

How Drinking Culture is Learned: A Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem Perspective on South Korea

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Abstract

Alcohol drinking culture occupied a central place in South Korean social life, functioning as a key mechanism for social networking, interpersonal communication, and the maintenance of organizational relationships. Although previous scholars had examined drinking patterns, health consequences, and gender-related changes in alcohol use, relatively little attention had been given to the learning processes through which drinking-related knowledge, values, and practices were acquired, reproduced, and transmitted across social contexts and generations. This article addressed this gap by analyzing the socio-cultural learning ecosystem that shaped drinking behaviors and alcohol-related values in South Korean society. Using a documentary research approach, the study synthesized scholarly articles, research studies, academic reports, and relevant media sources through content analysis within the framework of learning ecosystem theory.

The findings reveal that drinking culture in South Korea is sustained through an interconnected learning ecosystem comprising five principal environments: family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry. Rather than operating as independent influences, these environments interact to reinforce, modify, and transform drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices. Family provides early cultural meanings and behavioral models; peer groups reinforce belonging and conformity; workplaces institutionalize drinking through organizational practices such as *hoesik*; mass media circulates and normalizes particular representations of drinking; and the alcohol industry commercializes and amplifies these meanings through branding, advertising, celebrity culture, and product placement. The study therefore argues that Korean drinking culture is best understood not simply as individual alcohol consumption but as an ongoing process of socio-cultural learning across interconnected environments.

Keywords

Drinking Culture, Learning Ecosystem, Social Learning, South Korea, Cultural Transmission

Introduction

The widespread social acceptance of alcohol consumption in South Korea is reflected not only in everyday drinking practices but also in the visibility of alcoholic beverages in public culture and media. South Korea is among the countries where alcohol advertising remains relatively common, alongside nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan. Celebrity endorsements of beer, liquor, and soju are widely accepted, and popular actors, singers, and K-pop idols frequently serve as brand ambassadors for alcoholic beverages. As Amlamyong (2022) noted, drinking culture permeates virtually every sphere of Korean society, to the point that even young entertainment celebrities are commonly featured in soju advertisements. Unlike in many countries where alcohol promotion is heavily restricted or visually censored, advertisements for alcoholic beverages in South Korea are often presented openly, reflecting a relatively permissive cultural attitude toward alcohol consumption.

Beyond its visibility in advertising and popular media, alcohol occupies a prominent place in the everyday lives of many South Koreans. Sharing food and drinks is a common feature of social interaction, whether among family members, friends, university students, or workplace colleagues. In particular, the practice of hoesik (회식) - the after-work dining and drinking gathering - has long been regarded as an important part of organizational life, providing opportunities for employees to interact beyond formal workplace hierarchies, build trust, and strengthen interpersonal relationships (Amlamyong, 2022). Over the past several decades, alcoholic beverages, especially soju, have emerged as recognizable symbols of contemporary Korean culture. Drinking occasions frequently serve as spaces where individuals express respect toward senior members, develop a sense of group belonging, and navigate social expectations, reflecting the broader collectivist values that underpin Korean social life (Ko & Sohn, 2018). Participation in these gatherings often signifies inclusion within a community rather than simply the consumption of alcohol itself.

Importantly, drinking culture in South Korea has not remained static. Rapid industrialization, expanding access to higher education, and increasing women's participation in the workforce have significantly transformed drinking behaviors and their associated meanings. Historically regarded as a male-dominated activity rooted in Confucian social norms (Yang, 1997), alcohol consumption has increasingly become a practice in which women actively participate, symbolizing modernity, personal autonomy, and shifting gender identities (Kim & Kim, 2008). At the same time, the global rise of the Korean Wave through K-Dramas, K-Pop, and related cultural media - has extended Korean drinking culture far beyond national borders, shaping how international audiences perceive and engage with alcohol consumption as part of Korean social life (Pasupathy et al., 2022; Bonny-Noach et al., 2026).

Yet participation in these practices is not instinctive. People are not born knowing when it is appropriate to drink, how to behave in drinking situations, or what meanings are attached to drinking rituals.

Such understandings are acquired gradually through everyday experiences. Individuals observe family members, interact with peers, adapt to workplace norms, and consume media representations of drinking, learning along the way the values and expectations associated with alcohol consumption. What appears to be a routine social activity is therefore the result of a long process of socialization and cultural learning.

Existing studies on alcohol use in South Korea have examined a wide range of issues, including drinking patterns, health consequences, organizational culture, gender transformations, and changing social norms. While these studies have generated valuable insights, most have tended to examine these factors independently, treating family, peers, workplaces, and media as separate domains rather than as interconnected components of a broader socio-cultural system. Consequently, less attention has been given to the learning processes through which drinking-related knowledge, values, and practices are collectively formed, transmitted, and reproduced across social contexts and generations.

To address this issue, this article draws on the concept of the socio-cultural learning ecosystem to examine drinking culture in South Korea. Rather than viewing learning as something that occurs within a single institution or setting, the learning ecosystem perspective emphasizes the interconnected relationships among individuals, social groups, institutions, and cultural environments (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Eudy, 2018; Wongdaeng, 2025). Using this framework, the article explores how families, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry collectively contribute to the formation and transmission of drinking-related norms and values. In doing so, it argues that drinking in South Korea should be understood not merely as an individual choice but as the product of ongoing social and cultural learning processes that unfold across a complex network of relationships and institutions.

Research Question

How does the socio-cultural learning ecosystem contribute to the formation, transmission, and reproduction of drinking practices and alcohol-related values in South Korean society?

Research objectives

This article aimed to examine the socio-cultural learning ecosystem that contributed to the formation and reproduction of drinking practices and alcohol-related values in South Korean society.

Research Methodology

This study used a documentary research approach to examine South Korea's drinking culture through the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem framework. Documentary research is a qualitative method that relies on collecting and analyzing existing documents as the main source of data. The materials included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, research reports, policy documents, news

articles, and media and cultural industry sources. These sources were selected based on their relevance to drinking culture, social learning processes, gender norms, media influence, and cultural change in South Korea. The purpose of this approach was to synthesize existing knowledge to better understand how drinking behaviors are socially and culturally learned, rather than collecting new data from fieldwork.

For the analysis, the selected documents were reviewed systematically to identify recurring evidence concerning how drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, practices, and meanings are learned and reinforced. The analysis focused on evidence describing socialization, observation, imitation, conformity, participation, institutional expectations, media representation, and commercial influence. Similar findings from different sources were then coded and grouped according to the learning environment in which the learning process occurred. Five analytical components were identified: family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry.

