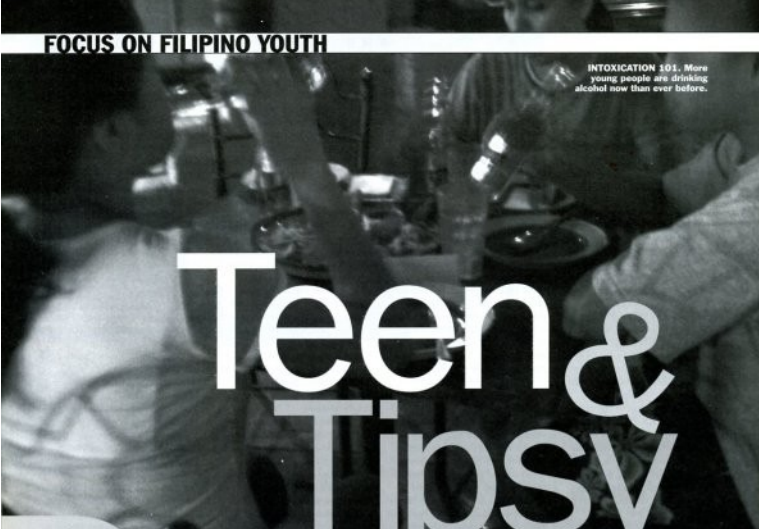


Teen and Tipsy
by Vinia M. Datinguino
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FOCUS ON FILIPINO YOUTH

INTOXICATION 101. More young people are drinking alcohol now than ever before.

Teen & Tipsy

VINIA DATINGUINO

RONA AND her friends don't want you to know their real names, although their favorite pastime is no secret among their own families. Well, at least Rona's mother knows about it, even letting the girls indulge in it in the family home. That way she also knows they are safe, even if she figures that at 21, the girls already know what they're doing.

But she worries nonetheless, and constantly tells Rona and her *lutong*, which includes Marissa and Jenny, to go slow. When she was their age it wasn't common to have girls enjoying drinking sessions. These days it apparently is, and it may not even take too long before the girls reach the boys' bottle for bottle.

"It is increasingly becoming more acceptable among young people to drink alcohol," says demographer Grace Trinidad-Cruz of the University of the Philippines. She also says that while in absolute numbers there are still more young males than females who are drinking, the gender gap is narrowing with the faster rates

of increase among girls.

Cruz was part of the team that worked on the 2002 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Survey (YAFS), the third in a series of nationwide surveys on adolescent sexuality, fertility and reproductive health. The first YAFS was done in 1982. Two decades later, data showed drinkers as starting younger, drinking more, and less likely to drop the habit.

Nearly 42 percent of 15- to 24-year-olds drank alcohol, up from 37 percent in 1994, when YAFS2 was conducted. That increase in drinking prevalence among young people was traced mostly to females. Between the two survey rounds of 1994 and 2002, the proportion of young females who drank rose by a huge 65 percent; among the males, the increase was a much lower 10 percent.

YAFS says it's a pattern that is evident not only in drinking, but in other risk behaviors, too, both sexual and nonsexual. More girls are smoking, more girls are trying illicit drugs, and

more girls are having early sex. According to Cruz, these are manifestations of girls "becoming more liberal," shedding themselves of inhibitions. For Dr. Cecilia Conaco, a psychologist and adolescence expert from the University of the Philippines, it's "patung what boys can do, girls can also do."

Jang, who also wants to hide her identity, readily admits to drinking, which she says she started doing in first year high school. She is now a nursing school freshman. She is also only 16 years old, which means she began drinking when she was about 12 or 13.

Rona and her group began even earlier, when they were all in fourth grade. The father of a fourth common friend always had a stock of San Miguel at home, and the girls would raid the fridge whenever they were over for a visit. "It was so bitter we'd take sugar after every gulp!" recalls Rona. Since then, they have tasted all sorts of alcoholic drinks, from

wine to tequila, to brandy and vodka. They say there is no special reason why they drink. They just like drinking, period.

