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The glamorization of alcohol in contemporary Guyanese Chutney music

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### **Introduction/Background**

Music is an integral part of Guyanese culture. Being a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, musical encounters, musical interaction and musical exchange are of special importance, especially in exploring the transfer and adoption of musical attributes across and among cultural communities (Cambridge 6).

This paper aims at highlighting the extent to which alcohol use is glamorized in Guyanese Chutney music. Since music can influence action (Engels et al. 530) it is important to understand the lyrics of these songs in order to begin to tackle a larger problem.

Chutney music is often referred to as an “Indo-Caribbean” genre of music, present in the Caribbean, mainly in Trinidad, Guyana and Suriname. It is largely influenced by Indian music, particularly Bhojpuri folk music (Bhojpuri is a language spoken in some Indian regions such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, from where many Indian immigrants were brought to Guyana during indentureship). Chutney music does, however, have influences from African, Western and other cultures. It is a fast paced genre of music which makes use of instruments such as the harmonium, dhantaal, dholak and tabla, among others (Ramnarine 12).

As much a part of Guyanese culture as Chutney music is the culture of “rum drinking.” As of 2010, the average Guyanese over 15 years old consumed more than eight liters of pure alcohol each year, compared to a global average of 6.2 liters (WHO 155). A study conducted by the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 2008 revealed that alcohol is the number one drug abused in Guyana (1).

According to the most recent WHO Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health, heavy episodic or binge drinking is prevalent among 6.1 percent of the population, while 5.9 percent has an alcohol use disorder (AUD) and 2.9 percent has a dependency on alcohol (155). WHO defines heavy episodic or binge drinking as having “consumed at least 60 grams or more of pure alcohol on at least one occasion in the past 30 days” (155).

Such heavy consumption of alcohol is not without consequences. Aside from the many health risks alcohol poses to the drinker, it also contributes to a barrage of other problems such as: road fatalities due to drunk driving, casualties/injuries resulting from altercations while imbibing alcohol, domestic violence, and suicide.

There are currently no national action plans in Guyana regarding alcohol abuse, nor public broadcasting policies controlling content aired on local television or radio, nor any regulatory bodies monitoring content produced in Guyana. Moreover, while the legal drinking age for off-premise sales is set at 16, and on premise sales 18, this is merely a “symbolic law” since it is not being enforced. Research on this subject can therefore have crucial policy implications as well as serve as a basis for further research.

A content analysis was conducted on the lyrics of 40 Chutney songs produced by Guyanese artists between the years 2010 and 2015 and uploaded to YouTube. This approach was taken since YouTube and similar online platforms are becoming increasingly popular in the country. As of December, 2014, 40.2% of the population had access to the internet (Internet World Stats, 2016). This shows an increasing trend when compared to 30.3% in 2011 (Internet World Stats, 2014). Since this paper focuses on contemporary Chutney music, it is important to acknowledge that in this technological era physical borders are no barriers to the transfer of cultural elements.

As such, music uploaded on online platforms are exposed to a wide audience both in and out of Guyana.

## **Literature Review**

Chutney is a genre of music that is continuously evolving, especially as the internet and applications such as YouTube allows for the easy transfer of cultures around the world. While its roots lie in Bhojpuri folk music, the lyrics and even the musical composition of Chutney songs have changed significantly in the last few decades. Manuel (2) sums this up perfectly when he writes, “Chutney, in its brash exuberance, had emerged as the favoured dance idiom of a community that was merrily shedding many of its traditional inhibitions while retaining its own distinctive sense of ethnicity.”

In his book *East Indian music in the West Indies*, Manuel (11) describes Chutney as a genre of music which has evolved into fast paced songs in the style of recreational folk songs traditionally performed by women, Chamars (low-caste Indians) and others at weddings and other celebratory events. He notes that they can be both controversial and contradictory following themes of working class creativity/vulgarity, female liberation/degradation and the revitalization/desecration of Indian culture (3).

One of the elements of contemporary chutney music is sexual references in its lyrics, often accompanied by a dancing style which involves “graceful hand gestures and vigorous pelvic rotation” (Manuel 11) referred to commonly in the Caribbean as “wining”. According to Manuel, this evolved from traditional Indian folk songs such as those performed at the “maticore” ceremony (or “dig dutty” in Guyanese dialect) held on the Friday before a Hindu wedding.

