



Young Thai People's Exposure to Alcohol Portrayals in Society and the Media: A Qualitative Study for Policy Implications

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Abstract

Background Although previous quantitative studies have documented the association between exposure to alcohol portrayals and drinking attitudes in Western countries, few qualitative studies have explored this matter in Thailand. A better understanding of the association in young Thais is required for a more efficient alcohol policy development. This study aims to explore the information young Thais have learnt from exposure to alcohol portrayals in society and the media, examine how this exposure shapes their drinking attitudes, and investigate the alignment of policy-makers' views on drinking with those of young people.

Methods Two qualitative research methods were employed. Seventy-two university students (38 men, 34 women) aged 20–24 participated in focus groups conducted on campus. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with academia, civil society and representatives from government who were involved in alcohol policy. Recorded data were transcribed verbatim, systematically coded and analysed using content analysis.

Results Young Thais were regularly exposed to alcohol portrayals, particularly on social media and in their social environment. Being increasingly exposed to alcohol portrayals, particularly on social media, and the role of the alcohol industry emerged as concerning matters to the academia and civil society sectors. In response to the concerns, the government social media monitoring and alcohol censorship had become more challenging.

Conclusions This study reflects the growing concerns from academia and civil society sectors of the impacts of increased alcohol exposure and the role that the industry may have on young people's drinking attitudes. It highlights the need for response to significant policy challenges to reduce these impacts.

Keywords Alcohol · Alcohol policy · Censorship · Media · Qualitative · Thailand

Introduction

Exposure to Alcohol Portrayals

There is widespread public health concern about the impacts of exposure to drinking portrayals in society, particularly in

the media in the forms of alcohol product placements and advertisements, on drinking perceptions, attitudes, intentions, behaviours and other risky health behaviours in young people [1–3]. Traditional media such as films and television are often identified as potential sources that can influence young people's drinking [4]. Previous studies have found that alcohol placement was common in youth-rated films in Europe and the Americas [5–7]. In Thailand, over 75% of Thai films screened in cinemas in 2008–2009 contained youth and underage drinking scenes, particularly in comedy and melodrama films [8]. Similar to other countries such as the USA and Australia [9, 10], most of these Thai films portrayed drinking as a positive experience, ranging from enhancing social interactions to personal success, rather than a negative experience [8]. Moreover, in the USA and UK, the representation of alcohol in popular songs and music videos is generally more positive than negative because alcohol is featured in association with wealth, sex, luxury objects and partying [11, 12].

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In addition to exposure to alcohol product placement, young people are also found to be more likely than adults to be exposed to alcohol advertisements in both print (e.g. magazines) and digital (e.g. television) media [13, 14]. Alcohol advertisements are prominent during broadcasts of programmes to which young people are attracted such as the FIFA Football World Cup Tournament matches [15]. Previous studies found that brand-specific exposure to alcohol advertisements in these traditional media was associated with increased likelihood of brand-specific consumption, particularly among underage youth [16–18]. A US study also reported that young people who were exposed to youth-orientated alcohol advertisements such as party-themed advertisements were more likely to have higher rates of alcohol use and binge drinking onset [19].

Besides exposure to alcohol through these traditional media, alcohol is increasingly being advertised on social media. The rising expenditure on the production of alcohol advertisements on social media indicates that social media is attracting increasing attention from the alcohol industry [20]. Although the influence of alcohol advertising on social media is not yet fully understood, the body of literature on social media and alcohol is growing [21]. It is likely that young people, particularly those aged 18–29, are more likely to be exposed to the alcohol industry's messages and promotional materials on social media because they comparatively use social media more than other age groups do [21, 22]. For example, an Australian study has found that alcohol marketing social media use, such as liking and following, was associated with riskier alcohol use in people aged 15–29 [23].

Regulatory Control of Exposure to Alcohol in Thailand

Since several past studies have found the associations between exposure to alcohol and subsequent alcohol consumption and risky health behaviours, stricter regulatory control of alcohol on the media is often called for [24]. Governments across the world have attempted to protect young people in particular from overexposure to alcohol advertising and alcohol use portrayed in artistic works through either statutory regulation, co-regulation or self-regulation [25]. In Thailand, there have been a multitude of regulatory interventions in the forms of advertising and marketing restrictions. The Alcoholic Beverage Control Act B.E. 2551 (the Act) enacted in 2008 stipulates comprehensive regulatory control of alcohol advertising. Previously, information about alcohol consumption and its concrete negative impacts had not gained public attention until the Thai Health Promotion Foundation revealed that Thai adult per-capita consumption was ranked the fifth highest in the world at 13.59 l of pure alcohol in 2000. Since then, despite being statistically adjusted to 8.40 l of pure alcohol later in 2005, health advocates continued to use indicators such as consumption volume and road traffic mortality to call for stricter alcohol control, leading to enactment of the Act.