"*Trip lang* (We just like to)," Jang says as well, when asked why she and her friends—also 16-year-olds—drink. But she also says alcohol enables them to open up more and tell each other about their problems. They drink "twice, maybe three times a month...or anytime we feel like it and we have money," says Jang. San Miguel and the stronger Red Horse beer are their favorites. But if money is tight, they settle for fiery Gilbey's gin, which comes out cheaper because they can share a bottle.

DRINKING has become so ordinary among many youths, girls included, and it is not only surveys and tongue-chucking adults saying so. Jang echoes other youths in saying, "*Tata-mah na yan* (It's widespread)." But perhaps this shouldn't be surprising in a country where beer is the unofficial national

drink even as the biggest local brewery says about 22 bottles of its gin are consumed by Filipinos every second. Numerous provinces also boast of their own potent local brews, which are imbibed by both men and women in great quantities.

Yet as late as a generation ago, drinking among the youth was not seen as hip and desirable, although then as now, the ability to hold a drink was taken as one of the signs of growing up. But even that was true only for the boys.

These days there are still "coming of age" beer and brandy commercials aimed at young men. There are, however, now also advertisements where young women are the featured drinkers. One commercial for a gin brand, for example, features starlet Anne Curtis, who looks 16 but is actually 21. The ad has her sauntering in a dance club full of gyrating young bodies and pouring herself a glass of gin on the rocks. In the past, that commercial would have had her pouring that drink for her date.

While alcohol ads have always had women in them, they used to be mere props, sometimes appearing as if they were meant to be among the *pulutan* enjoyed by the men along with their beer, brandy, rum, or gin. Today the ads show young women drinking with equally young men, either in trendy clubs or parties.

"They've shifted from sleazy to hip," anthropologist Joyce Valbuena says of the alcoholic-drink makers' latest marketing strategies. "The message is, it's cool to drink." Even for young women, apparently. And the companies have not stopped at just placing youths—and women focused ads. They also sponsor events like musicfests that feature whatever bands are most popular among the young. There are even annual drinking festivals inspired by Germany's Oktoberfest where beer goes for a peso per glass.

In its reports on the Philippine alcoholic-drink industry in the last two years, marketing research company Euromonitor noted how companies such as San Miguel and Asia Brewery have begun targeting "entry drinkers" and women to expand their markets. The

strategy made sense since, Euromonitor pointed out, the mean age in the Philippines is 21. More women are also entering the workforce, giving them "the predisposition, the money and the urge to spend on alcoholic drinks." In other words, said Euromonitor, "drinking to unwind after a hard day's work is no longer just limited to men." Gonaco agrees that the alcoholic-beverage industry has noted the rise in the number of working women. "So they're thinking, 'let's tap into that,'" she says.

The fact that more women are earning their own keep and may have even become the family breadwinners could also have something to do with the changing attitudes among young Filipinos. Younger women now thus have role models (among them former-Fox-Daughters, turned-TV-host Kris Aquino) who have not only kept pace with the men, but have sometimes even outdone them. If men drink, then so can women.

DEMOGRAPHERS AND health experts, though, stress that the rise in popularity in drinking among the youth is something to be very concerned about, and not only because there was once a time when "proper" young girls would not be caught dead with a bottle of beer or gin in their hands. "We are alarmed because now we know better," says Dr. Lynn Panganiiban of the National Poison Control and Information Service (NPCIS) at the UP-Philippine General Hospital.

We know now, she says, that alcohol is toxic. "The least amount has the potential to kill," she adds. She isn't exaggerating. There are people who are predisposed to have allergic reactions to alcohol, but are unaware of such until they drink. There are also those who drink beyond their individual tolerance limits, causing their bodies to react as if these were under siege. Other experts stress as well that youths normally have lower tolerance for alcohol compared to adults.