During this ceremony young male tassa drummers would drum from a reasonable distance while the women sang lewd songs and danced provocatively, often using props like eggplants, as a form of sexual initiation of the bride (Manuel 169 & Niranjana 91).

Manuel (2) states that in some parts of the Caribbean, the term “chutney” had come to describe such women’s songs as the ones sung at weddings and other ceremonies. The author also noted that as spoken Hindi declined in Guyana and Trinidad, the songs became “creolized” with a mixture of English words.

Manuel also posits that chutney music is valued more for its ability to accompany social dance than for its intrinsic features such as lyrics and structure. “Chutney, like ‘jam and wine’ soca, generally functions as dance music rather than listening music, and its lyrics tend to be light and insignificant,” Manuel stated (176).

However, he noted that this is because chutney songs were traditionally sung in Hindi or Bhojpuri. The introduction of English language into chutney music composition has rendered the lyrics of chutney songs “quite ordinary, if not downright adolescent in quality” (Manuel 179). Manuel further stated that while chutney songs may lack poetic sophistication, many verses do touch on contemporary issues, albeit in a humorous way which listeners enjoy.

Over the years chutney music has been the center of controversy for themes involving religion, race, gender and class. Manuel quoted then President of the Hindu Women’s Organization of Trinidad, Indrani Rampersaud, who denounced chutney as “vulgar, degrading, and obscene” (184).

Ramnarine (77) stated that the chutney tradition has changed, noting that men, and women in particular, have moved from the riverside rituals and traditional ceremonies to performing on

stages. According to the author, chutney music is “seen as a performance forum giving a voice to Indians in the Caribbean and as contributing to a World Music market” (79).

In her book “Creating their own space: The development of an Indian-Caribbean musical tradition,” Ramnarine (81) analyzed the language of chutney songs for “issues of identity” in Caribbean Indians. Among the songs she examined were “Guyana Kay Dulahin” by Anand Yankaran and “Guyana Baboo” by Terry Gajraj. In his song, Yankaran (a Trinidadian) appeals for a “dulahin” (a bride) from Guyana, while in Gajraj’s song, he talks about being a US migrant from the “land of de bauxite, de rice and sugar” and going back home to find a “dulahin.” Ramnarine notes how these singers speak to their Caribbean roots while still maintaining aspects of the Indian language.

She also alluded to Sundar Popo’s “Phoulourie” in which some of the things mentioned “phoulourie without chutney, the drum, the bottle of rum, the cane” (85) were all images of local village life. Also mentioned in this song was “Jack and Jill” which Ramnarine says is “an example of those cultural elements which have been absorbed in the tradition as a result of historical circumstance and interaction between people from diverse places” (85).

Niranjana documented her experience as a woman from India visiting the Caribbean and encountering its music and culture for the first time in the book “Mobilizing India: Women, music, and migration between India and Guyana.” One of her observations was the lewdness of chutney music and how different it is from Indian music.

Niranjana gave the example of chutney songs which used the word “nani” as slang for a woman’s vagina, such as in the song “Lick down mih nani” by Drupatee Ramgoonai (87). Nani

is the Hindi word for maternal grandmother, a woman who is revered with much respect and veneration.

“I remember thinking fleetingly that Indian women in India were highly unlikely to sing in public about vaginas and that ‘Indians’ in the Caribbean clearly occupied a different expressive register,” she notes (86).

Niranjana further stated that sexual connotations in chutney music is not a new phenomenon, quoting the lyrics of one of the early women’s songs which said, in English, “Rosie gal, whey you cookin’ for dinner/She makin’ choka, it ent have no salt” (90)

“Already we see the suggestive connection made by the singer between cooking and eating and sexuality, a theme prevalent in much of the subsequent music, as well,” she observes (90).

The alcohol discourse in chutney music has also been present since early times. This is evident in the lyrics quoted by Niranjana from a former plantation worker who recalled a song that went: “I beatin’ my drum, an’ singin; mih song, de only ting missin’ is a bottle of rum” (93). These very lyrics made a comeback in Trinidadian Sundar Popo’s song, “Phoulourie” (Ramnarine 84).

