

# Underage drinking motivation and contexts in Hong Kong: a qualitative analysis

S Yoon \*, WWT Lam, DSY Ho

## KEY MESSAGES

1. This study explores the contextual conundrum of alcohol drinking among Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong.
2. The first encounter with alcohol mostly occurs in the context of family and social networks.
3. Promoting conviviality and sociability is the main motivation for drinking.
4. Peer socialisation does not compel conformity in drinking behaviour.
5. There is a growing acceptance of underage

alcohol use by adolescents.

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<sup>1,2</sup> S Yoon, <sup>1</sup> WWT Lam, <sup>1</sup> DSY Ho

<sup>1</sup> School of Public Health, The University of Hong Kong

<sup>2</sup> Health Services and Systems Research, Duke-NUS Medical School Singapore

\* Principal applicant and corresponding author: sungwon.yoon@duke-nus.edu.sg

## Introduction

Alcohol consumption in Hong Kong is gaining popularity, in particular among the younger age groups.<sup>1</sup> High risk-taking behaviours among adolescents suggest that alcohol consumption is a potential risk factor in development of other risky behaviours.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, this emphasis is due to a lack of understanding of the actual circumstances of the initiation of alcohol use and the meaning of alcohol drinking in adolescence. Moreover, previous analyses primarily relied on quantitative evidence, often of a largely aggregate and summative nature. Qualitative analyses have shown that youth alcohol consumption does not occur uniformly and that wide variations exist with respect to the societal and sub-cultural contexts within which alcohol is consumed.<sup>3</sup> Assessing such situational aspect of drinking is fundamental to the understanding of the contextual factors that encourage drinking under some circumstances and discourage it in others. This study aimed to examine in-depth contextual characteristics of alcohol drinking among adolescents in Hong Kong, with special attention to the social interactions and relationships.

## Methods

Adolescents aged 14 to 17 years were recruited from secondary schools in Hong Kong. A letter informing the study purpose was sent to principals of the randomly selected schools in three geographical areas. One week later, the schools were contacted by telephone. Of 44 schools contacted, 13 agreed to participate. A one-page screening questionnaire on drinking behaviour was distributed to classes. Students were asked to leave their contact details if

they were willing to talk about their views on alcohol confidentially in informal group discussion. Of 2744 questionnaires distributed, 2271 returned; 538 students provided their contact details.

We purposively selected participants of different age, sex, and drinking status to garner diverse views and perspectives. A total of 131 students were contacted and 81 students participated in focus group discussions. Consent form was obtained from each participant and parents/guardians. The sample size was determined by data saturation. Reasons for refusal included being too busy or unavailable, feeling uncomfortable, and losing interest in taking part. Focus groups were categorised in terms of participants' similar characteristics and circumstances (ie, sex, school, and year at school). An interview guideline with open-ended questions was directed to solicit the adolescents' perspectives and experience relating to alcohol consumption. Confidentiality of all personal information was emphasised. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis based upon grounded theory was conducted using NVivo 10.

## Results

A total of 16 focus groups ranging in size from three to seven were undertaken (Table 1). About half of the participants were female and 75% of the participants had tried more than a sip of alcohol on one occasion. The average age for first alcohol use was 12.9 years (12.8 years for male students and 13.0 years for female students). More than half of the participants had experience of alcohol use in the past 1 year, whereas 32% of them drank alcohol in the past 1 month (Table 2).

**TABLE 1.** Focus group composition

Focus group (n=16)	No. of participants (n=81)	Age range, y	Sex
1	6	15-17	Girls only
2	6	16-17	Girls only
3	5	15-17	Girls only
4	6	15-17	Girls only
5	3	15-17	Girls only
6	5	14-16	Girls only
7	3	15-16	Boys only
8	5	15-17	Boys only
9	6	15-18	Boys only
10	7	14-17	Boys only
11	4	15-16	Boys only
12	5	16-17	Boys only
13	5	16-17	Mixed
14	6	15-18	Mixed
15	6	15-16	Mixed
16	3	15	Mixed

**TABLE 2.** Demographic and drinking characteristics of participants (n=81)

	Value*
Sex	
Male	41 (50.6)
Female	40 (49.4)
Age, y	
≤14	3 (3.7)
15	34 (42)
16	20 (24.7)
≥17	24 (29.6)
Grade	
≤S3	15 (18.5)
S4	42 (51.8)
S5	22 (27.2)
S6	2 (2.5)
Drinking status	
Lifetime	60 (75.3)
During the last 12 months	43 (53.1)
During the last 30 days	26 (32.1)
Past-30 day-binge drinking	
Yes	15 (18.5)
No	66 (81.5)
Age of first use of alcohol, y	12.94±1.80

\* Data are presented as No. (%) of participants or mean±standard deviation

### First experience with alcohol

Many participants reported that their first experience with alcohol occurred in family celebration where extended family and relatives were present and where drinking was the norm. *"When having family reunion dinner at home, my dad suggested that maybe I should start learning how to drink alcohol. So he gave me a glass of beer and asked me to drink."* (male, 17 years old)

One of the key motivations for experimenting with drinking was curiosity, particularly when they regarded the alcohol drinking opportunity as part of celebratory experience. Overall, the first exposure to alcoholic beverages was commonly characterised as a negative experience describing the taste of alcohol as "bitter", "weird", and "stinky".