For example, evidence concerning family rituals, parental modeling, intergenerational practices, and early exposure to alcohol-related meanings was grouped under the family component. Evidence concerning friendship, peer pressure, conformity, belonging, and drinking practices among young people was grouped under peer groups. Evidence concerning organizational expectations, workplace relationships, hierarchy, networking, and hoesik was grouped under workplaces. Evidence concerning K-dramas, K-pop, celebrity representations, and the normalization of drinking in popular culture was grouped under mass media. Finally, evidence concerning alcohol advertising, branding, celebrity endorsement, product placement, and the commercialization of soju was grouped under the alcohol industry.

After the initial thematic grouping, the five components were compared across the literature to identify relationships and patterns that extended beyond individual settings. The analysis therefore moved from identifying separate learning environments to examining how these environments may reinforce, complement, or reshape one another. The Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem framework was used as an interpretive lens to synthesize these relationships and explain how drinking culture may be continuously learned and reproduced across interconnected social and cultural contexts.

“Drinking Culture in Korea”: Past and Current Trends Studies

The study of drinking culture in South Korea has attracted sustained scholarly attention, particularly since the late twentieth century, as alcohol consumption represents a significant social and cultural phenomenon closely intertwined with Korean lifestyles, values, and social structures. A review of the existing literature reveals that early studies primarily focused on patterns of alcohol consumption, health-related consequences, and factors influencing drinking behaviors among the population. Particular attention was devoted to heavy drinking and alcohol-related health problems. However, subsequent research

gradually expanded beyond medical and public health perspectives to examine drinking as a social and cultural institution.

One notable example is the work of Ko and Sohn (2018), *Behaviors and Culture of Drinking among Korean People*, which represents an important contribution within the social sciences and humanities. Their study highlights the role of drinking as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining social relationships within a collectivist society that highly values group solidarity and interpersonal harmony. Drinking frequently occurs in communal settings, including family meals, gatherings with friends, and after-work social events involving colleagues (Ko & Sohn, 2018). In the context of Korean corporate culture, after-work drinking gatherings, commonly referred to as *hoesik*, have been described as important social spaces that foster interpersonal relationships, reduce hierarchical barriers between supervisors and subordinates, and strengthen employees' sense of organizational belonging (Amlamyong, 2022).

Beyond examining the social functions of drinking, several studies have explored its relationship with broader social value systems shaped by Confucian traditions. Yang (1997), for example, argues that the traditional family structure contributes to patterns of alcohol dependence among Korean men. Specifically, first-born sons often experience greater pressure to fulfill familial expectations rooted in Confucian values and patriarchal family systems, increasing their vulnerability to alcohol dependence as a coping mechanism. At the same time, drinking practices in South Korea are governed by a complex set of rituals and etiquette that reflect social hierarchy and power relations. Customs such as pouring drinks for elders, receiving a glass with both hands, and demonstrating deference during drinking occasions serve as important expressions of respect and social order. These rituals can also reduce interpersonal distance, particularly in workplaces characterized by age and status differences. Consequently, alcohol frequently functions as a social intermediary that alleviates tension and facilitates communication during work-related interactions and meetings. Such practices demonstrate that drinking is embedded within broader processes of socialization and normative learning that help maintain social cohesion and interpersonal relationships within Korean society (Amlamyong, 2022).

Over the past decade, research on Korean drinking culture has increasingly addressed issues of gender and cultural identity, particularly through analyses of soju as a national cultural symbol. Recent social transformations have revealed significant changes in both alcohol marketing and drinking practices. Changes in soju products, the growing use of female celebrities as brand ambassadors, and evolving media representations of drinking reflect broader shifts in gender norms and lifestyles among younger generations. Historically, drinking was largely perceived as a male-dominated activity. However, contemporary Korean society increasingly recognizes alcohol consumption as an activity in which women actively participate. As noted by Amlamyong (2022), early soju advertisements primarily targeted men because traditional soju contained relatively high levels of alcohol, often exceeding 35 percent alcohol by volume. As alcohol content gradually declined—from approximately 30 percent in the 1960s to around 25 percent in the 1980s—

manufacturers sought to expand their consumer base by appealing to female consumers. This shift was accompanied by branding strategies that emphasized purity, softness, and approachability, often featuring female celebrities as endorsers. These developments suggest that drinking has become a cultural arena in which social identities and gender roles are continuously negotiated, contested, and reconstructed.

Similarly, Kim and Kim's (2008) study, *Women's Alcohol Use and Alcoholism in Korea*, illustrates significant transformations in Korean drinking culture through the lens of gender. Their research argues that women's drinking behaviors are not merely individual choices but rather outcomes of rapid social, economic, and cultural changes experienced in South Korea over recent decades. Under traditional Confucian norms, men were generally permitted to drink as part of social networking, professional advancement, and status display, whereas women were expected to avoid alcohol consumption to preserve personal and family honor. However, industrialization and modernization expanded women's access to education and employment, increasing their participation in public life and exposing them to drinking cultures previously dominated by men.

The study further reports that younger Korean women begin drinking at earlier ages and consume alcohol in greater quantities than previous generations, reflecting changing social values and the gradual erosion of traditional gender norms. Importantly, women's drinking has increasingly come to symbolize modernity, personal autonomy, and gender equality, particularly within urban and professional environments (Kim & Kim, 2008).

At the same time, the rapid growth of the Korean Wave has prompted scholars and cultural commentators to investigate the role of mass media and entertainment industries in reproducing and disseminating drinking culture. The global popularity of Korean films, television dramas, and popular music has enabled audiences worldwide to become increasingly familiar with Korean cultural practices, including drinking rituals and alcohol consumption. Viewers frequently encounter scenes involving soju bombs, communal drinking sessions, and alcohol-centered social interactions, thereby internalizing aspects of Korean drinking culture through media exposure (Saejia, 2021).

Research within this area has examined how drinking is portrayed in television dramas, films, and variety programs. Alcohol consumption is often depicted as a routine aspect of everyday life associated with celebration, stress relief, friendship formation, romantic development, and expressions of grief. Such portrayals contribute to the social normalization of drinking and facilitate the global diffusion of Korean drinking culture through K-dramas and K-pop. As Amlamyong (2022) observes, the international popularity of Korean entertainment has transformed soju into one of South Korea's most recognizable cultural exports, alongside Korean music, cuisine, tourism, and popular culture.

A particularly important contribution is the study by Pasupathy et al. (2022), *Alcohol Consumption Messages in Korean Dramas: The Globalization of South Korean Drinking Norms*. The authors argue that K-dramas serve as a major vehicle through which Korean drinking culture is transmitted to global audiences. These dramas frequently portray alcohol consumption in family gatherings, friendships, workplace relationships, and after-work social events, framing drinking as a mechanism for strengthening social bonds, promoting solidarity, and alleviating stress. Furthermore, characters who consume alcohol are often depicted in positive contexts, such as expressing genuine emotions, developing romantic relationships, or receiving care and support from others. In contrast, negative consequences associated with alcohol consumption are portrayed relatively infrequently. Consequently, K-dramas function as important sites of social and cultural learning that shape audience perceptions of drinking as a normal, socially acceptable, and integral component of Korean life (Pasupathy et al., 2022).

