

Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion

Volume 18

2022

Article 3

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Sakesun Siriphadung

Independent Researcher

Michael Christopher*

Pacific University
Hillsboro, OR, USA

* mchristopher@pacifcu.edu

The authors wish to thank the National Statistical Office of Thailand (NSO) for providing the set of data, and Prof. Dr. Kathleen Ford, University of Michigan, U.S.A for her useful statistical guidance.

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Sociodemographic Predictors of Buddhist Religious Engagement Among Thai Adolescents and Young Adults

Sakesun Siriphadung
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Abstract

In this cross-sectional study, we examined sociodemographic predictors of engagement in Buddhist religious practices among Thai adolescents and young adults aged 15-32 years old. The nationally representative sample was drawn from the 2018 dataset of the survey on Social Conditions, Culture and Mental Health conducted by the National Statistical Office of Thailand (NSO). Results indicate that individual (age, gender, educational attainment, occupation), family (relationship to household head), and community contextual (urbanicity, region) variables were significantly associated with Buddhist religiosity. Overall, the findings suggest that these sociodemographic factors play an important role in determining to what extent Thai youth and young adults adhere to Buddhist practices. Given the growing evidence base for the beneficial health effects of Buddhist practices, further examination of sociodemographic predictors in an effort to promote Buddhist religiosity among Thai young adults is warranted.

Religious and spiritual development can help foster developmental process during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Desmond et al., 2010; Smith & Denton, 2009). This distinct period in life entails a transition into adult roles, during which a sense of self and values are established, life possibilities are explored, and identities--including those related to religion--are solidified, paving the way for adult roles and responsibilities to be established (Arnett, 2000). Variations in both degree and patterns of religiosity during this significant time of change are critically intertwined with a multitude of sociodemographic factors at individual, family, and contextual levels. A growing body of research elucidates the distinctive sociodemographic profiles among groups of people with different degrees of religious beliefs and practices (Hayes, 2000; Schwadel, 2017; Shahabi et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2002). Characteristics such as age, gender, educational attainment, family type, marital status, urbanicity, and residential areas have been shown to relate to and predict religiosity (Chan et al., 2015; Chen & Trommsdorff, 2012; Moreira-Almeida et al., 2010; Schwadel, 2017; Wallace Jr et al., 2003).

Socio-demographic factors have often been used as control variables in a growing body of research examining association between religiosity and health or behavioral outcomes (Shahabi et al., 2002; Vitorino et al., 2018; Zimmer et al., 2019). Several studies, including the one that used a nationally representative sample, indicate distinctive sociodemographic characteristics of those who rated themselves as “spiritual” versus those who considered themselves “religious”(Shahabi et al., 2002; Woods & Ironson, 1999; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). Those who perceived themselves as “spiritual” in contrast to “religious” are female, of younger age, higher socioeconomic status, having a higher education, less likely from Catholic background, less connected to God and organized religion, having more interconnectedness with living beings, having low cynical mistrust, and intolerance (Shahabi et al., 2002). Thus, the findings that support a positive relationship between spirituality/religiosity, health, and well-being may otherwise be alternatively attributed to such salubrious sociodemographic characteristics as being female, younger age, or of higher socioeconomic status (Davidson, 1975; Shahabi et al., 2002; Woods & Ironson, 1999; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). It is, as a result, imperative to understand the relationship between sociodemographic profiles and religiosity as a foundation for more advanced analysis employing religiosity as a covariate of factors of interest. Findings of research on social correlates of religiosity are still inconsistent despite virtually universal focus on Christianity among European and American respondents. From an ecological perspective, expounding the interrelatedness of culture, values, and religion, cultural context is emphasized, as it bidirectionally influences personal meaning of values and religion through socialization (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As religiosity is subject to social and cultural contexts inherently embedded in life course processes,

it remains to be seen how religiosity varies as a function of social correlates in a different cultural context in which Buddhism is predominantly professed.