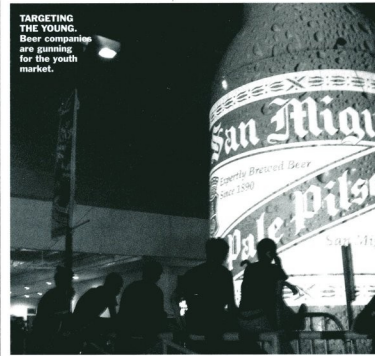
From January to March alone the NPCIS treated 11 youths between the ages of 13 to 19 for alcohol abuse. If that trend keeps up, NPCIS could be looking at a total of 44 for

the whole 2005, a big jump from last year's 27 and 2003's 24 cases of young people—boys and girls—brought in by their friends after imbibing more alcohol than their systems could take. "These are teenagers who go out, sometimes on a weekday, they binge, one of them ends up unconscious or vomiting violently and they panic," says Panganiiban.

In many other parts of the world, the practice of heavy alcohol drinking among young people has been a problem for many years now. In the United States, binge drinking has been the bane of many college campuses since the 1970s. In Britain, doctors' groups have started to engage the advertis-

the smaller quantities being imbibed by young Filipinos don't necessarily rule out serious consequences. The brain goes through dynamic changes during adolescence and alcohol can seriously damage long-term and short-term growth processes. Damage from alcohol during adolescence can be irreversible. Even short-term drinking impairs learning and memory far more in youth than adults, and adolescents need only to drink half as much to suffer the same negative effects.

Health experts add that long years of alcohol use affect the liver in the long term, until the organ simply gives up. And while alcohol facilitates blood circulation in the heart, in the



TARGETING THE YOUNG. Beer companies are gunning for the youth market.



ing industry in a battle, calling for a ban on alcohol advertising to contain what they call a "binge-drinking epidemic" among their young.

Here in the Philippines, binge drinking—or as medical anthropologist Michael Tan and the British magazine *New Scientist* put it, "drinking to get drunk"—has yet to be as widespread among the young, partly because even if beer and gin are relatively cheap, Filipino youths just don't have that much money to spare. A store-bought bottle of beer, for example, could take 20 percent of the daily allowance of a middle-class college student. But experts warn that

long run the heart muscle is weakened, leaving it unable to pump blood efficiently. This, in turn, affects the lungs, liver, and brain.

For females, alcohol poses more danger because of their lower physiological thresh-

THE LOST GENERATION

olds. As women metabolize alcohol differently than men, they reach higher peak blood alcohol levels with the same amount of drink, making them at higher risk for medical problems.

ACCORDING TO NPCIS, the accepted universal definition of moderate drinking is, for males, no more than three standard drinks per session or 15 per week, and for females, no more than two standard drinks per session or 10 per week. "Standards" vary by drink; one regular 320-ml beer bottle is standard and so is a glass of wine. Ditto with a shot of gin. Beyond these standards, the behavior is considered "at risk."

"*Tama lang naman ang pag-inom namin* (We drink just right)," fresh college graduate Marissa insists. Her friends say the same thing; they set limits. Rona, for example, will have no more than two bottles of San Mig Light or a bottle and a half of the stronger Red Horse in one sitting. Using the NPCIS definition, they would seem "moderate" drinkers.

In general, local experts define drunkenness at a blood alcohol level of 0.1 percent or 100 mg/dL. The amount of alcohol that one needs to take in to be intoxicated actually varies, and depends on factors such as gender, age, body weight, and metabolism rate. For a normal, 15-year-old girl who weighs 50 kgs., for example, intoxication can come after she drinks nearly three 320-ml bottles of pale pilsner, or just a smidgen more than a 305-ml bottle of strong beer, or two 50-ml jiggers of gin.

Elsewhere, experts define binge drinking as having a blood alcohol level of 0.08 percent or 80 mg/dL. Tan quotes *New Scientist* as saying that "on average, males taking in five or more 'standard drinks' or females taking in four or more 'standard drinks' in two hours send blood alcohol soaring to that 80-milligram level." But he notes that since the magazine is talking of Western bodies, Filipinos would probably need less than that in less time to be considered "binge drinkers."

