

# Alcohol and media: The situation in the Philippines

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## Introduction

There is little data available on the extent of alcoholism or alcohol abuse in the Philippines.

However, while there may be no official statistics available, the consequences of alcoholism are very obvious in the community or inside homes. There are many undocumented cases of alcoholic persons who collapsed in the streets because of drunkenness. Alcoholism is a growing concern in the culture and social life of our country. In the recent years, only few alcohol-related cases have been recorded by the Philippine General Hospital. For instance last year, only six patients were admitted in that state-run hospital.

This could be due to the fact that alcoholism is not considered a medical problem by most Filipinos. Most Filipinos with an alcohol problem do not submit to medical treatment even if their condition is chronic.

Alcohol rehabilitation centres have low admission rates compared to similar institutions for illicit drug dependency. The PGH alcohol support group centre offers treatment and counselling for its indigent patients. For anonymity, patients from rich families go to private rehabilitation centres. There are also some NGOs which provide similar services and carry out advocacy work. However, more effort is needed in the Philippines in order to address the problems of alcohol abuse.

## Crime and Violence

Greater alcohol availability is associated with greater consumption and a greater number of problems.

A number of cases of sexual and drug abuse, suicide and violence among Filipinos have been caused by habitual drunkenness or alcohol intoxication. The Philippine General Hospital considers patients with blood alcohol levels of 0.05 per cent (50 mg/100 ml) to be medically intoxicated.

## Alcohol Industry: A Lucrative Business

The liquor industry in the Philippines consists of the indigenous and commercially manufactured beverages.

The production of beer and other liquors is one of the most profitable industries in the Philippines. In fact, the country's biggest beer company, San Miguel Corporation (SMC), ranked number nine in the Philippine's Top Corporations of 1999 with a total sale of \$766 million. SMC sold a total of 327.6 million bottles of beer in 1998. Liquor companies are partly owned by transnational corporations or wealthy Fil-Chinese industrialists whose businesses have been established since the Spanish colonization period in the eighteenth century.

Alcoholic drinks are also widely sold at duty free shops. For the many returning overseas Filipino workers, expensive alcoholic drinks, such as Chivas Regal whisky, are good presents for their relatives and friends.

However, because of the influx and supremacy of commercial drinks, native drinks have been confined to small-scale production.

Common in the rural areas is Lambanog (or coconut wine) which is now being sold in different flavors such as cherry, jack fruit, apple, four seasons, etc. Rice wine is also popular in the northern part of the Philippines where it retails at approximately \$3 for a 750 ml bottle.

### **Drinking Filipinos**

Filipinos' wine consumption increases by 10 per cent each year. In 1995, Filipinos were seen to be the number one wine drinkers in Asia consuming a total of 146,000 bottles of wine that year.

Generally, however, beer is the favourite among Filipinos principally because of its affordability compared to hard drinks. In 1998, the Filipinos were reported to have consumed about 1.25 billion litres of beer (equivalent to 3.9 billion of beer bottles). But among youth drinkers, even at \$30 cents a bottle, beer is relatively expensive for them. A \$40 cents bottle of Tanduay gin, which is stronger or more intoxicating, can fill a few hours of drinking for a small group. Middle and upper class Filipinos, on the other hand, with a much greater disposable income, could spend more money on alcohol, treating themselves to the likes of Johnny Walker and Chivas Regal which cost up to \$50.

Beers are widely available in grocery and convenience stores, but whisky, wine and other alcoholic drinks are supposedly purchasable only at licensed liquor stores. But this is not always the case. Due to lax monitoring and implementation, hard drinks can also be bought in many regular stores, even by teenagers.

Philippine law sets the minimum legal drinking age at 18 but underage drinking is widespread. Most young people get alcohol from home with or without their parents' permission. They know how to obtain alcohol – they are able to get it from friends or they can discreetly buy for themselves.

According to the 1997 Family Income and Expenditure Survey, an average Filipino family spends one per cent of its income on alcoholic beverages. However, if for example a minimum wage earner gets \$5 a day, and if he develops the habit of drinking at least three bottles of beers every night, that would mean spending \$1 a day on beer, which is already 20 per cent of his hard earned money.

Alcohol drinking is a big part of the Filipino merry-making activities. Beer is an essential part of fiestas, birthdays, and parties. Even when there is no special occasion, many Filipinos hang out together in the streets, in front of their houses and convenience stores drinking gin and tonic, which is a considerably cheaper alcoholic drink.