Sundar Popo was one of the early singers who assisted in popularizing chutney music. His first album “Nani Nana” was released in 1969 and featured a mixture of Bhojpuri and English lyrics. Among the English lyrics of one of his songs: “Nana drinking white one and Nani drinking wine...Nana smoking tobacco and Nani cigarette, the rain started falling the both of them get wet. Nani tell meh Nana old man ah feelin’ cold, give meh some white one to warm up meh soul” (Niranjana 95). The song goes on to say “Nana make a mistake and cut meh Nani throat” (IslandLyrics.com), an indication of the domestic violence consequence of alcoholism.

According to Niranjana, this song became a hit in Trinidad and Guyana and the artist Sundar Popo became known as the “King of Chutney.”

Manuel had suggested, six years prior to Niranjana, that chutney was traditionally a genre of “women’s music.” However, Niranjana noted that on her visit to Trinidad she found out that most chutney singers were actually male, though there were many more female singers in chutney than in calypso.

Niranjana stated that when men first started singing chutney music, they were thought to be leaning towards homosexuality. Sundar Popo had learned chutney songs from his mother and aunt and, being one of these early singers, was called “dog” among many other names by classical singers.

Sundar Popo’s music marked a shift in chutney music; as Niranjana put it, “it is however interesting to note that it is from these very tunes that the present Chutney songs have evolved and are sung by men in a public forum” (96).

Furthermore, Niranjana suggested that chutney music displayed a form and expressive space for African-Indian relations which was significant given the ramblings about racial tension between the two ethnic groups in some parts of the Caribbean. When singer Drupatee’s career began to take off in the 1980’s, it was the first time Trinidadians began to see a woman of Indian ancestry on the carnival stage (Niranjana 97). Drupatee is credited with coining the term “chutney soca” and one of her hit songs “Indian Soca” contained the lyrics “sounding sweeter, hotter than a chulha (fireside), rhythm from Africa and India, blend together in a perfect mixture” (Niranjana 97).

Meanwhile, Baksh (155) noted that “rum” has frequently been associated with the Indian population in the Caribbean, fueled by the stereotype that Indians are frequently addicted to rum drinking. In the article “Jep sting Radica with rum and roti: Trinidadian social dynamics in chutney music,” Baksh analyses three popular chutney recordings of 2009, “Rum and Roti,” “Radica,” and “Jep Sting Naina” within the social context of Trinidadian chutney music.

“Notions of rum drinking, alongside the ambiance of the rum shop and the enjoyment of alcohol during festivals like Carnival, have been romanticized within Caribbean popular culture and have been exploited as a common theme in Carnival music, particularly within calypso—to a certain extent—but more so within chutney,” Baksh wrote (156).

The notion that Indians are prone to alcohol addiction may have originated from the fact that rum drinking was encouraged among Indian men during indentureship (Pillai 15). Ganja smoking had initially been a common past time of indentured labourers, but this was replaced with alcohol. Pillai (15) writes that in exchange for extra work, men were supplied with free alcohol, and rum shops had opened next to each plantation which provided labourers with alcohol on credit.

The Guyana Hindu Dharmic Sabha, one of the largest religious organisations in the country, has recognised the need to tackle the issue of “rum drinking” amongst the Hindu population. According to the *Guyana Chronicle*, the organisation has banned the sale of alcoholic beverages at its melas, cultural shows and other events, and as of 2013, asked the Guyana Revenue Authority to not grant licenses for the sale of alcoholic beverages at Hindu weddings, as well as called upon pandits to refuse to perform wedding ceremonies if there is a bar.

Aside from the prevalence of alcohol in chutney music, Baksh (157) also pointed to the sexual allusions. The chorus of the song “Rum and Roti” by Roger “Patch” Joseph and Shawn “Da

Mastamind” Noel says “When they drink they rum, they only want roti,” which Baksh said was a clear allusion to sex. The idea of using Indian food as metaphors for sex is quite common in Caribbean music, he said. Moreover, the author stated that the Indian culture is “exoticized” further with a music video that shows a woman dancing erotically to the bridge of the song “come for roti.”

With reference to how alcohol abuse and chutney music may be connected, Engels et al. (530) posit that music and drinking are closely connected. In an article titled “Effect of alcohol references in music on alcohol consumption in public drinking spaces,” the researchers detail a study which found that people are prone to spending more on alcoholic beverages in bars which play music that contain textual references to alcohol.

Engels et al. suggest that this phenomenon can be explained through theories of priming. Through the exposure to lyrics with references to alcohol, people are affected on a cognitive level. The lyrics are connected to certain traits, goals, and stereotypes or memories and associations which may prompt a person to consume alcohol (Engels et al. 533).