The Act stipulates that any alcoholic beverages sold in Thailand may not be advertised in a manner which directly or indirectly claims benefits or promotes their consumption [26]. All alcohol advertisements are also prohibited from containing illustrations of the product or its packaging, and there is a requirement that these advertisements be accompanied by one of the five predefined warning messages [27]. Televised alcohol advertisements are restricted to airing between 10 PM and 5 AM and must show one of these warning messages for at least 2 s [26, 27]. In television broadcasts, scenes with consumption of alcohol and illustrations of alcohol brands are censored [26]. In televised, digital screen and printed media, the warning message must occupy at least one-third of the advertisement area [27]. Despite these restrictions, alcohol portrayals especially of people drinking remain prevalent in digital and social media in Thailand.

Policy and Young People

In the policy-making process, young people's participation is believed to benefit the design and implementation of policy in achieving its objectives [28]. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, youth participation in policy-making process enables young people to understand better the political and administrative of policy development which could create trust in public authorities and increase the ownership of policies and initiatives [29]. These, in turn, help improve programme design and implementation of policy. However, there is no evidence of young people's participation in the design of alcohol policy in Thailand. Furthermore, although there are a few qualitative studies examining the association between exposure to alcohol portrayals of alcohol use and drinking attitudes and behaviours in Western settings [14, 30], very few qualitative studies have been conducted in non-Western settings, including Thailand [31, 32]. Given the well-documented evidence of the associations between exposure to drinking portrayals and alcohol use in young people, a better understanding of how young people perceive alcohol use upon exposure to drinking portrayals is required in order to develop a more efficient alcohol control policy. Therefore, this study aims to explore the information young Thai people have learnt from exposure to alcohol portrayals in society and the media, explore how young people perceive this exposure, and investigate the alignment of alcohol policy-makers' views on drinking with those of the young people.

Methods

Research Designs

This study employed two modes of data collection: focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The focus groups were

used to explore the information that young Thai people have learnt from exposure to alcohol in society and the media. Semi-structured interviews were designed to investigate the alignment of alcohol policy-makers' views with those of the young people as well as policy challenges required to reduce the adverse consequences of such exposure. The study has been granted ethics approval by the Human Research Ethics committees in Australia (HE15/480) and Thailand (MUPH2016-034). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants in focus groups and semi-structured interview respondents included in this study prior to the commencement of the discussion. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. A code was assigned to each participant/respondent in the study, so that all data were fully anonymised to preserve confidentiality.

Focus Groups

Participants Young Thai tertiary students aged 20–24 years who were studying at a public university with campuses located in Bangkok and a peripheral province were recruited via information flyers and 'snowball' referrals. The study recruited people with a wide range of drinking experiences from ex-drinkers to frequent drinkers. Based on the participants' responses, they were categorised into either ex-drinker, social drinker or frequent drinker (Table 1). No participants were non-drinkers. The classification of drinkers was based on the category of drinking frequency used by the National Statistical Office of Thailand in their national survey on smoking and drinking behaviours [33]. As with many topics related to stigmatised health behaviours, discussions about substance use like alcohol are sensitive and may pose challenges to elicit quality and quantity of information from young people [34]. Therefore, groups of friends were encouraged to participate, so as to lower anxiety about discussing sensitive issues with strangers. Interested students were asked to contact R.K. or

S.N. via email to organise date and time for participation. The students were allotted to a group based on their convenience.

Data Collection The focus groups were conducted at both university campuses. Each group was mixed in terms of gender and types of drinkers. Previous studies suggest that a well-designed focus group usually consists of no more than 12 participants [35]. Hence, the authors organised focus groups of peer groups of 9–12 participants in each group in order for people to actively exchange ideas among one another and discuss the issues in a friendly and constructive fashion. There were 72 participants in total, 38 men and 34 women. The characteristics of the participants are summarised in Table 2.