### Perceived parental attitudes towards alcohol

Different styles in the ways parents set the boundaries were reported. The prevailing style was the harm minimisation approach: although parents do not actively support underage drinking or provide them alcoholic beverages, they considered underage alcohol use acceptable as long as it is handled "responsibly". *"My parents think that it's okay to drink as long as I stay out of trouble and I don't get too drunk."* (male, 16 years old)

By contrast, a clear and strong anti-drinking parental message was noted by a considerable minority of participants. The prohibitive attitude towards underage drinking by parents was a more significant theme for non-drinking participants compared to drinking participants. *"My parents think that only bad kids drink alcohol. Underage drinking is like committing a crime."* (female, 15 years old, non-drinker)

### Drinking occasions and locations

Alcohol was seen to be "appropriate" at special occasions such as friends' birthdays, school breaks, marking educational achievements (examinations), Lunar New Year Festivals, and Christmas. Although drinking did not occur regularly for most participants, the most-cited reason for drinking was "increased enjoyment and happiness" that could not be possibly achieved when sober. *"We [friendship group] exchange greetings for Lunar New Year. When we have dinner together, there must be a bottle of red wine or beer around."* (female, 17 years old)

Apart from the celebratory function, collective consumption of alcohol was viewed as an essential step in bonding with their peers. *"It [alcohol] represents the friendship we all share, that is, the kind of feeling that we are friends."* (male, 15 years old)

The places in which adolescents drink include parks, playgrounds, local food stalls, karaoke, and friends' homes when parents were out or away. Most

notably, all-you-can-eat Chinese hot pot restaurant was consistently cited as a popular hangout venue where adolescents could help themselves with alcoholic drinks with no restriction.

Notably, there was little indication that adolescents use alcohol to pursue intoxication. Although the immediate effects of intoxication (such as making a fool of themselves, not being able to walk straight) were described as "fun" by some, "remaining in control after drinking" was most important for the majority of participants.

### Influences on drinking behaviour

Participants recognised willingness to serve alcohol to underage drinkers in establishments that have liquor licences. It was felt that legal restrictions had minimal impact, and that off-licence purchase was relatively easy among those who drink. Participants described numerous strategies to work around the rule. Most of the time, identity card was not even asked for. *"It is pretty easy if you are not wearing a school uniform. You can walk into a supermarket and buy the whole pack. They wouldn't even ask a thing."* (male, 15 years old)

Participants recognised pro-drinking influences of industry marketing. Most participants believed that such marketing efforts did not affect their decision to drink but, at the same time, viewed that pervasiveness of advertising and promotions could influence 'other' young people. *"These things [marketing activities] do not affect me, but they would encourage some teenagers to drink alcohol."* (female, 17 years old)

The relatively low cost of alcohol in Hong Kong means that many young drinkers select flavour and taste over and above price simply because they could afford. Indeed, the prime importance was palatability of alcoholic beverages. *"Price doesn't really matter to me. Brand and taste are more important than price. A few bottles only cost twenty something dollars."* (male, 17 years old)

However, adolescents tended to have limited finances for spending on alcohol and there were occasions where supply of alcohol needed to last longer and could be shared between group members. Under such circumstances, price played a part to a certain extent in the purchases that adolescents choose to make. *"Because you have limited money, you don't want to spend all on buying alcohol right? If there is a large group of friends, we need to consider price."* (male, 16 years old)

### Perceptions of drinking or non-drinking among adolescents

Drinking does not necessarily represent an emblem of group membership and hence non-drinking peers are often blended in the group of drinking friends. *"They are my friends. They don't care [whether I*

*drink or not]. They drink theirs and I drink mine [soft drink]."* (female, 16 years old)

Hence, friendship groups do not seem to be defined by common behaviours. However, some abstainers noted that being sober within drinking situations was sometimes intolerable, commonly portraying as "odd," "awkward," and "less sociable".

Irrespective of alcohol use, most participants saw underage drinking as a normal behaviour provided that one drinks in moderation and knows one's limit. The idea of "reaching the limit" is widely understood to mean "doing oneself no physical or social harm" and "not losing control" no matter how much a person drinks. *"It must be bad if people [adolescents] drink too much. But if they can stop drinking once they reach their limit, I think it is acceptable."* (male, 15 years old, non-drinker)

The perceived normality and acceptance of underage drinking was a key theme running through both drinkers and non-drinkers.

## Discussion

The traditional Chinese drinking culture, characterised by joining together for celebrations, signifies the adolescents' first alcohol experiment.<sup>4</sup> The first taste of drinks was experimental, yet such experience seems to signal, albeit inadvertently, that underage drinking is a socially acceptable behaviour. We observed a generally relaxed and lenient parental attitude towards children's alcohol use, namely a 'harm reduction approach.' The adolescents' motivations for drinking were essentially reflective of the value that alcohol symbolises within the Chinese culture.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the idea of 'drinking to belong'<sup>3</sup> was a central theme. However, the much-discussed concepts of 'peer influence' and 'peer selection' did not seem to cogently explain the adolescents' drinking behaviours. Our study did not observe what other researchers saw a 'culture of intoxication'. Rather, sporadic patterns and lower consumption are typical of adolescent drinkers. Contrary to the 'third-person effect' being apparent in discussions, the images and representations presented in alcohol seemed to have contributed to the choice of alcohol and overall normalisation of alcohol drinking. The city's lack of legislation banning the sale of alcohol to minors--off-premise alcohol sales to minors are exclusively subject to industry voluntary codes of conduct--is further inflating youth's perceptions of alcohol access. Regardless of one's drinking status, our participants see underage drinking as a normal and accepted part of social lives provided that it is kept under control.

## Conclusion

The present study reveals the cultural backdrop of adolescent drinking to underscore the importance

of understanding the connection between alcohol and collective social activities in Chinese culture at large. Interventions to curtail underage drinking need to reflect social and cultural contexts within which alcohol comes into play and give greater consideration to changing wider social environments conducive to underage alcohol use.<sup>5</sup>

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