Primack et al. (502), who studied videos on YouTube related to alcohol intoxication, found that such videos were heavily viewed. The researchers related that, in these videos, alcohol intoxication is often juxtaposed with humour and attractiveness, but rarely with negative outcomes.

Scholars who have studied chutney music agree that it often contains “controversial” lyrics, while those who have studied music and its impact on audiences posit that lyrics and videos can affect people cognitively.

However, a feature in the “Peeping Tom” column of Kaieteur News cautioned that the problem is not rum drinking; but alcoholism. The article points out that consumption of alcohol does not always lead to social problems, and therefore it is “inadvisable to warn television stations about the airing of songs that glorify rum drinking.” Should the songs encourage persons to become alcoholics, then they would warrant censorship. The article states that the songs which are seen as encouraging rum drinking may simply be seen as reflecting a problem within society which would not go away by simply discouraging music about rum.

## **Methodology**

### **Research questions**

1. To what extent is alcohol glamorized in Guyanese Chutney music?
2. How is alcohol glamorized in Guyanese Chutney music?

### **Method**

A content analysis was conducted on the lyrics of chutney songs produced by Guyanese artists between the years 2010 and 2015. The sample comprised 40 songs which were selected via a convenience sampling method. A YouTube search for “Guyanese chutney music” for each year was done and songs were selected from the results. The lyrics of those songs were then coded for references to alcohol such as the words: rum, beer and liquor, as well as themes and local slangs related to the consumption of alcohol.

### **Findings**

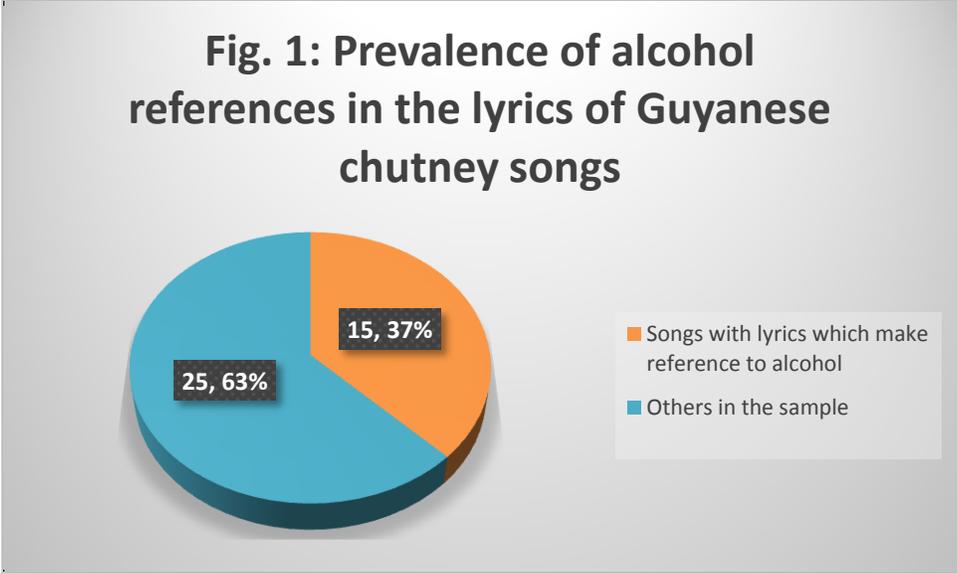


Fig. 1: Of the 40 songs studied, 15 (representing 37% of the sample) contained references to alcohol. Themes of glamorization of alcohol found in the lyrics of these songs included: actual drinking, alcohol as therapy/self-medication, machismo, reinforcement of anti-social cultural practices, reinforcement of the stereotype that Indians are prone to alcohol abuse, juxtaposition of drinking and driving, and the connection between alcohol and violent behavior.