Recent studies have increasingly emphasized the processes through which individuals learn and internalize drinking culture, particularly among younger generations. Existing studies demonstrate that drinking behaviors emerge through ongoing interactions with individuals, institutions, and social environments, transforming alcohol consumption into a form of cultural knowledge transmitted across generations through social networks and relationships. Bonny-Noach et al. (2026), for example, examined the relationship between alcohol portrayals in Korean dramas and viewers' attitudes and drinking behaviors in Indonesia and Israel. Their findings reveal that although many viewers recognize the risks associated with alcohol consumption, repeated exposure to drinking scenes contributes to perceptions that drinking is normal and socially accepted, especially when linked to friendship, celebration, relaxation, and interpersonal relationships.

The study further found that individuals who held positive attitudes toward drinking portrayals in K-dramas were more likely to consume alcohol, drink soju, and engage in heavy drinking. Additionally, Indonesian viewers, whose cultural and religious backgrounds impose stronger restrictions on alcohol consumption, exhibited more critical attitudes toward drinking scenes than their Israeli counterparts. These findings suggest that Korean entertainment media play a significant role in shaping drinking norms across national contexts and may influence alcohol-related behaviors through processes of social learning and cultural transmission (Bonny-Noach et al., 2026).

Taken together, existing scholarship has generated substantial knowledge about Korean drinking culture from diverse perspectives, including public health, social relationships, family socialization, gender, workplace practices, media representation, and alcohol marketing. However, these strands of research have generally been examined as separate domains of inquiry. Previous studies have provided valuable explanations of particular settings in which drinking practices are learned or reinforced, but they have paid comparatively less attention to how these settings interact with one another as part of a broader learning process.

More specifically, family studies emphasize early socialization and the transmission of cultural values; research on peer groups highlights conformity, belonging, and social acceptance; studies of workplace drinking examine organizational expectations and practices such as hoesik; media studies focus on the representation and normalization of alcohol consumption; and research on the alcohol industry examines advertising, branding, and the commercialization of drinking. While these studies provide important insights into individual components of Korean drinking culture, they do not fully explain how these components operate together to shape, reinforce, reproduce, and transform drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices.

This study addresses this gap by bringing these dimensions together within a Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem framework. Rather than treating family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry as independent contexts, the study conceptualizes them as interconnected learning environments. In this ecosystem, meanings and practices learned in one setting may be reinforced, modified, or contested in another. The contribution of this study therefore lies not in claiming that these five contexts have previously been unidentified, but in providing an integrated framework for understanding how they interact as a broader system through which drinking culture is learned, reproduced, transmitted, and transformed in contemporary South Korean society.

Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem: Conceptual Foundations and Definitions

The concept of a Learning Ecosystem is rooted in the field of ecology, which views various elements within a system as interconnected and interdependent. Changes occurring in one part of the system inevitably affect other components. This ecological perspective was applied to human development by Bronfenbrenner (2005), who argued that individuals do not grow or learn in isolation. Rather, human development is shaped by multiple layers of environmental influences, ranging from family and peer groups to communities, cultural values, and broader social structures.

Building upon this perspective, the concept of a learning ecosystem emerged from the recognition that learning is not confined to classrooms or formal educational institutions. Instead, it is a dynamic process that occurs through interactions among people, knowledge, resources, technologies, and diverse social contexts. Eudy (2018) defines a learning ecosystem as a network of individuals, knowledge resources, technologies, and other assets connected through complex relationships. Similarly, Lotrecchiano and Norman (2021) argue that these interconnected elements function both within and beyond organizational settings to support formal and informal learning. Learning occurs across individual, team, and organizational levels through knowledge sharing, collaboration, reflection, and the practical application of knowledge in real-world situations.

Within the Thai context, Wongdaeng (2025) synthesized and expanded this concept by describing a learning ecosystem as a system of relationships between learners and their surrounding environments. Such environments include learning resources, learning processes, collaborative networks, and technologies that support learning both inside and outside educational institutions. This perspective emphasizes that learning can occur anywhere and at any stage of life, whether within families, communities, workplaces, or other social settings.

Several scholars further suggest that learning ecosystems consist of diverse components, including people, spaces, time, content, activities, culture, strategies, and technologies, all of which contribute to creating conditions that support learning (Kondratova et al., 2017). At the same time, an effective learning ecosystem should provide learners with the flexibility to direct their own learning pathways across formal, non-formal, and informal learning environments (Harrell, 2020).

One of the most significant contributions of the learning ecosystem perspective to the study of social and cultural phenomena is its recognition that culture is not merely a contextual backdrop for learning but an integral component of the learning process itself. Cultural values, beliefs, traditions, and social norms influence what people learn, how they learn, and the meanings they assign to knowledge. Simultaneously, learning processes contribute to the creation, transformation, and transmission of culture across generations.

Furthermore, Walcutt and Schatz (2019, as cited in Wongdaeng, 2025) argue that a comprehensive learning ecosystem should support holistic human development, encompassing physical, emotional, interpersonal, social, and cultural dimensions. This perspective highlights that learning is fundamentally embedded in everyday life rather than existing as an activity separate from social experience.

From this standpoint, a Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem may be understood as an interconnected system that links individuals, social groups, institutions, places, and cultural practices in the collective creation, transmission, and preservation of knowledge, skills, values, and meanings through everyday interactions. Learning, therefore, is viewed as a continuous and lifelong process that unfolds within complex networks of social and cultural relationships.

Based on this understanding, the study of any social or cultural practice cannot be limited to individual behavior alone. Instead, it requires an examination of the broader social and cultural networks that shape how individuals learn, interpret, and enact practices. The drinking culture of South Korean society provides a useful example. Drinking behaviors do not emerge solely from personal choices; rather, they are the product of ongoing learning processes that occur through interactions with family members, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the social values and norms encountered in everyday life.

From this perspective, drinking in South Korea should not be viewed merely as a form of alcohol consumption. Rather, it represents an important aspect of social participation, relationship building, and membership within social groups. Consequently, understanding Korean drinking culture requires a socio-cultural learning ecosystem perspective that illuminates how individuals acquire the meanings, practices, and values associated with drinking through diverse learning environments and social interactions. Such an approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how drinking-related norms are learned, reproduced, and sustained within contemporary South Korean society.

“How Drinking Culture is Learned”: A Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem Perspective

The objective of this study is to examine how drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices are learned and transmitted within South Korean society through an interconnected socio-cultural learning ecosystem. The findings are organized around five principal learning environments—family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry—to examine not only how each environment contributes to the formation and reproduction of drinking culture, but also how these environments interact with and influence one another.