Religiosity, in this study, refers to religious practices conducted by respondents themselves. This measure conceptually parallels with personal practice, which reflects a high degree of religious salience, self-motivation, and volition (Pearce et al., 2017). As measures of religiosity are often multidimensional and warrant separate examination for each dimension's effect on outcomes (P. E. King & Boyatzis, 2004; Pearce et al., 2017), using purely one's own conduct of religious practices corresponds to the largely personal and individualized nature of Buddhist practices. This distinguishing characteristic sets it apart from most Western religions, which emphasize social interactions within relational networks embedded in organized religious congregations (Smith, 2003). Moreover, although results from a large multinational study suggest young adults aged 18-39 are generally less likely to identify with any religious group and commit to religious observance than their older counterparts, it is not universal, as certain variations exist in some regions and cultures (Pew Research Center, 2018).

A vast body of research indicates that youth evince various trends of religiosity, which may stabilize, increase, or decline, with fluctuations during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Wallace Jr et al., 2003). Such significant variation in trends and the level of religiosity are manifested across a number of highly dynamic individual, family, and contextual sociodemographic factors, characteristic of each life stage (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). While identifying social correlates as predictors of religiosity has been an area of scholarly examination, the inconclusive nature of social influences on religiosity is evident in previous research, and may be largely due to culturally grounded contexts and individual differences (Chen & Trommsdorff, 2012; McCullough et al., 2003; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Important sociodemographic correlates of religiosity include age, gender, level of educational attainment, marital status, family structures, urbanicity, and region of residence.

AGE, GENDER, MARITAL STATUS, AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Although there is substantial variability and complexity, the transition from adolescence into young adulthood is often a period of general pattern of declining religiosity (Chan et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2002; Wallace Jr et al., 2003). Age-related increase or decrease in religiosity (participation in religious services) is otherwise found and proposed to be inextricably connected with changes in life course circumstances such as college responsibilities, the timing of marriage, or divorce (Stolzenberg et al., 1995; Uecker et al., 2007). These life course events have high implications for the level of religious service participation on the basis of whether such changes conform with or contradict normative conventions

prescribed by different religions. Young, higher educated, single men and women are sociodemographic characteristics most indicative of those with little or no involvement in religious practices or beliefs (Hayes, 2000; Shahabi et al., 2002). Changes in life course events such as marriage or divorce may also differentially affect the extent of religious participation of men versus that of women, adding layers of complexities to the conventional wisdom suggested by most research on religious activities that women tend to exhibit higher religious participation than do men (Hardie et al., 2016; Pew Research Center, 2018; Twenge et al., 2016). Nonetheless, marriage tends to increase the rate of religious services attendance, as it conforms with conventional norms (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Hayes, 2000; Stolzenberg et al., 1995). The education-religiosity connection is more complex than the widespread view that higher education decreases religiosity (Uecker et al., 2007). Higher education appears likely to promote increases in religiosity for people with low religious commitment, and reduce it for those with a high religious commitment background as they transition into young adult years (McFarland et al., 2010; Schwadel, 2017). In sum, most of the explanations for gender, age, marital, and educational differences are speculative, which emphasizes the need to investigate its associations, particularly in an understudied cultural context, such as Buddhism (McNamara et al., 2010).

FAMILY TYPE, URBANICITY, AND REGION OF RESIDENCE

Empirical evidence suggests that adolescents residing in two-parent families may experience less decline in religiosity into young adulthood relative to adolescents from single parent households (Petts, 2009; Regnerus & Uecker, 2006; Zhai et al., 2007). Additionally, adolescents in individualistic cultures are more likely to reduce their affiliation and practices within organized religious institutions relative to adolescents from collectivistic societies (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Twenge et al., 2016). In the United States, there are higher rates of religious conviction in the south than in other regions, as the residents have less social power and more strongly uphold collectivism than do those in the west or northeast (Twenge et al., 2016; Wallace Jr et al., 2003). Additionally, youth residing in smaller, rural areas appear to be more religious than those living in larger, urban areas (V. King et al., 1997).

Recent studies are in support of positive impact of such Buddhist practices as meditation, chanting, and prayer on mental health and well-being, quality of life, self-esteem, and stress reduction among adolescents and young adults in Thailand, United States, Korea, China, United Kingdom, and Australia (Chi et al., 2018; Plumwongrot et al., 2021).