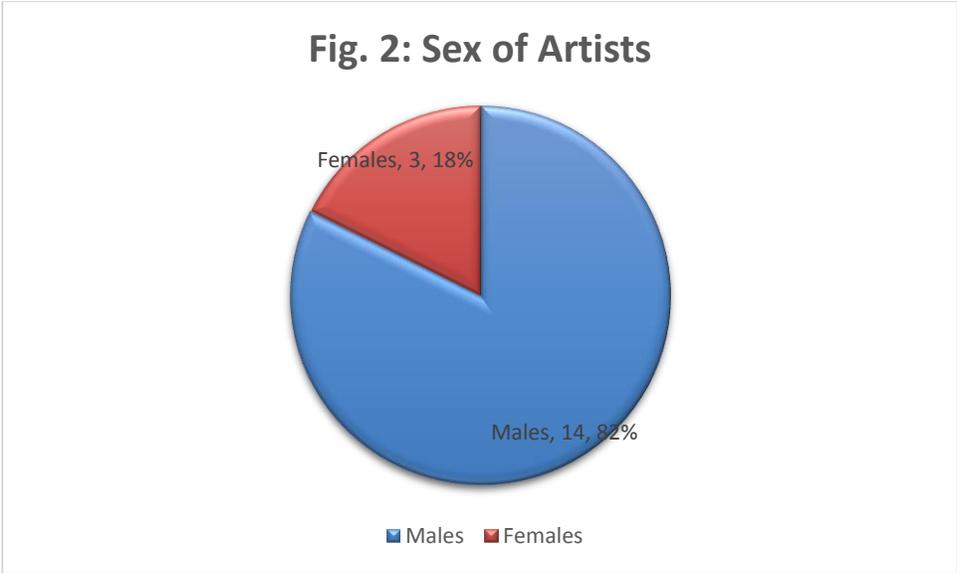


Fig. 2: Even though chutney was traditionally sung by women, only three (18%) out of the 17 artists whose music was examined were females. In the total sample of 40 songs, only 5 were by female singers; and of those 5 songs, only one made reference to alcohol.

### **Intercoder reliability**

The songs studied were coded by the primary researcher, as well as a second coder to ensure intercoder reliability. The independent intercoder exercise produced an 80 percent match. However, six of the eight songs which did not match, were coded “not sure” by the second coder. This was because the second coder is not from Guyana and was not familiar with Guyanese dialect, which many of the songs studied contained. There were therefore some lyrics that she did not understand at all, and there may have been some that were interpreted differently by her than they would be by a Guyanese person.

### **Discussion**

Through priming, music with references to alcohol can influence persons to consume alcohol (Engels et al., 2011). Thirty-seven percent of the songs studied contained references to alcohol. Themes of glamorization of alcohol found in the lyrics of these songs included: actual drinking, alcohol as therapy/self-medication, machismo, reinforcement of anti-social cultural practices, reinforcement of the stereotype that Indians are prone to alcohol abuse, juxtaposition of drinking and driving, and the connection between alcohol and violent behaviour.

Official music videos were found on YouTube for 18 of the 40 songs studied. Many of these videos showed persons actually drinking alcohol, even those which did not refer to alcohol in its lyrics such as in “Dem ah watch me” and “Dab the bottom house” by Mahendra Ramkellawan, and “Indian drums” by Prince JP. In addition, the act of consuming alcohol is very much present in the lyrics of the 15 songs which were found to contain alcohol references. Bunty Singh sings about “drinking whole day in the bar,” Pooran Seeraj sings “everyday ah drinking meh rum” and even encourages “if you want to be free, just take a glass and come drink some rum with me.”

Another common theme in which alcohol is glamorized in chutney music is alcohol as therapy/self-medication. In “everyday ah drinking meh rum” Pooran Seeraj talks about drinking rum because a woman wants to “spoil” his freedom. In “Stay home darling” Bunty Singh says “many days I have no money, I just feeling real unhappy, liquor in meh head I feeling like a living dead.” The chorus of this same song goes "when I wake up in the morning, before I eat anything I have to drink some stay home darling (Banks DIH Extra white rum). No vodka, no black label, stay home darling keeps me stable, without the rum, my whole body start to tremble." The symptoms described here (consuming alcohol as soon he wakes up, tremors due to lack of alcohol) are all signs of alcohol addiction.

In addition, alcohol is seen in some chutney songs as a substance which promotes machismo. For instance, Bunty Singh feels like a “big superstar” for drinking whole day in the bar, and Pooran Seeraj “does be the man in charge” after drinking a whole large (a 750 ml bottle of rum). A theme that was also found in some of the songs studied was the reinforcement of anti-social cultural practices through the use of Guyanese slangs such as “one more fuh the road” and “can't stand on one foot,” used by Mahendra Ramkellawan, meaning someone should not have just one

drink, and "you used to drink and hold yuh head," also used by Ramkellawan, meaning a person is able to take a lot of drinks without physically displaying any effects.