Panganiban herself is not at all reassured with all this

talk of moderation. "Thresholds are naturally pushed up," she says. Jang, for instance, began drinking with a limit of two Red Horse bottles per session. Now she can drink three bottles and not even feel slightly tipsy. Her friends have an even higher tolerance—or so they think. MJ, also 16, can drink up to eight bottles of beer in one sitting without feeling drunk. But experts have repeatedly emphasized that there are people who do not show or feel the effects of having dangerous levels of alcohol in their systems. More often than not, the realization comes only after they have already figured in an accident or wake up in a hospital.

MJ, though, is unperturbed.



"Sometimes, my drinking buddies are my aunts," she says. "They say it's okay so long as I don't drink too much."

College lecturer Carole Diamante, who teaches at an exclusive girls' school, feels habitual drinking may have harmful consequences. But she says she tries to understand her students who drink. "I guess I'm just indulgent by nature," she says, laughing at herself. Diamante says students like drinking because "alcohol brings out the spirit." She's a theology teacher, and she and her students have noted that Jesus shared a goblet of wine with the Apostles, urging them to drink in His memory after His death.

To Diamante, the students' drinking is akin to the way ordinary wage earners turn to

bottles of beer to relieve their workday aches and pains. She says academic life can be just as stressful. "So they binge," she says of her students. "They enjoy the moment because they know they will (soon) go back to reality." She says her students even drink with their parents, a setup that she believes helps rein in the youngsters. "They tell their daughter, 'O, not the very hard drink ba,'" says Diamante. "Or, 'On the rocks lang ba.'"

THERE ARE indeed several youngsters who are drinking openly with their friends at home. But many times, adult supervision is lacking because both parents are too busy either with work or attending to



the rest of the family. Meanwhile, outside, the drinking continues in bars and restaurants, especially for college students, who imbibe even during lunch and merienda. There are schools that have had to ask nearby restaurants not to serve alcohol during the day so that their students will stop showing up in class tipsy—that is, if these show up at all. Apparently, the restaurants assume college students are all at least 18, the legal drinking age, and it is therefore okay for them to drink.

College teachers also say there are students who bring alcohol-filled thermoses, the contents of which are usually chugged inside the rooms of the various school organizations. Teachers who pick up

on the distinct smell of beer reprimand the students, who appear contrite and swear never to bring the brew to school again. But that is a promise writ in air, and it quickly dissipates even before the teachers' backs are turned. "Our society," says anthropologist Valbuena, who is with the Health Action and Information Network (HAIN), "has yet to regard alcohol drinking as a problem." This is despite a high awareness that those who drink are more likely to engage in other risk behaviors. Alcohol impairs decision-making abilities and reflexes; studies done abroad have shown alcohol as a factor in as much as 30 percent of all vehicular accidents.

In HAIN's own focus-group discussions for the qualitative component of YAFS3, participants said they were more likely to have sex after drinking. In the United States, it is estimated that teenage girls who binge drink are up to 63 percent more likely to become teen mothers.

"It's not automatic," cautions adolescence expert Corrao. "But you're drinking, your inhibitory senses are depressed, and you're fooling around with your boyfriend! The same way you say do not drink and drive? Do not drink and date."

Marissa says this is why she puts limits on her drinking and stops before she becomes unable to think clearly. "We've had friends who became pregnant because they were drunk," she says. Stories of date rapes also abound.

Jang and her friends tell similar tales. "When you're drunk, you don't know what you're doing," Jang says. That's why she says she and her friends are careful. Whenever her parents scold her about her drinking, Jang also tells them that she knows the consequences of drinking too much, and that they need not worry.

"They're not ignorant," demographer Cruz concedes. It's just that they have been unable to resist the call of the bottle, a call magnified as much by the desire of alcoholic-drink manufacturers to increase profits as it is by changes in societal attitudes. ■