ADOLESCENT AND YOUNG ADULT RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN THAILAND

Young adults aged 18-39 are generally less likely to identify with any religious group, pray daily, and be committed to religious observance than their older counterparts; however this widespread pattern appears to occur in more economically affluent countries and is not universal (Pew Research Center, 2018). In Thailand, where Theravāda Buddhism predominates, findings from a recent national survey on social conditions and culture indicate a declining trend among Thais aged 13 and over in the practice of chanting and giving alms to Buddhist monks, yet an increasing trend in the adherence to the five key Buddhist precepts (i.e., do not kill, steal, commit adultery, lie, or become intoxicated) (NSO Thailand, 2018).

THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

Theravāda Buddhism is professed by over 95% of Thais (Chamrathirong et al., 2013). While most of the world's major religions are categorized as belief systems, Buddhism is recognized as an education system, which offers a path of training in every aspect of life to cultivate wisdom toward the true nature of our mental and physical phenomena with the ultimate goal to free ourselves from suffering and its causes (Ajahn Jayasaro, 2011; Venerable Luangpor Pramote Pamojjo, 2015b). In Buddhism, the root cause of suffering is ignorance to the truth that our body and mind are suffering, which creates various defilements such as clinging, attachment to body and mind, craving, greed, delusion, and hatred (Venerable Luangpor Pramote Pamojjo, 2015b; Venerable Pramote Pamojjo, 2017). Clearly seeing the truths of the body and mind in accordance with the Four Noble Truths – suffering, its causes, its end, and the path leading to it – the mind releases attachment to them (Venerable Pramote Pamojjo, 2013).

Developing mindfulness is most fundamental to such training in morality, concentration, and wisdom, all of which are encompassed in what is called the Noble Eightfold Path (Ajahn Jayasaro, 2011; Venerable Luangpor Pramote Pamojjo, 2015b; Venerable Pramote Pamojjo, 2018). Mindfulness (or Sati in Pāli) is the ability to non-judgmentally be aware in the present moment of our mental and physical phenomena such as bodily movements, constant mind wandering, and a whole spectrum of responses of the mind toward contact with daily stimuli through sense perceptions such as cognitions, emotions, perceptions, intentions, sensations, and feelings (Kabat-Zinn, 2019; Venerable Luangpor Pramote Pamojjo, 2015b; Venerable Pramote Pamojjo, 2013). To nurture mindfulness, awareness of the mind and body must be consistently exercised until the reality of such conditions becomes clear and imprinted in memory. Mindfulness can thus be

automatically and unintentionally activated when such conditions reoccur thereafter. Mindfulness in tandem with morality and right concentration enable the attainment of wisdom through the observing mind becoming aware of the presence of any mental and physical movements, allowing their true characteristics of impermanence and non-self to be recognized (Venerable Luangpor Pramote Pamojjo, 2015a; Venerable Pramote Pamojjo, 2013). To achieve such wisdom, a content, peaceful, poised, and equanimous mind is required, which can be attained through the following key Buddhist practices to which mindfulness and wisdom are inextricably integral (Venerable Pramote Pamojjo, 2017).

- 1) Offering food to monks: This is done to diminish selfishness and increase the joy of giving. This act of generosity fosters the symbiotic relationship between the monastics and the lay Buddhists, and inspires the monastics to be conscientious in the performance of their duties. This act is advised to be conducted with right view to sacrifice resources for the good of others that is not beyond the means of the laity, while allowing the observing mind to notice whether greed or other toxic mental states surreptitiously orchestrate the act in the background (Ajahn Jayasaro, 2011, 2013; Venerable Pramote Pamojjo, 2017).

- 2) Observance of the five key Buddhist precepts (no killing, stealing, adultery, lying, or intoxication): This serves as a framework within which the dynamics of cognitions and emotions relate to actions. When toxic mental states such as anger or greed arise and are noticed by the observing mind, their intensity is diminished or wholly eliminated. This process facilitates the precepts to be properly and automatically observed. The precepts ensure harmonious relationships between oneself and others, enabling contentment and peace of mind to occur. Mindfulness can be called upon to investigate whether, for example, conceit arises as one's performance in the precept observance is assessed in relation to others (Ajahn Jayasaro, 2013; Venerable Pramote Pamojjo, 2017).