Although drinking culture in South Korea is often understood as an integral part of everyday life, social relationships, and workplace culture, examining the process of “learning to drink in South Korea” through a socio-cultural learning ecosystem framework reveals that drinking should not be understood as an innate or naturally occurring behavior. Rather, drinking practices are acquired through an ongoing process of social and cultural learning that unfolds across the life course.

Individuals are not born knowing when, how, with whom, or for what purposes alcohol should be consumed. Instead, they gradually acquire the meanings, rules, norms, values, and forms of etiquette associated with drinking through sustained interaction with others and through exposure to multiple social, institutional, and media environments. This learning process begins in the family and continues through interactions with peers, workplaces, and mass media, while also being shaped by the commercial influence of the alcohol industry. These learning environments do not operate independently. Rather, they are interconnected and continuously shape, reinforce, modify, and sometimes challenge one another, creating a dynamic socio-cultural learning ecosystem through which drinking culture is learned, reproduced, transmitted, and transformed.

Accordingly, the analysis that follows examines each of the five learning environments individually before considering the relationships among them. This approach makes it possible to move beyond viewing drinking culture as the product of any single social context and instead understand it as the outcome of multiple, interconnected processes of learning that operate across different stages and domains of social life.

(1) Family as an Early Learning Environment

Based on an analysis of studies on drinking culture in Korean society, the family can be identified as a core social institution and one of the earliest learning environments through which individuals develop an understanding of alcohol consumption. Learning about drinking does not necessarily occur through explicit instruction. Rather, it emerges implicitly through everyday socialization, observation, participation in family rituals, and exposure to parental and intergenerational practices. Through these processes, individuals may gradually learn not only what drinking entails, but also when it is considered appropriate, with whom drinking is socially acceptable, and what meanings and values are attached to alcohol consumption.

In the Korean context, Damrong (2015) highlights that traditional family structures have been characterized by hierarchical relationships and relatively distinct gender roles. Men have traditionally been expected to embody leadership, strength, and responsibility in the public sphere, whereas women have been associated more closely with caregiving and domestic responsibilities. These gendered expectations extend beyond the organization of family life and are also reflected in drinking culture. Alcohol consumption has often been associated with masculinity, drinking capacity, social competence, and demonstrations of strength, particularly in social settings where men are expected to participate in collective drinking practices.

The cultural meanings attached to alcohol are further evident in family rituals. The Korean Foundation (2014) explains that alcohol in Korean society functions not merely as a substance consumed for intoxication but also as a “ritual component” embedded in important cultural practices. In ancestral rites (jesa) and major holidays such as Seollal and Chuseok, alcoholic beverages serve as symbolic media through which filial piety, respect for ancestors and elders, and the continuity and unity of the family lineage are expressed. Within these contexts, alcohol consumption is culturally legitimized and associated with positive social and moral meanings. Consequently, family rituals provide an important context through which younger generations are exposed to and learn culturally accepted meanings of drinking.

From a learning perspective, the family therefore operates as a site of implicit and observational learning. Children and adolescents encounter alcohol-related practices in everyday situations, including family gatherings, reunions, celebrations, and ritual occasions. Through observing how adults consume alcohol and how drinking is incorporated into social interactions, younger family members may come to understand drinking as a socially situated practice associated with celebration, relationship-building, respect, and membership within the family. In this sense, learning takes place not through direct instruction but through repeated exposure to behaviors and meanings that are embedded in ordinary family life.

This process can be further understood through Bandura's (1989) Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that individuals acquire behaviors, attitudes, and values through observation and imitation of

socially significant models. Within the family, parents and older relatives may serve as important behavioral models. When drinking is presented as a normalized and socially meaningful aspect of adult life, younger generations may consequently develop an understanding of alcohol consumption as an ordinary component of social and cultural participation rather than simply as an individual behavior or a potentially problematic activity.

Importantly, families transmit not only specific drinking behaviors but also the broader meaning systems through which alcohol is interpreted. Within family contexts, drinking may signify respect for elders, reinforce kinship solidarity, facilitate social bonding, and mark important transitions in the life course, including the transition into adulthood. Through repeated exposure to these practices and meanings, alcohol-related knowledge and values can become incorporated into individuals' broader cognitive and cultural frameworks, shaping how they subsequently perceive and evaluate drinking.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the family functions as an early learning environment in which alcohol acquires social and cultural meanings before individuals develop independent drinking practices. Through observation, participation in family rituals, and exposure to parental and intergenerational behavior, individuals learn not only how drinking is practiced but also when it is considered appropriate, with whom it is acceptable, and what social purposes it serves. The family therefore functions not merely as a co-residential or kinship unit, but as a cultural mechanism through which drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and meanings are transmitted across generations.

From the perspective of the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, however, family-based learning represents only the initial layer of a broader and interconnected process. The meanings and norms acquired within the family may subsequently be reinforced, modified, or challenged through interactions with peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry. In this way, early family-based learning provides an important foundation upon which subsequent learning experiences are built, contributing to the continued reproduction, negotiation, and transformation of drinking culture within Korean society.

(2) Peer Groups and the Formation of Drinking Norms

During adolescence and early adulthood, peer groups often become increasingly influential in shaping individuals' attitudes, norms, and practices related to alcohol consumption. In the Korean context, group membership carries considerable social significance, and the desire for peer acceptance, the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, and the avoidance of social exclusion can encourage individuals to conform to established group norms. As Ko and Sohn (2018) highlight in *Behaviors and Culture of Drinking among Korean People*, alcohol consumption in South Korea is not merely an individual behavioral choice but a socially regulated practice shaped by enduring cultural norms, values, and relational expectations.

Within this context, alcohol functions as an important social medium for initiating, maintaining, and strengthening interpersonal relationships. Drinking is particularly embedded in interactions among friends, acquaintances, and colleagues, as well as in post-work gatherings and informal social occasions. Rather than serving solely as a form of recreational consumption, drinking can facilitate social bonding, the development of trust, and the affirmation of group membership (Ko & Sohn, 2018). Participation in drinking therefore becomes closely associated with the maintenance of social relationships and the performance of one's role within a group.

A defining characteristic of Korean drinking culture is its strongly collective orientation. Drinking is frequently organized around shared participation and interaction, as reflected in practices such as group "one-shot" drinking, mixed alcoholic beverages commonly referred to as "bomb shots," and the ritualized exchange or passing of drinks among participants. Such practices demonstrate that alcohol consumption operates not only as an individual act but also as a social and performative practice through which solidarity, inclusion, reciprocity, and relational commitment are expressed and reinforced.