This is particularly true in a low income community where, unlike those from the middle and high income brackets who have money to go to the bars to hang out and drink. The price of drinks in the bars is about 100 per cent more expensive.

## Young Drinkers

Drinking alcoholic beverages beyond one's capacity to the point of intoxication is a risky behaviour in which most young people get involved at some time. In a survey conducted by the University of the Philippines in 1994, 60 per cent or 5.3 million Filipino youths are said to be drinking alcoholic beverages. About 4.2 million of them are males and 1.1 million are females. The study stated that most of the Filipino teenagers have tried cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs. In fact, there are more alcoholic drinkers than smokers.

On the average, Filipino youths start drinking alcohol at the age of 16 or 17. However, there are also many cases when children as young as 12 years old are already drinking alcoholic beverages. About 37 per cent of the respondents in the survey have continued the habit of drinking alcohol while 33 per cent said they only drink alcoholic beverages on special occasions. Some 17 per cent said they have already decided to stop the vice of drinking.

In the Philippines, drinking is more acceptable among girls than smoking. Nevertheless, it is still the case that it is considered more appropriate for men than for women to drink. Parents are more lax with boys, giving them more freedom to drink alcohol than their sisters.

The teenagers said their family, friends, and the mass media have influenced them to experiment with drinking alcohol. Underscoring the critical role that the family plays in youth behaviours, young people seem to take their cue from their own parents' attitudes and behaviour. Thus, a boy who grows up with an alcoholic father is more likely to become one himself.

The study indicated that those who are more likely to drink are those:

- who are not living with parents (for example, college students living in dormitories)
- whose parents approve of drinking
- who frequently attending social gatherings
- who enjoy going out to parties, bars and discos
- who do not take part in sports activities

## Advertising: Image is Everything

Filipinos are very creative and daring, which is evident when they are involved in advertising campaigns. Filipinos are also big victims of consumerism. The pictures on page 13 are samples of alcohol advertisements that circulate in the Philippines, appearing in most youth-oriented and fashion magazines.

For a long time now, advertising has deeply established the need for alcoholic beverages among Filipinos. It is through advertising that the industry achieves its high level of sales. With creative strategies in marketing, companies can persuade most people drink beer and other alcoholic drinks. Beer and Liquor companies spend more than \$12 million on advertising. For every beer Filipinos buy, 80 per cent of the amount we pay is spent on advertising.

Alcohol advertisements present a direct link between alcohol and happiness, sexual conquest, success, and excitement. Alcohol drinkers are portrayed as heroic, attractive, athletic, or successful.

Alcohol appears in the media as part of the day-to-day lives of the Filipinos – as portrayed in soap operas, comedy shows, basketball league games, music video channels, etc.

## **Marketing SMB**

San Miguel Beer (SMB) is the Filipinos favourite alcoholic drink. Being a locally produced beer, its name has been steadily and deeply embedded in the Filipino psyche and it has become almost a generic name for beer in the Philippines. Its target market covers not only those from the C-D income bracket but also those in the corporate field. In 1997, SMC had spent \$15.2 million on advertising, becoming the seventh largest advertiser in the country.

Beer and liquors in the Philippines are portrayed with positive images. SMC has varied strategies, depending on what market they want to target, focusing on basic Filipino values. For instance, beers and other alcoholic beverages have been associated with thirst quenching, male bonding, friendship and camaraderie, unity, youthfulness and fun among many others. Most common in the advertisements is the use of popular local action and sexy actors and actresses as their image models.

Some of SMB's advertisements in the past have used the following:

- S-capade (to connote summer escapade, but interpreted by others as sex escapade)
- Sarap mag beer (Feels good to drink beer)
- Sarap ng samahan (unity)
- Kahit kailan magkaibigan (friendship)
- Hero and the beer (a boy saves a girl and then they go on a drinking binge together)
- Love and courtship
- Christmas spirit
- Fiesta and other occasions
- 5-thirsty (drinking beer every 5:30 or after work to relieve stress)

## **Beer advertisers have used different media:**

- TV, radio, print and internet
- Music video channels, MTV
- Commercial jingles (which have become popular among youth)
- Basketball teams (at least 3 basketball teams playing in the league are sponsored by Liquor companies)
- Songs like Laklak and Inuman na which were sung by popular youth bands have become popular in the airwaves
- Octoberfest (Beer fiesta in October)
- Sponsorship of sports and youth-oriented activities
- Distributing gift items like shirts, caps, calendars, etc

These trends in alcohol advertising are something about which we should be concerned. Popular perceptions among young people about alcohol drinking are greatly influenced by advertising.