- 3) Meditation practice: Concentration or Samatha meditation is to make the mind temporarily calm by focusing on an object of attention such as inbreath and outbreath, or a mantra. Right concentration can be temporarily gained when the observing mind notices the mind wandering from such an object of focus. With proper morality and calmness achieved through concentration meditation, preparatory meditation toward Insight or Vipassana can begin. In this meditation, the mind is relaxed enough and poised to potentially become the observer. The equanimous observing mind is

consistently aware of the rise and fall of all mental and physical phenomena until the mind accepts the truths of such conditioned existence: impermanence, non-self, and Dukkha (suffering or chronic unsatisfactoriness of unenlightened existence, which covers a range of experience, from severe physical and emotional pain to the subtlest sense of unease and lack) (Ajahn Jayasaro, 2013; Venerable Luangpor Pramote Pamojjo, 2015b; Venerable Pramote Pamojjo, 2013).

4) *Spiritual chanting*: Theravāda Buddhists chant verses in the original Pāli language, at times, accompanied with Thai translations. It includes verses listing the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma (the teachings) and Sangha (the monastics), discourses expounding key teachings, passages of wise reflection, and verses for radiating thoughts of kindness and for sharing merits with all sentient beings. Its calming meditative quality particularly suits those of a more active disposition who have difficulty with sitting meditation. Chanting is distinguished from prayer, as the core Buddhist understanding of cause and effects forbids prayers of supplication or thankfulness (Ajahn Jayasaro, 2013).

5) *Reading and listening to Buddhist teachings*: A means to acquire knowledge and preliminary wisdom as a basis to train the mind to let go, give up, and be free from defilement through the practice of mindfulness. It is one form of meritorious action that serves as a foundation for peaceful living and training of the mind (Ajahn Chah, 2011; Bhikkhu PA Payutto, 2006).

CURRENT STUDY

The overarching goal of the current study is to investigate to what extent conduct of five key Theravāda Buddhist practices (i.e., giving alms to monks, observance of the five Buddhist precepts, meditation, chanting, and reading and listening to Buddhist teachings) is predicted by individual (i.e., age, gender, marital status, and education), family (i.e., family type), and contextual sociodemographic factors (i.e., urbanicity and region of residence) among Thai adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 32. The Institutional Review Board at the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, has granted approval for this study (COE. No. 2020/02-052).

METHODS

Participants

The participants in this study were a nationally representative sample of Thai adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 32 years old ($N = 5,658$). Data were obtained from the 2018 National Survey on Social Conditions, Culture, and Mental health conducted by the National Statistical Office of Thailand (NSO). Table 1 provides a summary of participant sociodemographic information.

<u>Variables</u>	<u>Statistic</u>
Mean age (SD)	26.1 (4.41)
Gender (%): female	44.6
Education (%)	
Primary or less	43.9
Secondary	34.6
Tertiary, College, or higher	21.5
Occupation (%)	
Self-employed	38.7
Government employee	11.9
Private employee	49.3
Marital status: Married (%)	45.3
Relationship to household head (%)	
Household head/spouse of household head	31.4
Unmarried children, married children/in -laws, grandchildren	62.2
Relatives or maids	6.4
Family type (%)	
No father and mother in household	48.3
Mother only in household	14.0
Father only in household	3.7
Both father and mother in household	33.9
Living in municipality areas (%)	56.7
Region of residence (%)	
Northeast	23.9
Bangkok and Central	42.2
North	19.7
South	14.3

Table 1: Descriptive summary of socio-demographic characteristics of 5,627 Thai adolescents and young adults aged 15-32, in 2018 ($N = 5,627$)