A moderator (R.K.) and an assistant moderator (S.N.) conducted the focus groups. R.K. explained the study to the participants and provided them with an information statement. They were also given an opportunity to ask questions and allowed to withdraw from the discussion at any time. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants prior to the commencement of the focus groups. Both the information statement and consent form were in the Thai language to ensure that all participants were well informed. Each focus group was facilitated by a topic guide containing open-ended questions. These questions focused on the participants' cultural understanding of alcohol consumption, alcohol media literacy and the influence of drinking portrayals in the media on their drinking behaviours. Each focus group (1.5 h) was audio-recorded with the participants' permission. The participants were compensated for their time and travel costs to participate.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Respondents Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the stakeholders who have been actively involved in alcohol research and policy development. These identified key stakeholders were from three sectors: (1) the government (policy-makers), (2) academia and (3) civil society. The three sectors are collectively called the 'triangle that moves the mountain' as proposed by a well-known medical, public health and social scholar in Thailand, Professor Prawase Wasi [36]. The three interconnected sectors are believed to simultaneously strengthen capacity in three interrelated areas, namely political involvement (the government), creation of knowledge (academia) and social movement (civil society organisations). Pragmatic purposive sampling through policy networks and snowball referrals was used. Snowballing was a useful way to expand a sample of stakeholders, hence reaching out to more people. It was very important to ask people if they knew of others who would be interested in joining this study. However, it should be noted that the referred stakeholders were the people who were listed as committee members of the National Alcohol Policy Commission. A list of the members of the

Table 1 Types of drinkers

Type	Definition
Non-drinker (nil)	Reported having never had or tried alcohol
Ex-drinker (21%)	Reported having had no alcohol in the past 12 months, but having had alcohol more than 12 months ago
Social (64%)	Reported having an average of less than one drinking session per week in the past 12 months
Frequent (15%)	Reported having an average of at least one drinking session per week in the past 12 months

Table 2 Characteristics of participants

Group	<i>n</i>	Mean age (years)	Gender (M/F)	Educational degree	Education level
1	12	22.0	6:6	Public health	Undergraduate
2	9	23.6	9:0	Public health	Postgraduate
3	9	20.8	9:0	Public health	Undergraduate
4	10	22.1	6:4	Public health	Undergraduate
5	9	24.0	3:6	Public health	Postgraduate
6	11	22.4	4:7	Environmental science	Undergraduate
7	12	20.7	1:11	Environmental science	Undergraduate
Total	72	22.1	38:34 53%:47%	Health/non-health 68%:32%	Undergraduate/postgraduate 75%:25%

National Alcohol Policy Commission as appointed by the Act [26] was used for initial sample selection. The Commission involved extensively in the alcohol policy formation in Thailand. The members of the Commission consisted of representatives from government agencies, non-governmental organisations and persons whose knowledge, competence and experience pertaining to the fields of either social science, law or information and communication technology. Table 3 presents a summary of respondents' areas of work and/or expertise. Initially, six stakeholders (two policy-makers, two academics and two civil society organisations) were contacted by an email. Those who failed to respond within 5 working days were followed up by telephone. All of them replied the email within a few days and accepted the invitation for an interview. Additional interviewees were referred to by the respondents who had been interviewed. The snowball sampling was used because the initially identified interviewees had recommended that it would be useful for people who were in the same area to discuss so that the authors could compare and contrast opinions.

Data Collection The semi-structured interviews (30–60 min) were conducted face-to-face at the respondents' agreed locations (e.g. their offices) between May and August 2016. An information statement and a consent form provided to all respondents were in both English and Thai to ensure that the respondents

were well informed. R.K. explained the study and their right to withdraw from the study to the respondents and allowed them to ask questions with regard to the study. The interviews were facilitated by a topic guide containing open-ended questions that had been provided to the respondents in advance. The signed informed consent was received prior to the commencement of the interviews. The interview topics included the perceptions of the sociocultural context of drinking, the portrayals of alcohol use in society and the media, and any relevant policy concerns. Each interview was audio-recorded with the respondents' permission. R.K. and S.N. separately transcribed, coded and analysed the audio-recorded discussions simultaneously after each discussion session to achieve data saturation.

Data Analysis

The recorded discussions of both focus groups and semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were read, re-read and coded separately by R.K. and S.N. Content analysis was used to identify key themes and sub-themes, and the data were continually coded and refined into categories. Notes were taken throughout the process of analysis. R.K. and S.N. then compared the themes and categories derived from their individual coding for similarities and differences. The emerging themes, categories and concepts

Table 3 Respondents' areas of work and/or expertise

Category	ID number	Organisation's work and/or expertise
Government	G1	Alcohol policy
	G2	Alcohol policy and enforcement under G1
	G3	Government–research unit hybrid organisation
Academia	A1	Alcohol industry's behaviour
	A2	Media communication of alcohol industry
	A3	Alcohol research in Thailand and health economics
	A4	Alcohol research and international collaboration
Civil society	S1	Drunk-driving watchdog
	S2	Alcohol information and awareness in Thailand
	S3	Alcohol-related harm watchdog

were discussed among the study team. While a number of themes emerged from the focus groups, the analysis presented here focused on young people's perceptions about exposure to alcohol portrayals in society and the media and their drinking attitudes. Similarly, the analysis of data derived from the semi-structured interviews focused on the respondents' views on exposure to alcohol portrayals, policy challenges and other relevant concerning areas which varied across three different sectors. Finally, the codes, themes, categories and sub-categories were refined by the study team, until no new themes or categories emerged. These data analyses were ongoing and iterative, as new enquiries derived from the analyses were pursued in the subsequent focus groups/semi-structured interviews.