Furthermore, the reinforcement of the stereotype that Indians are prone to alcohol abuse was also present in some of the songs studied. As Baksh (155) noted, "rum" has frequently been associated with the Indian population in the Caribbean, fueled by the stereotype that they Indians are frequently addicted to rum drinking. In Romeo "Mystic" Nermal's song "Coolie bai," which was very popular in Guyana, the singer uses the line "beat some liquor like a coolie bai." Avi from the Supertones band, in the song "Sally tek meh rum," says after coming home from work he would "put on meh Indian song, drink meh rum and curl up meh hand," referring to Indian-style dancing, while Princess Anisa, in her song "Wine up meh body" about her search for an Indian man from the Caribbean, says she does not mind that "some of them man like to drink rum, other man them like to party up some" because they would "still wuk hard up in the bed or down in the yard." The bit about working hard in this song also has a double meaning and points to the sexual innuendos common in chutney songs, as authors Manuel (177) and Niranjana (87) had pointed out. In another song by Princess Anisa, she says "Yuh chulha (fireside) too hot, yuh guh dry out the patwa, no man go like it without surwah (gravy)." While metaphors are used in some songs as sexual innuendos some sexual references are stated plainly such as in Mystic's "Coolie bai" when he says "me know yuh weary chacha (uncle), go home an' buss pata (Guyanese slang for vagina)."

Moreover, a juxtaposition of drinking and driving was found in some of the songs analysed. In Adrian Dutchin's "I ok" he sings about having "a little something" but assures "don't worry with me, I ok" all while singing in front of a vehicle. A similar theme was seen in Mahendra Ramkellawan's "One more fuh the road." The video for this song is set in a parking lot filled

with sports cars, throughout the video a split screen is shown where on one half of the screen people can be seen drinking and on the other half shots of cars are shown, meanwhile Ramkellawan sings “take one more fuh the road.”

Another theme of how alcohol is glamorized in chutney music is through a connection between alcohol and violent behaviour, as in “Blame it on rum” by Omesh Singh who places the blame on rum after “cussing up” his neighbor and in “Coolie bai” Mystic says he “like pick fight when liquor bite.”

The 40 songs analysed for this study were by 14 male artists and 3 female artists. This illustrates a shift in tradition since chutney started as “women’s songs,” as Manuel (2) had stated. Niranjana (95) noted that this change started with Sundar Popo in the 1960’s. Of the 15 songs that contained references to alcohol, only one was sung by a female; and in that song Princess Anisa spoke about men that “like to drink rum.” Moreover, only one of the songs (“Sally tek meh rum” by Avi and the Supertones) made reference to a female consuming alcohol. This seems to support the notion that men are more prone to alcohol abuse, an idea that is as old as indentureship. Pillai (15) had noted that during the days of indentureship, men on the plantations were supplied with free alcohol in exchange for extra work.

Existing literature suggests that alcohol discourse has been present in chutney music since the days when it was now emerging as a genre. The findings of this study show that such discourse is still very much present in chutney music. Engels et al. (533) posit that people will consume more alcohol when “primed” with songs that contain references to alcohol. Given that alcohol is the number one drug abused in Guyana, producers of chutney music should be wary of the consequences that their music could have on their audiences.

## **Limitations to the study**

A major limitation to this study was time constraints: the entire study was completed in less than two months, and this limited its scope. Nevertheless, follow up studies can examine other aspects of the music such as: musical composition, how music by different producers compare, or how aspects such as age or ethnic background influences music.

Since YouTube was used as the medium to access the songs, there was no way to get a sampling frame of all chutney songs produced by Guyanese between the time period studied. As such, the sample was selected using a convenience method and for this reason, the findings should not be generalized. Instead, the study is exploratory in nature and could be used as a basis for further research.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study could have implications on various aspects of Guyanese society and culture. Such research is crucial in informing policy. Even though alcohol is widely abused in Guyana, there are currently no national action plans in the country to curb the issue, nor any policies relating to the content produced and aired in Guyana. In addition, the legal drinking age is not being enforced, so research on this subject could serve as a nudge to those in power to ensure that such laws are enforced.

On a more interpersonal level, the findings of this study could be a message to those who listen to music to be conscious of the lyrics in the music they listen to and the effects they could have

on them. In addition, the people who produce music should wary of the messages they are sending to their audiences and the effects those messages could have on society.

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