MEASURES

Dependent Variable

Buddhist Adolescent and Young Adult Religiosity Scale: The five Buddhist practices (i.e., giving alms to monks, observance of the five Buddhist precepts, meditation, chanting, and reading about and listening to Buddhist teachings) were measured with the following continuous item: “How often did you conduct the following Buddhist practices last year?” Possible responses range in ascending order of frequency in undertaking the practices from 1 to 8 (1 = never and 8 = every day/almost every day). Exploratory factor analysis using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation was used to examine whether the 5 Buddhist practice variables can be combined into a composite variable, which has more internal reliability than single items. The results of the sampling adequacy indicate the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure (KMO) of 0.77 ($p > 0.05$), and the Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity of 0.00 ($p < 0.05$). These values suggest that factor analysis is an appropriate method to be used to combine all five Buddhist practice variables into composite variables. All five variables loaded highly onto a single component, explaining 48.9% of variance. The single underlying component is then labeled ‘Buddhist Adolescent and Young Adult Religiosity Scale.’ Scores for each of the five items of each respondent were summed to create the Buddhist Adolescent and Young Adult Religiosity Scale total score, yielding a range from 5 to 40. Higher total scores signify higher level of engagement in such religious practices.

Independent Variables

Individual demographic characteristics: Age was included as a continuous variable, ranging from 15 to 32 years. A series of dummy variables was created for the following factors: gender (1 = male, 0 = female), marital status (1 = married, 0 = non-married), highest level of education attained (1 = primary or less (reference), 2 = secondary, 3 = tertiary or college and higher), and occupation (1 = self-employed (reference), 2 = government employee, 3 = private employee).

Family characteristics: Dummy variables were created for relationship to household head, which asks about the relationship youth have with the household head with whom they reside (1 = household head or spouse of household head (reference), 2 = unmarried child, married child, in-law (spouse of married child), or grandchild, 3 = relative or maid), and family type, which was used to categorize whether both father and mother or either one of them or none resides with youth in the household (1 = no father and mother (reference), 2 = mother only, 3 = father only, 4 = both father and mother).

Community contextual characteristics: Dummy variables were created for urbanicity, determined by which area the household is located (1 = within municipality area, 0 = out of municipality area), and region of residence (1 = Bangkok and central, 2 = north, 3 = northeast (reference), 4 = south).

PROCEDURES

A two-stage stratified sampling design was used to select respondents from each of the 77 provinces in Thailand to yield nationally representative samples. Each province (a stratum) has 2 sub-strata: within municipality and outside municipality. The data collection through face-to-face interviews occurred from January 1st to 30th, 2018 nationwide. The data collected as part of the national survey on Social Conditions, Culture, and Mental Health of the Kingdom of Thailand included demographic information, practices, and perceptions with regards to various social aspects and mental health such as religious affiliation, current social behaviors, morality, integrity, values, ethics, relationships with family members, and mental health. Field interviewers who are permanent employees of the NSO were trained with a focus on the survey's methodology, scope, definitions, and questionnaires to enhance their efficiency in data collection. Data collected through the interviews were entered into a computer tablet, and subsequently verified for accuracy and stored in a cloud computing system for data processing. To maximize generalization of the sampling-based data, weight average calculation was conducted in three steps: 1. calculation of the base weight, 2. adjustment for non-response, 3. post stratification calibration adjustment. This survey is conducted every four years, starting in 1985. The 2018 dataset is the latest available dataset. According to the Statistics Act B.E. 2550 (2007), the National Statistical Office of Thailand (NSO) has been graciously granted authorities and duties by then the reigning King RAMA IX to prepare and conduct survey research nationwide in order to produce baseline statistics for further utilization by interested institutions within the country.

ANALYSIS STRATEGY

The analytical goal of this study was to explore the extent to which Buddhist adolescent and young adult religious engagement can be predicted by individual, family, and community contextual variables. Toward this end, analyses proceeded in several stages in SPSS Statistics (version 22). First, frequency and distribution of each of the five Buddhist practices were calculated. Second, multivariate analyses employing multiple linear regression was undertaken to ascertain the extent to which each of the social characteristics is predictive of adolescent and

young adult Buddhist religious engagement when all the other individual, family, and contextual measures were simultaneously controlled.

Hypothesis I: Individual sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender, marital status, education, and occupation) will each have a significant association with adolescent and young adult Buddhist religious engagement, controlling for other sociodemographic factors.

Hypothesis II: Family sociodemographic characteristic (relationship to household head, and family type) will each have a significant association with adolescent and young adult Buddhist religious engagement, controlling for other sociodemographic factors.