Results

Focus Groups

Exposure to Alcohol in the Media

When participants were asked about alcohol or drinking portrayals in the media, they initially said that they had often seen drinking on television dramas. Many participants did not believe that such portrayals affected their own alcohol consumption. However, a few participants reported to have imitated the characters' drinking in the television dramas.

I drink when I'm heartbroken because I've seen the actors drinking in television series/dramas. So I just copied them.—Male ex-drinker aged 20

When asked about any alcohol-related content in the media that they have seen and remembered, most participants mentioned a number of televised advertisements that belonged to a few dominant Thai alcohol companies. However, they said that it was rare to see alcohol advertisements on television due to the airtime restriction. Participants also noted that the content of alcohol advertisements has changed to focus more on the brand rather than the product itself.

Alcohol ads nowadays don't show the products. In fact, it looks like they're promoting the brands, not the products. The alcohol ads on television are only allowed to air like after 10 pm or later than that. By that time, we're probably either in bed or already out (with friends).—Male social drinker aged 24

When asked further how they recalled these advertisements and perceived them to be for alcohol, despite the extensive content restriction, they reported to have seen these advertisements in other platforms such as street advertising or

advertising displays on public transport. They stated that alcohol advertisements were often in the form of brand advertising—only the brand was shown without specifying the product advertised. They became aware that these advertisements were meant for alcohol because most advertisements belonged to only a few Thai alcohol companies whose beer was their flagship product. Moreover, participants speculated that they were in a generation in transition in which alcohol advertising restriction has come into effect. Asked if they thought that the similar branding of alcoholic and non-alcoholic products would increase societal acceptance of alcohol consumption, they believed that drinking was becoming more acceptable because of frequent exposure to alcohol brand advertisements in the media. Some participants added that brand advertising made them recall the brands more easily when making a purchase.

We grew up in the period where alcohol advertisements were allowed. Later, drinking water (a subsidiary product with the same branding) was introduced to the market. But I already associate the brand with beer.—Male social drinker aged 22

Exposure to Alcohol on Social Media

Although participants rarely saw drinking portrayals on television and played down any influence of such exposure on their own drinking, they said to have often seen alcohol-related content on leading social media websites (e.g. Facebook) that were posted or shared by their friends. They added that the interactive features of these social media websites, such as 'like' or 'share', increased the likelihood of them seeing these alcohol-related materials. They thought that it was common for young people to post their own alcohol-fuelled social activities on social media and 'tag' their friends to acknowledge these activities.

When my friends check-in and post photos (on Facebook), I feel like I want to go there too. The (alcoholic) drinks look nice.—Female social drinker aged 23

However, despite dismissing the instant influence of seeing alcohol-related content online on their purchasing or drinking decision, a number of participants admitted that, among other factors, frequent exposure to alcohol materials online could incite their curiosity and lead to brand-specific purchasing intent and consumption. Young people also considered other factors such as the location of alcohol outlet, previous experience and on-premise promotions to be influential on their drinking behaviours.

If it's an outlet, I need to check the location of the outlet first. If the promotions are interesting enough and it's not too far, I would go.—Male regular drinker aged 23

Exposure to the Alcohol Industry Activities and Sponsorship

Participants also talked about alcohol brand advertising and brand placement in the forms of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and sponsorship. They were able to recall a number of the alcohol industry CSR activities and sponsorships, many of these were donation programmes and sports sponsorship. Participants believed that it was appropriate for the alcohol industry to conduct CSR activities and sponsor youth-orientated activities as an ethical responsibility to the society.

I think all for-profit organisations conduct some kind of CSR activities whether we're aware of these activities or not. It is one of the ways to give back to society.—Male ex-drinker aged 23

When asked if these CSR activities and sponsorship had led to their drinking preferences or intention, although participants dismissed the influence of CSR activities on their alcohol consumption, they admitted that these activities positively affected their choice of non-alcoholic products (e.g. soda water and still water). Unlike CSR activities, alcohol sports sponsorship successfully persuaded a few participants to purchase and consume alcoholic products of the brands that sponsored their favourite sports teams. Further, many participants also noticed that the dominant Thai alcohol brands have expanded their sponsorship to other youth-orientated sporting events (e.g. car racing) in both domestic and international arenas.

