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Drinking cultures in urban Vietnam and what it means for social marketing

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Introduction and Background

This paper presents the early results of a study into social drinking behaviours in Vietnam with a view to gain an understanding how consumption norms are established and transferred within the cultural setting. Vietnam has an established culture of drinking for celebration, social networking and business relationship enhancement (Parker, 2010, Luu, Nguyen & Nguyen 2012). Consumption levels of alcoholic beverages such as beer and wine have been documented by organisations such as the local Health Strategy and Policy Institute (HSPI) and the World Health Organization (WHO). However, consumption of homemade alcohol beverages such as rice wine, snake wine and home-brewed beer, which are popular among the working class in Vietnam, has remained largely undocumented (HSPI 2006). This is principally because it is often difficult to record and analyse something that is produced and consumed outside formal governance processes. Data on alcohol consumption in Vietnam can be problematic. For example, the Vietnamese government official statistics indicate that alcohol consumption contributes to around seven per cent of road crashes (HSPI 2006). Luu, Nguyen and Nguyen (2012) questioned the reliability of these figures given that these data are collected by the police, who do not always have the proper equipment to confirm whether alcohol was involved in a crash. The most recent data from Forensic Medicine (2001, cited in World Health Organization 2009) listed alcohol as contributory to 34 per cent of road deaths.

Alcohol as a public health concern has increased in Vietnam in recent years. Advertising has been banned for products in the ‘wine’ category that have an alcohol concentration that exceeds 30 per cent under the advertising law revision in 2012. Beer advertising is, however, permitted by law and as many wines are under the 30 per cent threshold, there is still widespread advertising of alcohol products. Vietnam also has drink-driving laws (World Health Organization, 2009), which allow a maximum blood alcohol concentration level of 0.05g/dl for drivers (including motorbike riders). There has also been an increasing number of public communication campaigns against drink-driving, initiated by the public and the private sectors, such as the RS10 campaign (carried out by WHO, funded by the Bloomberg Family Foundation), “Responsible Drinking” program (by the Vietnam Brewery Association), and numerous government billboard campaigns. Government officials were banned from drinking prior to and during working hours in 2013 as a way to set an example for the general public, and government office canteens are not allowed to sell alcohol (Thai Thinh 2013).

Alcohol consumption patterns in Vietnam still remain relatively under-researched (Parker, 2010). Research elsewhere shows that drinking is a socialised behaviour that falls within the social norms of a cultural group (Rundle-Thiele 2009a, 2009b, Brennan, Previte & Scott 2014). Thus, understanding the dynamics of group drinking behaviour will potentially inform social marketing initiatives targeting to promote responsible drinking and consequently reduce the rate of alcohol-related problems. The research question is: What are alcohol consumption behaviours of urban Vietnamese drinkers?

Approach

Data were collected by means of structured and unstructured observation of participants in a naturalistic setting. The subjects of this study were adults consuming alcohol in public space, whose drinking behaviours were observed and analysed for identification of possible patterns of behaviour. Public drinking venues were purposively selected and categorised according to venue type: 1) Informal drinking venues (*quán nhậu*) – conventional bars where drinking, and some eating, takes place, which are casual in nature 2) Bars/pubs, 3) Drinking restaurants (*nhà hàng nhậu*), (4) Night clubs and (5) Live music cafes.

Artefacts included both descriptive notes and reflective notes by the researchers. At the end of each session, an introspective debrief with the non-observing team member was held. As with any other social consumption activities, alcohol consumption fluctuates throughout a fiscal year and correlates with public holidays and celebration of special social events (Single & Wortley 1994, Davey, Obst & Sheehan 2001, Mohr et al 2001). The study is ongoing and will be conducted at multiple time and days in similar identified venues in order to grasp a better picture of the alcohol consumption landscape. Identified critical milestones for observation include: leading up to and during public holidays and lunar new year (Tết) holidays, and other weekends. This paper presents preliminary results from the first round of observations. The covert observation observables list was partly inspired by the observation record sheet developed by Rundle-Thiele (2009a) and localised for Vietnamese conditions. Observation worksheets were piloted and refined after the first round of observations so that data could be recorded efficiently and to ensure that data could be recorded without drawing attention to the observers. Various means of recording observations were trialled including paper and pen, electronic tablets, mobile phones (keyed in data entry and audio recording of observations) and use of small cards to take notes. Multiple means of recording observations will be used for the remainder of the study. For instance, mobile phones may be used in venues where patrons generally stand up and the lighting is low, and paper/card notes may be used in drinking restaurants where patrons are seated.

Preliminary Results and Implications for Practice

Two pilot visits were paid to two different drinking restaurants in the most urbanised districts of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's largest city, in week preceding the 2014 lunar new year holiday. Some preliminary data gathered from these visits, although cannot be used to make any generalisable or conclusive claims, provided interesting insights into group drinking behaviours and dynamics. These insights will later be built upon as the study goes on to investigate drinking norms in other venue types and covers a greater range of locations.

A total number of 13 drinking groups were observed by a team of three researchers as part of the initial pilot of the research instrument and process. Each visit lasted exactly one hour, and drinking groups were chosen on the basis of relative proximity to the observers' in the venue. Factors such as group composition, relative stage of each drinking session and drinking style varied for that reason. Collective ordering and payment was common, with one person taking responsibility for the group; 'invitation' and 'acceptance of invitations', as opposed to group ordering or sharing of the bill, were the norm. 'Rounds' and 'shouting' were less common. Drinking alone, or putting one's drink to one's mouth without the rest of the group, was uncommon for groups comprised of only men. However drinking at one's own pace, in some cases individually in one's group, was more common in those groups with a mix of genders. Drinks were generally ordered when it when group consensus was reached, but it was not uncommon for female wait staff, usually sponsored by beer brands, to refill drinkers' glasses without explicit consent. The investigators were not aware of any instances of over-drinking, however the venues visited could be classed as drinking restaurants with tables largely comprised of mixed gender groups, which appear to be less prone to excessive drinking. It is expected that we will encounter excessive drinkers in venues largely frequented by males only, given that drinking in Vietnam is very much a masculine pursuit.

This pilot is the first step in a more comprehensive study of drinking culture within Vietnam. The results, so far have been used to revise the observation instruments and refine data collection processes. The study will continue over the coming months and be expanded to Ha Noi, the capital and second largest city, throughout 2014. Once completed, the study will provide a comprehensive insight into actual drinking behaviour in urban Vietnam.

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