Hypothesis III: Contextual sociodemographic characteristics (urbanicity and region of residence) will each have a significant association with adolescent and young adult Buddhist religious engagement, controlling for other sociodemographic factors.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

If there were missing cases in any items of questions, all data of those participants were deleted. Nominal variables were recoded into scale or ordinal level of measurement for subsequent analysis in the SPSS. For example, gender (1 = male, 0 = female), highest level of education attained (1 = primary or less (reference), 2 = secondary, 3 = tertiary or college and higher). Regrouping of unmarried child, married child, in-law (spouse of married child), or grandchild into the same category under the variable 'Relationship to household head' was performed to minimize multicollinearity, as some of these children and grandchildren may reside within the same three generational family. And their status as children and grandchildren is clearly distinguished by definition from the other two categories: 1 = household head or spouse of household head and 3 = relative or maid.

Table 1 provides a summary of the sociodemographic descriptions of the sample. The average age is 26 years ($SD = 4.15$) with a relatively equal percentage of females (44.6%) and males (55.4%), and those who are married (45.3%) and non-married (54.7%). The highest percentage of the sample attained a primary education level or less (43.9%), and has been employed in the private sector (49.3%). A preponderance of the sample holds a status of unmarried child, married child, in-law, or grandchild within the household, and the sample was mostly located in Bangkok and central Thailand (42.2%), and within large municipality areas (56.7%).

Table 2 illustrates the frequency distribution of engagement with each of the five Buddhist practices (the distribution is bimodal). Giving alms to Buddhist monks (52.1%), and reading or listening to Buddhist teachings (44.4%) are the practices chosen to be conducted by most respondents on days of Buddhist significance or “holy days.” Surprisingly, a majority of respondents reported never engaging in chanting (35.9%), observance of the five key Buddhist precepts (55%), and meditation (68.4%). However, among those who undertook these three practices, chanting (29.9%), observance of the five key Buddhist precepts (16.3%), and meditation (14.5%) were engaged by the highest percentage of respondents on days of Buddhist significance or “holy days.” Meditation is the least prevalent form of practice at all levels of frequency with the highest percentage of those who never engaging in it (68.4%).

	Chanting	Giving alms to monks	Reading and listening to Buddhist teachings	Observing the five precepts	Meditation
Never	35.9	11.4	35.6	55.0	68.4
5-7 days / week	5.3	2.2	0.4	6.3	1.2
1-4 days / week	8.0	8.0	2.2	7.9	2.9
1-3 days / month	11.2	14.9	6.9	7.6	5.6
Rarely	9.7	11.3	10.5	6.8	7.4
Holy/ important days	29.9	52.1	44.4	16.3	14.5
Total percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

N=5627

Table 2: Percentage of each type of Buddhist practice conducted by adolescents and young adults aged 15-32 in Thailand

MULTIVARIATE ANALYSES

Adolescent and young adult Buddhist religious engagement was regressed onto the individual, family, and geographic contextual variables. Analyses revealed several highly significant predictors, which collectively explained 8.2% of the variance in Buddhist religious engagement (Table 3). Consistent with hypothesis I, all individual sociodemographic characteristics predicted engagement in Buddhist practices. Females engaged in Buddhist practices significantly more often than males ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .001$), and age also significantly positively predicted engagement in Buddhist practices ($\beta = .32$, $p < .05$). Similarly, relative to youth whose education is at primary level or less, those who have achieved secondary level of education had higher religious engagement ($\beta = .05$, $p < .001$), and those whose educational achievement at the highest level of ‘tertiary, college, and higher’

contributed to markedly higher level of religious engagement ($\beta = .10$, $p < .001$). In relation to youth who are self-employed, those who are government employees are more likely to have higher engagement in Buddhist practices. ($\beta = .05$, $p < .001$), whereas those employed in the private sectors had lower Buddhist practice engagement ($\beta = -.071$, $p < .001$). Partially consistent with Hypothesis II, relationship to household head predicted Buddhist religious engagement; however, family type did not. In comparison to young adults who are household heads or spouse of household heads, those who are relatives or maids ($\beta = -.03$, $p < .05$) or unmarried children, married children, in-laws, and grandchildren ($\beta = -.05$, $p < .01$) endorse lower engagement in Buddhist religiosity. Consistent with hypothesis III, all contextual sociodemographic characteristics predicted engagement in Buddhist practices.