Chang beer is the first brand that I've tried because I like Barcelona (Football Club). It's so bitter but I still drink it. I think it is an indirect way to support my team.—Female social drinker aged 21

Alcohol Censorship in the Media

Despite seeing alcohol-related content on various media platforms, participants often mentioned that alcohol portrayals are heavily censored, particularly in traditional media. When asked whether they considered alcohol censorship to be effective in preventing drinking, the participants ridiculed and dismissed the effectiveness of the alcohol censorship to prevent their interest in drinking. Young people could not fathom the reasons behind the use of censorship. Instead, they thought that the use of alcohol censorship could further incite youth's interest in what was being censored.

When I see censorship in TV dramas or movies, I often wonder why they need to censor that. The censorship makes it more noticeable. If the censor wasn't there, I wouldn't have noticed (the alcohol). It actually increases my curiosity.—Male social drinker aged 22

Exposure to Alcohol in Social Environment

Participants were also asked whether they considered drinking to be a part of Thai culture. They dismissed the idea that drinking was a culture, but believed that drinking was customary, particularly in the north-eastern region. They were told that in the past alcohol was given as a payment for the labour in the rice fields, instead of monetary compensation. However, many participants regarded drinking as being symbolic of social gatherings where alcoholic drinks were often provided, including at religious ceremonies in which alcohol should be forbidden, such as at a Buddhist ordination (becoming a monk).

“There're alcoholic beverages in every wedding reception and Buddhist ordination ceremony. The host probably wants their guests to feel enjoyable ... —Male social drinker aged 23

When asked about their personal drinking experiences, participants recalled that their senior university peers had a significant role in introducing them to their first drinks. Many participants were placed in the situations where alcohol consumption was unavoidable, such as at university initiation rituals. Drinking with their friends was also common at most social gatherings during their university years. Asked whether drinking was a 'normal' practice, participants believed that the Thai society has learnt to 'accept' it as a common practice, providing that drinking would not lead to adverse consequences such as road accidents. However, they disapproved of underage drinking and believed that the Thai society only accepted age-appropriate drinking.

I think (our) society has learnt to accept that drinking is normal. However, it also depends on the drinker's age. The society may look at underage drinking more negatively than drinking in adults.—Female social drinker aged 22

In summary, with regard to exposure to alcohol portrayed in the media, only a small number of the participants talked about having seen drinking portrayals in the traditional media such as in television dramas. However, they noted the prominence and prevalence of alcohol advertising in public places and on social media. They also noted the alcohol industry activities in promoting their products using brand advertising

and brand placement in the forms of CSR activities and sports sponsorship. Increasingly being exposed to drinking in social environment, this group of young people regarded alcohol to be in the same category as other non-alcoholic beverages. They believed that drinking has become habitual in society and thought that moderate drinking at social gatherings was normal and acceptable. In some circumstances, drinking was even necessary such as at university initiation rituals.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Three different categories of respondents were used to analyse the data. Similar to young people's perceptions towards drinking in Thai society, respondents across all three sectors believed that drinking has become customary in Thailand, though not a culture.

Academia: Exposure to Drinking Portrayals in Social Setting and the Media

In regard to drinking custom in Thailand, the respondents from academic sector said that although drinking was against the teachings of Buddhism, religious belief was deprioritised when drinking was involved. They added that Thais have often made excuses to drink at social gatherings. A respondent from academic sector thought that drinking was easily incorporated into Thai society because of Thai people's fun-loving characteristics and believed that Thai people have already considered alcohol to be an ordinary beverage. These factors were believed to accommodate alcohol consumption and could consequently lead to increased exposure to drinking in social environment.

The fun-loving characteristic of Thai people is used to support the drinking attitudes. They dismiss that drinking violates the fifth precept in Buddhism, but associate drinking as a part of celebrations.—A2

The respondents from academic sector also added that although they did not consider drinking to be normalised in Thailand, they believed that Thais viewed alcohol as a social commodity. One reason was that Thai people were familiar with drinking in social settings due to frequent exposure. Another was that the issues of alcohol use and related problems were very much related to a biomedical perspective rather than social development issues. Therefore, unlike the people in health-related fields, the general public regarded drinking as a 'normal' practice.

... drinkers, non-drinkers, and those not working in public health field may think drinking is normal. (To young people), drinking is normal because they've seen it since when they were young. They've seen people drinking in

front of their house, in restaurants, (...), at beer gardens in front of shopping malls.—A2

Moreover, a respondent from the academic sector believed that the volume of exposure to alcohol in Thai society might not have changed, despite having Alcoholic Beverage Control Act since 2008. It was noted that the alcohol industry was viable in promoting their brands and products by shifting from traditional media to other types of communication platforms.