Ko and Sohn (2018) further note that drinking is embedded in a wide range of social contexts, including family meals, peer gatherings, workplace interactions, ceremonial occasions, and hospitality practices. The widespread presence of drinking across these contexts indicates that alcohol consumption is deeply integrated into everyday social life and operates across multiple institutional domains. Within peer groups, this integration may generate implicit expectations that members should participate in drinking activities and, in some situations, consume alcohol in ways that are interpreted as demonstrating sincerity, commitment, trust, or group belonging. Consequently, participation in collective drinking can become an important mechanism through which social norms are communicated and reinforced.

From a socio-cultural learning perspective, peer drinking can therefore be understood as a form of participatory and observational learning through which individuals acquire culturally appropriate behaviors and meanings. Practices such as making toasts, sharing drinks, taking turns pouring drinks, and participating in collective drinking occasions contribute to the construction of a shared group identity. Peer groups can consequently function as communities of practice, in which newcomers learn the expected forms of behavior through observation, imitation, participation, and social feedback. Through these interactions, individuals learn not only drinking practices and etiquette but also the implicit social boundaries that influence inclusion, acceptance, and exclusion within the group.

Peer groups also play an important role in shaping individuals' understanding of reciprocity and relational obligation. For example, practices surrounding the pouring and receiving of drinks may communicate respect, attentiveness, and mutual recognition among group members. Learning to participate appropriately in such practices involves more than acquiring behavioral skills; it also involves learning the meanings and expectations that underpin social interaction. In this sense, peer-based drinking

provides a context in which broader cultural values concerning friendship, reciprocity, hierarchy, and belonging are translated into everyday practices.

Historically, drinking in Korean university settings has also been associated with a rite of passage into adulthood. Participation in drinking activities with senior students and peers has carried symbolic significance beyond alcohol consumption itself, functioning as a means of social integration and identity formation within university culture. Through these experiences, young adults may learn the expectations and conventions associated with participation in adult social life, while simultaneously developing a sense of belonging within their peer networks.

The evidence reviewed in this section suggests that peer groups extend drinking-related learning beyond the family by providing opportunities for observation, imitation, participation, conformity, and social reinforcement. Within peer settings, drinking may become a means of demonstrating belonging, strengthening relationships, and affirming one's position within the group, while refusal or non-participation may, in some circumstances, generate pressure to conform to prevailing expectations. Peer groups therefore function not simply as contexts in which individuals encounter new drinking behaviors, but as important learning environments in which drinking-related norms and meanings are actively negotiated and reinforced.

From the perspective of the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, peer-based learning also illustrates how learning environments are interconnected. Norms and meanings initially acquired within the family may be reinforced through peer interactions, while simultaneously being modified by youth culture and changing forms of social interaction. In this way, peer groups represent a second layer of the learning ecosystem, transforming individual understandings of drinking from family-based cultural knowledge into socially negotiated practices of belonging, identity, and relationship-building.

(3) The Workplace and the Learning of Drinking Culture

In South Korean society, the workplace functions not only as a setting for carrying out professional responsibilities but also as a significant social institution through which drinking culture is embedded in employees' everyday lives. This process is particularly evident in *hoesik*, the tradition of after-work dining and drinking gatherings, which serves as an important context for the social learning of workplace norms, particularly for newcomers entering an organization. Through participation in *hoesik*, employees are introduced to the informal expectations, interpersonal relationships, and cultural practices that shape organizational life.

The learning that takes place within this semi-formal setting extends far beyond the acquisition of drinking etiquette or table manners. Rather, *hoesik* provides employees with direct experiences through which they learn about organizational hierarchies, power relations, seniority, and expectations concerning

appropriate workplace behavior. Practices that may initially appear routine—such as pouring drinks for supervisors, receiving a glass with both hands as a sign of respect, or waiting for senior colleagues to drink first—function as practical lessons through which broader Korean cultural values are translated into workplace practices. Through repeated participation, employees gradually learn how to navigate organizational relationships and how to behave in ways that conform to established workplace norms.

The relationship between workplace culture and drinking-related social learning is reflected in the findings of Kim and Jeon (2012), in their study *Relations of Drinking Motives and Alcohol Consumption in Korean Male Office Workers*. Based on a survey of 270 South Korean male office workers, the researchers found that alcohol was widely perceived as an ordinary and routine component of everyday life, to the extent that it was treated as almost comparable to food. This cultural perception contributed to the incorporation of drinking into workplace practices, through which employees learned to perceive alcohol as an important medium for social interaction, relationship building, and professional networking. Their statistical analysis further indicated that social motives were the strongest reported motivation for drinking among office workers. Alcohol was also used as a means of coping with work-related stress and emotional strain. These findings suggest that workplace drinking is shaped not only by individual preferences but also by organizational norms that position alcohol as a socially meaningful tool for integration, relationship maintenance, and stress management.

Similarly, Lee and Lee (2008) argue that the widespread perception of alcohol as an ordinary part of everyday life has contributed to the adoption of drinking as an important means of managing interpersonal relationships within workplaces. In this context, alcohol consumption is closely associated with social interaction, networking, and career development. Their findings indicate that social motives remain a major factor influencing workplace drinking behavior, while alcohol is also used as a coping mechanism for alleviating stress arising from everyday work responsibilities. These findings demonstrate that workplace drinking is embedded within a broader organizational culture in which alcohol may serve multiple social and emotional functions.

From a socio-cultural learning perspective, the workplace represents a transition from relatively informal forms of social learning to a more institutionalized form of cultural learning. Through hoesik, organizational hierarchy, networking practices, and expectations concerning participation, employees may learn that drinking is not simply a personal activity but can also constitute part of workplace membership and relationship building. Participation may communicate sociability, respect, reciprocity, and commitment to the group, while non-participation may, in some organizational contexts, create challenges for social integration.

Importantly, workplace-based learning does not occur independently of earlier learning experiences. Rather, organizational practices may reinforce meanings and norms previously acquired

through family and peer groups while simultaneously transforming them within a professional context. For example, values concerning respect for elders and seniority that are initially encountered within the family may be reproduced through workplace drinking etiquette and hierarchical interactions. Similarly, the sense of belonging and reciprocity learned within peer groups may be extended into professional relationships through collective drinking and networking activities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the workplace functions as a significant learning environment in which drinking culture is institutionalized through organizational routines, interpersonal relationships, and hierarchical structures. Hoesik and related drinking practices provide employees with repeated opportunities to observe, participate in, and internalize culturally appropriate forms of drinking behavior. The workplace therefore serves not merely as a context in which existing drinking norms are reproduced, but as an institutional environment that actively reinforces and reshapes those norms. Within the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, workplace learning represents an important stage through which drinking-related knowledge, values, and practices acquired in earlier social environments are carried forward into adult professional life and reproduced across generations of workers.

(3) Media, K-Dramas, and K-Pop in the Construction of Drinking Meaning

Beyond direct social institutions, mass media—particularly K-Dramas and K-Pop—also represent a crucial component of the contemporary learning ecosystem. These cultural industries play a significant role in constructing representations of alcohol consumption in Korean society, especially through their widespread portrayal of drinking practices.