Relative to youth residing in the northeast, those living in the south ($\beta = -.03$, $p < .05$), and the north ($\beta = -.08$, $p < .001$) endorse lower engagement with Buddhism, and youth residing in large, urban areas exhibit lower engagement with Buddhism in relation to those living in smaller, rural areas ($\beta = -.04$, $p < .01$).

Measures of multicollinearity were acceptable with values ranging from 0.56 to 0.94 for Tolerance, and 1.1 to 2.35 for the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), well below the standard value of 10 as well as significant Pearson correlations (r) ranging from 0.02-0.3 (not exceeding 0.5- 0.6).

DISCUSSION

By gleaning the insight from the nationally representative sample, the primary aim of this study was to provide a baseline association of social correlates and Buddhist religiosity. These data are fertile ground for advancing our understanding of more complex analyses, using religiosity and socio-demographic characteristics as covariates with other variables of interest. Consistent with the ecological perspective that warrants the study of youth and religion in a culturally specific context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this research also fills a gap of knowledge in culturally specific religiosity.

The difference between the emphasis of Buddhism and Christianity has a profound implication on how the social milieu is governed and the ways religious practices are conducted. The interrelatedness between youth and various developmental contexts in which they grow and navigate leads to a wide range of identities, and religious experiences youth will have (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Families and communities, structured within specific cultural, historical, and traditional contexts differentially influence youth's personal characteristics, including their religious content, comprising religious belief and views (Ashmore et al., 2004; Ho & Ho, 2007). Different cultural and ecological contexts in which unique sociodemographic characteristics are embedded contribute to culturally

Variables	<i>B</i>	SE	β	p-value	<i>F</i>	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²
					32.55	0.082
Gender	-2.441	.171	-.19	<.001		
Age	.049	.022	.03	.023		
Level of Education						
Primary or less (reference)						
Secondary	.600	.188	.05	.001		
Tertiary, College, or higher	1.581	.253	.10	<.001		
Occupations						
Self-employed (reference)						
Government employee	.973	.295	.05	.001		
Private employee	-.894	.183	-.07	<.001		
Marital status	-.005	.187	.01	.979		
Relationship to household head						
Household head/spouse of household head (reference)						
Unmarried children, married	-.706	.253	-.05	.005		
children/in -laws, grand children						
Relatives or maids	-.698	.357	-.03	.05		
Family type						
No father & mother (reference)						
Mother only	-.275	.298	-.02	.355		
Father only	.518	.471	.02	.272		
Both father and mother	-.084	.263	-.01	.750		
Urbanicity	-.453	.168	-.04	.007		
Region of residence						
Northeast (reference)						
Bangkok and Central	-.019	.216	-.01	.929		
North	-1.340	.248	-.08	<.001		
South	-.562	.274	-.03	.04		

N = 5627

Table 3: Multiple regression analysis of sociodemographic characteristics predicting adolescent and young adult Buddhist religious engagement

specific lived experiences, which, in turn, differentially shape distinctive youths' religious content (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The strong impact cultural context has on youths' religious content, thus, warrants an examination of how uniquely socio-demographic characteristics embedded in Buddhism in Thai culture play their roles on the level of religiosity among Thai adolescents and youth.

Buddhism tends to be “*pannadhika*,” the path with the wisdom-factor predominant, and Christianity tends to be “*saddhadhika*,” the path where trust or faith predominates” (Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikku, 1967). The five Buddhist practices are, therefore, largely conducted on the private or individual basis, except on festivals of Buddhist significance in which most of the practices may be conducted in groups at monastery or large gatherings. It is exceptionally rare that social interaction derived from relational networks will be a driving force as pervasive as it is in organized religion in the West (Shahabi et al., 2002; Smith, 2003). Thus, the core pattern of Buddhist practices may be conceptually parallel with spirituality in which the practices are conducted individually for the purpose of self-liberation from suffering.