... (the alcohol industry) has always been active in communicating with their customers. The Act doesn't really affect (the industry) that much. It only limits the explicit communication about alcohol (in traditional media) ...—A3

Civil Society: Exposure to the Alcohol Industry Activities

The respondents from the civil society sector alleged that the alcohol industry was attempting to increase receptive and accommodating attitudes towards alcohol use. They added that, in line with young Thai people's practice of drinking into intoxication, the industry viewed it as an opportunity to form more or less a 'wet culture' among young Thai people by increasing its appearance in youth-orientated activities, e.g. brand placement in CSR activities and sports sponsorship. They were also concerned that the alcohol industry's online marketing activities on, especially on social media, would reduce the effectiveness of alcohol control and increase exposure to alcohol in young people. They exemplified the recent scandal in which many Thai celebrities were allegedly paid by a domestic alcohol company to post pictures of them holding or drinking from a newly designed beer bottle on a social media website to promote the new packaging. The respondents considered it to be a sort of celebrity endorsement advertising. A respondent even compared social media to the black market for illegal or taboo activities because of the lack of monitoring on social media.

Social media has become the place where if you couldn't do it lawfully, you could do it online. For example, abortion pills can't be sold in pharmacy, but they are plenty on social media websites.—A2

With regard to anti-alcohol campaigns, a respondent from a civil society organisation noted that despite numerous campaigns to raise awareness about alcohol harm, public communication about alcohol being an unordinary product was lacking. They also urged the government to attentively intensify its alcohol control interventions to reduce alcohol use.

We (civil society sector) only communicate about the (alcohol-related) impacts. I think we need to emphasise more that alcohol is not an ordinary commodity. Alcoholic drinks shouldn't be sold like other ordinary commodities. We talk so little about this issue.—S3

In response to the focus group participants' dismissal of the effectiveness of alcohol censorship, the respondents disagreed and strongly encouraged the use of the censorship. They believed that it was an effective mechanism to de-normalise alcohol use, despite believing that alcohol use was not yet normalised in Thailand. Additionally, they suggested that other counteractive interventions similar to those of tobacco control should be considered to maximise alcohol control and urged the Thai government to increase its attention on public communication about health hazards of drinking to supplement the existing campaigns on social impacts.

Censorship's a mechanism to de-normalise drinking in our society. If we don't do it, drinking might have become normalised already.—S1

The Government: Anti-Drinking Policy to Discourage Drinking

Although the respondents from the government sector agreed with respondents from other sectors that alcohol use has not been normalised in Thailand, they believed that Thai society has become familiar with alcohol use as a result of a cumulative exposure to drinking portrayals both in social settings and the media. In response to the criticisms of ineffective regulatory control to prevent youth drinking, a respondent from the government sector stated that the government has been attempting to change young people's accommodating attitudes towards alcohol use by utilising strategic social interventions to supplement the legal measures. They claimed that a combination of both top-down and bottom-up approaches could yield more effective results.

We know that we cannot solve alcohol problems with only legal perspective. At the community level, we're trying to discourage drinking by campaigning for abstinence during the 3-month Buddhist lent to complement the alcohol regulations.—G1

However, the respondents from the government sector admitted that although the Act restricted the alcohol industry activities in all types of media including on social media, there were difficulties with the authority's competence to monitor and observe these activities on social media websites. A respondent from the government sector also recognised that the government was currently targeting those who violated the regulatory measures while the preventive measures on social media were lacking.

In practice, I think we should also work on the preventive measures, not only focusing on solving the problems ... we should think about how use the media to help us in this.—S1

In summary, three different categories of respondents, though discussed similar issues relating to youth exposure to alcohol, emphasised different aspects of increased exposure to alcohol portrayals. The respondents from academia sector were mostly concerned about increasing chances of being exposed to drinking portrayals in social settings and the media, while the respondents from civil society sector stressed the significant role of the alcohol industry in increasing exposure to alcohol in the forms of youth-oriented contents. In response to increasing concerns of the youth exposure to alcohol portrayals, the government claimed to focus more on combining both legal and non-legal measures, however admitted that the restriction of the alcohol industry activities on social media became more challenging and would require strenuous enforcement of legal interventions.

Discussion

Alcohol Portrayals in the Media

Young people in the study regard alcohol as a foodstuff rather than a non-ordinary product, hence believing that drinking is normal. The results of this study reflect the rising trend of drinking in people aged 15–24 years as reported by the recent national surveys [33, 37]. Young people reveal to have regularly been exposed to the portrayals of alcohol mainly through their own observation in social setting and alcohol advertising in public places and on social media websites. However, they seem to be less exposed to alcohol portrayals in film and television content. The declining exposure to alcohol portrayals on traditional media may have been offset by the increasing role of social media, particularly the growth of alcohol marketing on social media in the last decade [38].