Frequently, audiences observe characters consuming alcohol in moments of success, disappointment, romantic involvement, or life difficulties. In this sense, drinking is closely associated with emotions, relationships, and various life experiences, thereby generating emotional value. Many consumers also associate soju with images of love, friendship, social gatherings, and the warm atmosphere commonly depicted in Korean dramas. Consequently, drinking soju is not merely the consumption of an alcoholic beverage but also a form of “cultural consumption,” through which audiences feel a sense of participation in Korean cultural life (Thanabordeekij, 2025).

As can be observed, regardless of the drama, film, or even variety show, scenes involving soju consumption appear consistently. This reflects Korean drinking culture very clearly, where soju is portrayed as a national beverage embedded in everyday life. In nearly all life situations—whether moments of happiness, sadness, exhaustion, social gatherings, or solitude—and even in everyday meals, bottles of soju and shot glasses are frequently present (Marketing Oops!, 2022; Pasupathy et al., 2022).



Figure 1: A Meal with Soju
(Source: Blockdit, 2022)

Over the past decade, the Korean Wave has exerted a profound influence on global societies, including Thailand, through various forms of mass media such as television dramas, music, films, and variety shows. This cultural diffusion has contributed to the widespread popularity of Korean celebrities and, more broadly, Korean culture itself. Similar patterns of cultural reception have also been observed in several countries worldwide, including Indonesia and Israel (Bonny-Noach et al., 2026).

Furthermore, Nawarat (2017), in a study examining the cultural industries of Korean dramas and food culture in Korean society, identifies a key turning point in the global popularity of Korean cultural products. The drama *Dae Jang Geum: Jewel in the Palace* is highlighted as one of the earliest productions that significantly propelled the global interest in Korean cultural goods, particularly Korean food culture, leading to its expanded international recognition.

In more recent Korean dramas, cultural elements are continuously embedded throughout the narrative. For example, *Crash Landing on You*, which centers on a storyline involving North Korean military life, incorporates numerous scenes depicting Korean food culture and eating practices. One notable scene involves soldiers and the female protagonist sharing grilled shellfish alongside soju. The combination is portrayed as enjoyable, with the narrative suggesting that shellfish enhances the sweetness of soju, thereby increasing the drinking experience (Chomphunut, 2022).

The evidence above indicates that the role of K-Dramas in South Korean society extends beyond merely reflecting existing drinking culture. Rather, media functions as a key mechanism in constructing and reproducing meanings of alcohol consumption as part of contemporary social and cultural order. In other words, K-Dramas do not simply depict what Koreans drink or how they drink; they also communicate what

drinking means within social life. Korean series and films thus serve as powerful channels through which the Korean Wave expands globally, disseminating Korean cultural content in subtle and pervasive ways.

Based on this perspective, the researcher analyzes the construction of drinking meanings as follows:

A key aspect is that K-Dramas transform drinking into a form of social ritual used to create, maintain, and affirm interpersonal relationships. In many key scenes, drinking occurs during moments when characters express emotions, resolve misunderstandings, or build mutual trust. Acts such as raising glasses, pouring drinks for one another, or sitting together in group drinking settings after meals are not merely everyday behaviors; rather, they function as symbolic practices that signify belonging, intimacy, and social acceptance. In this sense, drinking is presented as an important mechanism that connects individuals to social networks and provides access to group membership.

In addition, K-Dramas contribute to the normalization of drinking through the repeated representation of alcohol consumption in diverse contexts, such as after-work drinking, drinking with meals, celebrating achievements, and relieving daily stress. This repeated portrayal is not merely a narrative device but a cultural process that gradually constructs social norms, leading audiences to perceive drinking as a natural and ordinary part of Korean life. As a result, drinking becomes a familiar, accepted behavior that does not require justification or explanation.

However, the significance of K-Dramas goes beyond normalization. They also subtly associate drinking with positive emotional values and life experiences. Drinking scenes are frequently accompanied by themes of friendship, love, success, familial warmth, and emotional relief from daily struggles. Consequently, alcohol is not framed as a substance of risk or harm, but rather as a symbol of happiness, relaxation, and emotional release. This representational pattern encourages audiences to gradually associate alcohol consumption with positive emotional experiences, producing what may be described as an “imagined affective happiness” linked to drinking behavior.



Figure 2. Celebrity Endorsements of Soju in South Korea

Source: Amlamyong (2022)

On the other hand, K-Dramas also play a significant role in generating desires for imitation through social learning processes. Viewers are not merely passive observers of characters from a distance; rather, they actively learn through observation, interpretation, and imaginative identification with the narrative. Drinking soju, therefore, does not simply refer to the consumption of an alcoholic beverage. Instead, it becomes a means of accessing the experiences, emotions, and identities embodied by the characters in the drama.

Many viewers attempt to consume related products, visit filming locations, or adopt aspects of the lifestyles depicted in dramas in order to feel a stronger connection to the cultural world they admire. In this sense, drinking is transformed from an everyday behavior into a symbolic experience that individuals seek to participate in and emotionally inhabit.

At a structural level, K-Dramas function as part of the cultural industries under the Korean Wave (Hallyu), transforming alcohol consumption into both cultural capital and a global cultural commodity. The appearance of soju in dramas is not merely a background element; rather, it operates as a representational mechanism that constructs and exports “*Koreanness*” to global audiences. Drinking is thus elevated from an ordinary everyday practice to a cultural symbol that reflects national identity. As a result, global consumers are not only consuming alcoholic beverages, but also consuming meanings, memories, and imaginaries of Korea that are produced through contemporary media.

From this analysis, the researcher argues that K-Dramas serve as an important space for shaping understandings of drinking in South Korean society through storytelling and the creation of shared viewer experiences. Korean dramas consistently portray drinking as part of everyday life in various contexts, including family, friendship, romantic relationships, and work environments. Through such representations, audiences gradually internalize the values and meanings that Korean society attaches to alcohol consumption.

The learning process involved is not direct instruction on how to drink, but rather an acquisition of meanings regarding what drinking signifies in relation to social relationships, emotional expression, and group belonging. In this sense, media functions as a “cultural teacher” that frames how drinking should be perceived in contemporary society through repeated representations and narratives.

Importantly, the influence of such media is not limited to South Korean society. Under the Korean Wave (Hallyu), these representations extend globally, shaping how audiences in different cultural and social contexts perceive, interpret, and reframe Korean drinking culture.

Overall, the researcher concludes that audiences do not learn how to drink directly from media, but rather learn the “social meanings of drinking” through the interpretation of narratives and characters. Media therefore acts as a cultural educator that shapes perceptions of alcohol consumption in contemporary

society. Moreover, its influence extends beyond South Korea, exporting drinking culture globally through the Korean Wave.

