even if the

young women contributed the money, it was usually the young men who buy the drug.

Some of the women interviewed have gone to the sales point to buy illicit drugs, but always accompanied by male users, usually their boyfriends or husbands. In this case, the negotiation is managed by their partner while the women watch, usually from a small distance, as suggested by the partner for their safety.

Interviewees agreed that female users are more vulnerable than men to some kind of violence during drug sales. In their narratives, they mentioned knowing women who were *esculachadas na boca*, a term that refers to the verbal and physical abuse women suffer at points of sale, such as being called "junkie," "whore," "slut," or being kissed forcibly by drug dealers before receiving the drug. The literature also points to the greater vulnerability of women users to violence, including sexual violence (INPUD, 2014).

For the young men interviewed, fear is not associated with being the target of violence by drug dealers, which they said does not happen, but of being caught in the crossfire if the police arrived. They reported no fear of sexual violence, harassment or humiliation, since the rules *"to avoid problems"* are clear: *"you can't go drunk or high, because if you embarrass yourself in the drug house, you'll get beaten up," "you can't go in a group," "make a mess" or "pay with coins"*. Payment has to be made in cash because paying with coins is seen by dealers as an affront, since *"they won't waste their time counting"*. They also said that *"it is better not to go with women to avoid problems"* with harassment. While there are clear rules for men buying drugs for which are easy to comply with, for women the only rule seems to be to avoid buying illicit drugs.

We identified no financial dependence of the young women on men to buy drugs. Rather, young women often pay for their own use and, in many occasions, that of their partners. Besides paying their own bills in bars, cabs they also paid for drugs, among other expenses. This happened despite

<sup>6</sup> Notably, the interviewees' family histories are permeated by domestic gender-based violence, a relevant topic that can help us understand these young adults' drug use histories that we will explore elsewhere.

the fact that their partners, more often than not, belonged to the same social class.

Although access to resources for buying drugs must be considered, a woman paying for her partner's drugs, and him accepting it, breaks with traditional gender norms. On the other hand, it reveals unequal gender relations in which female users are financially exploited by male users to access and consume their drug of choice.

Our data on the social dependence on men for accessing drugs are echoed by the literature (Fernandez, 2007); but the data on the economic independence of female users in relation to men has not appeared in former studies and is certainly associated with interviewees' socioeconomic status. We identified that drug use by young adults contesting and accommodating gender norms and expectations of what it traditionally means to be a man or a woman. But male domination (Bourdieu, 2002) remains and can be observed in the dichotomy between the "saint" and the "whore," present in the research participants' narratives.

## Final considerations

In the life histories presented here, having romantic partners or friends who are drug users, for young women and men, respectively, meant a search for acceptance, appreciation, belonging, and the feeling of being needed or important. However, the drug use histories are clearly marked by gender.

Young women tried alcohol and tobacco at home, during childhood, with family members or caregivers, while other drugs were first used with boyfriends and "hookups." For the women interviewed, using or not using drugs was closely linked to intimate relationships. The young men, in turn, tried all types of drugs with "older" friends, who were seen as capable of facilitating interaction with other young people, but mainly because they felt accepted, valued, and acknowledged.

Our data suggest that the interviewees have different expectations regarding intimate relationship with drug users. Although not perceiving themselves as respected in the relationship and acknowledging the violence suffered, young women

consider male drug users to be their boyfriends. Men, however, perceive intimate relationships with female users as casual, choosing non-users for committed relationships. Future studies should research couples to further investigate the perception of romantic relationships by men and women, where drug use is present for one and for both partners.

Ethnographic data collected in bars revealed that female users socially depend on men (usually their partners) to access illicit drugs, even if they are not financially dependent on them, due to the fear of physical and/or sexual violence from drug dealers. Our study reveals that the drug use by young adults reproduces unequal gender relations and traditional hegemonic models of femininity and masculinity, and women suffer harmful consequences regarding the social representation of drug use, such as: greater social stigmatization, gender-based violence, and social dependence on men to access drugs - consequences directly related to traditional gender norms, according to which women should not take drugs.

Policy and programs addressing drug use by young adults should consider gender and family socialization, as a privileged context for establishing healthy social norms, including drug use.

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### **Authors' contribution**

Silva, Souza, and Peres participated equally in all drafting stages of the article.

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