In Thailand, there are millions of social media subscribers (30 million on Facebook, 26 million on YouTube, 4.5 million on Twitter and 1.7 million on Instagram), many of which are under the legal drinking age (20 years old) [39]. The ease of access to online content on personal mobile devices means that young people including the underage could be exposed more easily to alcohol-related materials through these social media websites. Additionally, the interactive features of social media, such as like, share and comment, raises further concerns because of its capacity to snowball the distribution of information. Previous studies have found the associations between increased exposure to alcohol marketing in the media and subsequent drinking behaviours and increased consumption levels [38, 40], it is concerning since young people in the

study have failed to realise the negative consequences of being exposed to drinking portrayals, especially when they are in constant exposure to alcohol brand advertising in Thailand. The increased exposure to the alcohol portrayals on social media is not a coincidence. Past research has found that social media platform has been effectively utilised by not only the alcohol industry but also those with vested interest such as entertainment and sports industries [38, 40–42]. Such interdependence of these two industries is unavoidable in the business world. There are a few apparent reasons for which the alcohol industry uses sport or entertainment for the promotion of alcohol consumption. Sport and entertainment attracts mass audiences and can evoke strong emotions and social identification [43]. The nature of the entertainment industry is bustling and social, whereas alcohol advertising and sporting events have become omnipresent [44]. Moreover, pairing with healthy activity with an otherwise unhealthy product (such as alcohol) makes it seem less unhealthy and more customary and normal [45]. Hence, the alcohol industry and these industries seem to be inextricably linked beyond financial implications.

However, despite the concerns about the relationship between expanding trend of social media and on alcohol intake, surveys conducted among 23,000 consumers in 39 countries including Thailand by a marketing company argues that being accustomed to advertising may offer some beneficial protection [46]. One of these surveys conducted in Thailand reveals that Thais aged 16–19, though exposed to advertising from an early age, are the hardest group to engage with, compared to the other two older-age groups [20–34 and 35–49]. The results of this study are in line with the survey's findings. This study also finds that this group of young Thais perceive alcohol advertising to be less influential on their drinking behaviours and have become more sceptical of it. As a result, marketing companies have to become more equipped, which is what they have achieved with their brand substitution activities.

These brand substitution activities such as brand advertising or brand placement in the forms of CSR activities and sponsorship is more salient and more influential for this group of young people. This is consistent with a cross-sectional study that found that Thai adolescents who have been frequently exposed to alcohol CSR advertisements were more likely to drink [47]. Furthermore, the appearances of alcohol brands featured in the industry-supported activities help accommodate the use of alcohol because these activities reflect young Thai people's social activities to a greater extent. These everyday life tie-ins are one of the several strategies used by the marketing agencies to undermine policies aiming to change social norms around drinking [41]. The contacts that the young people have with the media and the information they have learnt from exposure to alcohol mass media communication indicates that the media helps generate accommodating attitudes towards alcohol use.

Observations of Drinking in Social Setting

In Thailand, although it is debatable whether the consumption of alcohol is culturally accepted, this study suggests that drinking has become ingrained into Thai society. As noted by young people in this study, drinking is perceived to be a norm in the north-eastern region of Thailand due to regular exposure to drinking portrayals in social environment. In this region, an ethnographic study exploring drinking perceptions and behaviour found that drinking was 'woven' into everyday and social life [48]. The locals exhibited positive attitudes towards alcohol use where alcohol-related social distress and harm to health were non-existent. Similarly, young people in the study who consider alcohol to be a normal practice lack health-orientated attitudes towards alcohol, i.e. they associate alcohol use with sociability and as socially acceptable norms, without considering a negative impact on short- or long-term health. Their attitudes towards alcohol use are clearly shaped by observing drinking in their social settings. For many of these young people, early exposure to alcohol use in social environment instigates the impression that alcohol is an essential socialising tool and a common practice of growing up. In fact, many had their first drink at university initiation rituals and continued to drink when socialising with their senior peers or friends. The university environment provides them the opportunities to create social bond using alcohol because alcohol is always consumed in groups. These, in turn, generates perceived norm of drinking and consequently leads to social normative beliefs of drinking among young people.

Policy Challenges and Future Policy Directions

As found in this study, anti-drinking policy is apparent in Thailand. The government has reportedly increased their efforts to end years of prevarication by the alcohol industry's influence on shaping drinking culture through a combination of legal and non-legal measures. However, two key important issues remain unsettled and debatable: censorship and social media monitoring.