Mass media expands the learning ecosystem beyond direct interpersonal interaction by allowing audiences to observe drinking practices repeatedly through mediated cultural representations. K-dramas and K-pop do not necessarily teach audiences to drink directly; rather, they may contribute to the construction of meanings by repeatedly associating alcohol with friendship, celebration, relaxation, romance, and social participation. These representations can reinforce meanings already learned through family, peer groups, or workplaces while also introducing such meanings to audiences who have not directly experienced the corresponding social practices. Media therefore functions as a cultural environment through which drinking norms can be represented, circulated, normalized, and renegotiated.

(4) Alcohol Industry and the Construction of Drinking Values

The Korean Wave (Hallyu) has increasingly blurred the boundary between fictional media worlds and everyday life, allowing audiences to experience Korean television dramas not as distant narratives but as culturally immersive realities. This sense of proximity encourages viewers to engage with the content beyond passive consumption—for example, by traveling to filming locations or consuming foods and beverages featured in popular series.

As Tiemlom (2022) argues in *“Korean food enjoys us: Culture industry in Korean series,”* even though the study focuses primarily on food culture, it reveals a broader cultural mechanism at work: the Korean cultural industry actively shapes how audiences perceive and emotionally connect with alcohol, particularly soju, through repeated and normalized representations in television dramas.

Soju appears consistently across major Korean dramas such as *Itaewon Class* and *Crash Landing on You*, to the extent that it can be seen as an almost constant narrative presence. This repetition is not incidental; rather, it reflects how alcohol is embedded into storytelling as a familiar and socially meaningful element of Korean life. Over time, this repeated exposure transforms drinking from a simple behavioral act into a culturally loaded symbol.

Within these narratives, soju is rarely framed as merely an intoxicating substance. Instead, it is closely associated with emotional and relational contexts—friendship, celebration, intimacy, and emotional release. Drinking scenes are integrated into everyday situations such as workplace interactions, social gatherings, and personal moments of reflection or distress, reinforcing the idea that alcohol is a routine part of social life.

From this perspective, the alcohol industry's influence extends beyond production and consumption in an economic sense. Through its integration into popular media, it participates in the construction of cultural meaning. Alcohol—particularly soju—is therefore not only consumed as a beverage but also

consumed symbolically, as part of a broader cultural narrative that defines contemporary “*Koreanness*” for both domestic and global audiences.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined South Korean drinking culture through the framework of a Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, emphasizing that alcohol consumption is not simply an individual behavioral choice but a socially and culturally constructed practice that is continuously learned, reinforced, transmitted, and transformed. By bringing together evidence from five interconnected learning environments—family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry—the study both confirms important findings from previous scholarship and extends existing understandings of Korean drinking culture by offering a more integrated explanation of how drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices are acquired and reproduced across social contexts.

A. Reinforcing and Extending Previous Research

First, the findings are consistent with earlier sociocultural research emphasizing the collective and relational nature of drinking in South Korean society. Ko and Sohn (2018), for example, demonstrate that drinking functions as an important mechanism for building social cohesion and maintaining interpersonal relationships within a collectivist cultural context. The present study supports this interpretation by showing that drinking is deeply embedded in processes of social bonding, particularly within peer groups and workplaces, where it can function as a form of symbolic “social language” through which individuals express inclusion, establish trust, maintain relationships, and affirm group membership. However, whereas previous studies have primarily focused on what drinking accomplishes socially, this study shifts attention toward how the meanings associated with drinking are learned and reproduced over time. By locating drinking within interconnected learning environments, the study demonstrates how socially meaningful drinking practices are continuously reinforced across different stages and domains of social life.

Second, the findings extend Yang’s (1997) argument that Korean drinking behavior is influenced by Confucian family structures, hierarchy, and broader social norms. The present study suggests that these cultural values are not simply expressed in adult drinking practices but may begin to be learned much earlier through everyday family interactions. Family rituals, parental modeling, and intergenerational practices provide children with opportunities to observe how alcohol is associated with respect, family relationships, celebration, and social obligation. This interpretation is consistent with Bandura’s (1989) Social Learning Theory, particularly the processes of observational learning, modeling, and reinforcement. The contribution of the present study, however, lies in positioning the family not merely as a cultural background factor but as an initial learning environment or “entry point” through which individuals acquire meanings that may later be reinforced, modified, or challenged in other social contexts.

Third, the findings reinforce previous research on workplace drinking culture, particularly the role of hoesik as an important social institution within Korean organizational life. Existing studies have described hoesik as a distinctive feature of Korean workplaces that can promote solidarity and interpersonal cohesion while simultaneously reflecting organizational hierarchy and power distance. This study extends this literature by interpreting hoesik not only as a workplace practice but also as a learning environment. Through participation in workplace drinking, employees learn implicit expectations concerning hierarchy, respect, reciprocity, networking, and appropriate interpersonal behavior. In this sense, workplace drinking constitutes both a form of social participation and a form of cultural instruction through which employees learn how to navigate organizational relationships.

Fourth, the findings are consistent with recent research concerning the role of Korean popular media in the globalization of drinking culture. Pasupathy et al. (2022) and Bonny-Noach et al. (2026), for instance, demonstrate that K-dramas can contribute to the normalization of alcohol consumption and the development of positive attitudes toward drinking among international audiences. The present study supports these findings while extending the interpretation of media beyond that of a simple reflection or external influence. Within the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, mass media functions as an integrated learning environment that actively participates in the construction of cultural meanings. Through repeated representations of alcohol in contexts of friendship, romance, emotional expression, relaxation, success, and everyday life, media can shape how audiences interpret the social significance of drinking. Media therefore functions not merely as a representational system but as a cultural learning agent through which drinking-related meanings are circulated and potentially normalized across national and cultural boundaries.

Fifth, the study extends existing literature on the alcohol industry and the cultural commodification of soju. Previous research has largely focused on advertising, branding, market expansion, and commercial strategies. The present study adds a cultural dimension by highlighting how soju can be transformed from an ordinary consumer product into a symbolic marker of “Koreanness” within the global cultural economy. This perspective is compatible with scholarship on the Korean Wave (Hallyu), which emphasizes the role of Korean cultural products in generating cultural influence and soft power. However, the present study further demonstrates that the cultural meaning of alcohol is not produced by commercial branding alone. Rather, it emerges through the interaction of commercial practices, media representations, and everyday social practices, which collectively reinforce and reproduce particular meanings associated with alcohol and Korean identity.

B. Theoretical Contribution: From Separate Influences to an Interconnected Learning Ecosystem

The principal academic contribution of this study lies in its conceptualization of Korean drinking culture as a Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem, rather than as the outcome of a collection of separate

social influences. The study does not claim that family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, or the alcohol industry are newly identified determinants of drinking culture. Instead, its contribution lies in synthesizing existing evidence to demonstrate how these environments operate as interconnected sites of cultural learning.

This perspective shifts the analytical focus from asking simply where drinking occurs or what factors influence drinking to asking how drinking-related meanings are learned, reinforced, transmitted, and transformed across interconnected social environments. The framework therefore provides a more dynamic understanding of cultural transmission. An individual may first encounter particular meanings associated with alcohol within the family, reinforce or modify those meanings through peer interactions, encounter new expectations within the workplace, and subsequently encounter mediated or commercial representations that further reinforce, challenge, or transform previous understandings.

Importantly, these learning environments do not operate in a linear or one-directional manner. Rather, they interact dynamically with one another. Family-based norms may influence how individuals respond to peer expectations, while peer practices may reshape meanings acquired within the family. Workplace practices may institutionalize norms previously learned through social relationships, while mass media may reinforce or challenge both family- and workplace-based understandings. At the same time, the alcohol industry can draw upon and commercialize meanings already embedded in social and cultural practices, while media representations can further circulate these meanings to broader audiences. The resulting ecosystem is therefore characterized by mutual reinforcement, adaptation, negotiation, and transformation.

C. Cultural Learning as a Dynamic and Lifelong Process

The findings also highlight that learning about drinking is not confined to a particular stage of life. Rather, it is a continuous process that develops across the life course. Individuals encounter different learning environments as they move from childhood and adolescence into adulthood and professional life, while simultaneously being exposed to increasingly diverse forms of mediated and commercial culture.

This perspective also highlights the dynamic nature of cultural learning. Drinking norms that have been established through family socialization and organizational practices may be reproduced across generations, but they are not necessarily fixed or immutable. Changes in gender expectations, generational values, workplace practices, youth culture, and media environments may modify or challenge established norms. Individuals are therefore not simply passive recipients of cultural expectations. They actively interpret, negotiate, accept, adapt, or contest the meanings they encounter across different learning environments.

The Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem consequently provides a framework for understanding both continuity and change in drinking culture. It explains how established practices can persist through repeated socialization and institutional reinforcement while also allowing for transformation as individuals encounter new social conditions, cultural influences, and alternative forms of meaning-making.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study confirms many of the central insights established by previous research on the social, cultural, relational, and symbolic dimensions of drinking in South Korean society. At the same time, it advances the literature by shifting the analytical focus from isolated determinants of drinking behavior to an interconnected system of cultural learning.

The findings demonstrate that drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices are learned through multiple environments that extend from the family to peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry. These environments do not function independently; rather, they continuously interact to reinforce, modify, reproduce, and sometimes challenge the meanings attached to alcohol consumption. Drinking culture can therefore be understood not simply as a set of established behaviors but as an ongoing process of socio-cultural learning and cultural reproduction.

The Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem framework offers a holistic perspective for understanding how drinking culture is formed and sustained across different domains of social life, while also accounting for the processes through which cultural meanings change and circulate beyond national boundaries. By connecting interpersonal, institutional, mediated, and commercial forms of learning within a single analytical framework, this study provides a foundation for further research on drinking culture and other culturally embedded practices in which behavior is learned through interconnected social environments.

Suggestion

Based on the findings of this study, South Korean drinking culture can be understood as the outcome of a continuous socio-cultural learning process in which individuals acquire, negotiate, and reproduce drinking-related knowledge, values, norms, and practices across interconnected social environments. The findings also suggest that these environments do not operate independently. Rather, family, peer groups, workplaces, mass media, and the alcohol industry interact dynamically, reinforcing, modifying, and sometimes challenging one another. Accordingly, future research should move beyond examining these contexts as separate influences and investigate more systematically how they function together as a Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem.

First, future research should examine the development of drinking-related learning across the life course. Longitudinal and life-course studies would be particularly valuable for tracing how meanings and norms associated with alcohol are initially acquired in childhood, reinforced or transformed during adolescence and early adulthood, and subsequently reproduced or renegotiated in professional and family life. Such research could provide a clearer understanding of how early socialization influences later drinking practices and how learning experiences at different stages of life interact with one another.

Second, future studies should investigate more closely the mechanisms of learning within each component of the ecosystem. Research on family contexts could examine parental modeling, family rituals, intergenerational transmission, and gendered expectations. Studies of peer groups could explore conformity, belonging, peer influence, reciprocity, and identity formation. Workplace research could further investigate hoesik, organizational hierarchy, networking, social expectations, and the relationship between drinking and workplace integration. Examining these mechanisms in greater depth would help clarify not simply whether these environments influence drinking, but how and under what conditions they shape individuals' understandings and practices.

Third, greater attention should be given to the changing role of media and cultural industries. As Korean popular culture continues to circulate globally, future research should examine how K-dramas, K-pop, social media, streaming platforms, celebrity culture, advertising, product placement, and alcohol branding contribute to the construction and circulation of drinking-related meanings. Particular attention should be paid to how domestic and international audiences interpret these representations differently and how mediated representations may interact with individuals' existing experiences of drinking.

Fourth, future research should investigate the interactions and feedback processes among the five learning environments. Rather than asking only how the family, peers, workplace, media, or alcohol industry independently influence drinking, researchers should examine how learning in one environment affects learning in another. For example, family-based meanings may shape how individuals respond to peer drinking practices, while peer experiences may modify previously acquired family norms. Workplace practices may institutionalize these norms, whereas media and commercial representations may reinforce, reshape, or challenge them. Understanding these cross-contextual relationships would provide stronger empirical support for the ecosystem perspective proposed in this study.

Fifth, future research should pay greater attention to social and cultural change within the learning ecosystem. Changes in gender relations, generational values, workplace practices, digital media, and attitudes toward alcohol may alter established patterns of drinking-related learning. Comparative research across generations, gender groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and urban and rural settings could therefore reveal how the ecosystem varies across different social contexts. Cross-cultural research could also examine how Korean drinking culture is interpreted and adapted when it encounters other cultural drinking norms.



Finally, future research should consider the implications of the learning ecosystem for alcohol-related policy and intervention. If drinking culture is produced and reinforced across multiple interconnected environments, interventions focused solely on individual behavior may have limited effectiveness. A more comprehensive approach could consider family socialization, peer norms, workplace practices, media representations, and commercial influences simultaneously. Understanding these interconnected mechanisms may help identify more culturally appropriate strategies for promoting healthier drinking practices while taking into account the social and cultural meanings that make alcohol consumption deeply embedded in everyday life.

Overall, future research should develop the Socio-Cultural Learning Ecosystem framework from a primarily conceptual and integrative model into an empirically testable framework. By examining how learning occurs, how different learning environments interact, and how these relationships change across the life course and across generations, future studies can provide a deeper explanation of how drinking culture is constructed, reproduced, negotiated, and transformed in South Korean society and beyond.

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