Censorship

First, it is undeniable that the government is employing the censorship as a predisposing measure to change people's drinking attitudes. Whereas there is a general consensus that censorship is effective in preventing young people from the uptake of smoking [49], the use of alcohol censorship remains debatable in Thailand and young people in the study are sceptical about it. Nonetheless, censorship of alcohol may be supported by literatures relating to other unhealthy behaviours. For example, a study assessing character portrayal of alcohol use in films screened in the USA, Argentina and Mexico has found that drinking portrayal was often associated with other

risk behaviours such as smoking and illicit drug use [7]. However, there is minimal evidence in Thailand to support the use of alcohol censorship. Therefore, Thailand may need to conduct a regulatory impact assessment to gauge the effectiveness and adjust the current alcohol censorship guideline.

Furthermore, the difference of opinions regarding censorship between young people and concerning stakeholders may need to be explored more for future policy review. As young people suggest that rather than reduce their interest in alcohol, the censorship actually arouses their curiosity. It is possible that this curiosity is scaffolded by social media and the censorship activities are unwittingly playing into a very insidious marketing campaign. The activities of the alcohol industry and those with vested interests together with the curiosity aroused by the censorship could become a fairly powerful incentive for young people to be interested in alcohol.

Social Media Monitoring

Second, the agency of the increasing influence of social media and the subsiding influence of traditional media indicate that modern culture plays a pivotal role in enhancing the young generation's normative perception towards the social norm of drinking. However, controlling activities on social media platforms is an insurmountable task and may require comprehensive efforts of all relevant organisational agencies. The previous research finds that youth are more inclined to respond to alcohol-related content online [22], evaluation research on social media may be needed to monitor the industry's increasing attention on social media. Additionally, despite Thailand's strict alcohol advertising regulations, the same attention and regulatory rigour on the activities on social media are disputable and required.

The recent development of the collaboration between the government and social media watchdogs has seen crackdowns of many substandard and falsely labelled cosmetic products and dietary supplements in Thailand [50]. The government should employ a similar approach of using media advocacy to raise awareness of alcohol harms and strengthen monitoring activities on social media. While the alcohol industry is progressively active on social media, social media is underutilised by the government. A similar social marketing approach, such as social media influencer marketing, should also be used to counter-advertise or neutralise the alcohol industry's activities on social media because social media outlets are less corporate, less commercial and more diverse than the traditional mass media [51].

Research Translation

Since the enactment Alcoholic Beverage Control Act B.E. 2551 in 2008, several alcohol control measures have been issued. Thailand is currently set to review its alcohol

regulatory measures as the Alcoholic Beverage Control Committee has established a sub-committee to review any relevant alcohol-related measures and interventions in order to update any ineffective measures [26]. It is hoped that a proposal containing the main findings of this study and other relevant publications will be submitted to this sub-committee to inform alcohol policy review in Thailand. Furthermore, the first author of this study is currently involved in the development of international framework for alcohol control in which the importance of limiting exposure to drinking portrayals to reduce possible negative impacts on drinking attitudes and behaviours will be emphasised.

Limitations

There are a few limitations that need to be addressed in this study. Firstly, snowball sampling used in this study might generate biased samples due to its respondent-driven characteristics, i.e. the interview respondents often suggest others who share similar characteristics or the same outlook [52]. The selected interview respondents remained within the chain of referrals and/or were the members of the National Alcohol Policy Commission (the sampling frame). Secondly, young participants in the focus groups were mostly social drinkers, while young people who were less likely to engage in drinking behaviour were composed of a lower proportion in this study. Finally, the generalisability of these findings is limited to the young people in this study due to the likelihood of a biased subset of individuals; however, this group of young people had a range of different levels of alcohol use, and gender was balanced among the participants. Nevertheless, this study provides significant insights into how the portrayals of alcohol in Thailand are perceived by young people and pinpoints potential venues for future policy development which are the strengths of this study.

Conclusions

The study highlights the formation of drinking attitudes by reflecting how being exposed to alcohol in social settings and social media impacts perceptions of others' drinking behaviours. These, in turn, generate perceived norms of drinking and consequently develop social normative beliefs of drinking. A combination of the contacts that young people have their social environment and the media, the information they have learnt from the exposure, and the perceived norm of drinking is likely to contribute to young people's drinking attitudes. This study also finds that, despite a strict regulatory control of alcohol in Thailand, alcohol portrayals remain widespread. This study suggests that the measures to limit and protect young people from exposure to alcohol portrayal, especially in the media, should be strengthened as an

important part of alcohol policy review in Thailand. The authority is urged to apply the same attention and regulatory rigour on all types of media, as well as develop an evidence-based approach to reduce the negative impacts of exposure to alcohol portrayals.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants/respondents included in the study.

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