A number of sociodemographic factors predicted engagement with Buddhist religious practices in this large nationally representative sample. In this study, giving alms to Buddhist monks and reading or listening to Buddhist teachings are among the forms of merit-making practices most frequently conducted during days of Buddhist significance or ‘holy days’, as these acts are traditionally and culturally embedded as suggested activities during important festivals. Required infrastructure at the monastery or elsewhere, which facilitates such acts are, therefore, provided for the convenience of the practices to be conducted. The pattern of such practices, especially giving alms to Buddhist monks may be largely influenced by the tangibly felt joy derived from the act of giving and the culturally grounded normative belief that committing such act of generosity to the monastics of high morals may yield the lay people a certain level of merits. Meditation is the least prevalent form of practice. This act, usually refers to sitting or walking meditations, is generally considered a ‘formal practice’, which requires an effort, volition, and time. It may, as a result, disrupt respondents’ daily activities.

The study’s finding on gender differences in religiosity upholds the conventional wisdom in most previous research that females are more religiously devout than males, and that the decline in both religiosity and spirituality was more pronounced among males than females (Hardie et al., 2016; Shahabi et al., 2002; Smith et al., 2002; Uecker et al., 2007; Wallace Jr et al., 2003). Age-related variations in the degree of religiosity shown in much previous research may impact life course factors such as marriage that curbs young adults’ declining religiosity. In many western religions, a driving force behind marriage, aside from faith in the higher being, is the expected benefits to be accrued from relational networks by

compliance with the normative marital status (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Hayes, 2000; Smith, 2003; Stolzenberg et al., 1995) . As marriage is not a significant predictor of religiosity in this sample, a speculative, yet plausible explanation in relation to age-related increase in religiosity may be linked to the nature and emphasis of Buddhist practices. While the practices may be internalized during adolescence through intergenerational transmission, the increasing depth of understanding that underlies the practices, gained through life experiences from adolescence to young adulthood may amplify their continued interest, thus raising the level of practice.

Due to complexity in the education-religiosity connection, a relativistic view that takes into account the social context by nation is warranted (Putnam & Campbell, 2010) . The positive relationship between highest education level attained and religiosity found in this study provides partial support for such a complex relationship (McFarland et al., 2010; Schwadel, 2017). Buddhism is intertwined in Thai life. Religious activities organized within formal educational system, some aspects of life experiences at higher education, and after graduation appear to be a powerful factor that escalates youth's religiosity. The finding may be proffered as the above argument that the more nuanced appreciation of the implication underlying the Buddhist practices fosters the amplified effort that results in increased religiosity, enabling youth to place high values on Buddhist practices, as a means to reconcile with life challenges.

The finding that young adults who are household heads or spouse of household heads exhibit higher level of religiosity than youths who have other types of relationships to household heads reinforces the above proposed argument about life experiences. Being a household head entails many responsibilities. It is speculated that family roles and related responsibilities enable youth to encounter a wider scope of life experiences than do those who are not the head of the family. Life challenges implicit in such responsibilities may propel young adults who are heads of the family to seek refuge in such Buddhist practices to a higher degree.

The explanation to why youth who are government employees are more likely to have higher religiosity than those who are self-employed may lie in the enabling environment in government sectors that facilitates accessibility to Buddhist practices. For example, there may be religious practices on special occasions or meditation programs organized as part of suggested activities on a regular basis for employees in government. However, being self-employed signifies full responsibility for their private business, plausibly motivating them to higher extent to find balance in life through Buddhist practices than are those who are employees in private sectors.

The findings on urbanicity and geographical region are consistent with previous research despite somewhat differing proposed explanations in relation to the culturally specific context (V. King et al., 1997; Twenge et al., 2016; Wallace Jr et

al., 2003). Youth residing in Northeast Thailand endorsed more religiosity than youth from other regions of the country. Northeast Thailand is the area where most prominent monastic leaders in Buddhism reside in monasteries at which lay people may be afforded with convenient access to their sermons and guided Buddhist practices. According to the theory of reasoned action (Trafimow, 2009), such accessibility to the monasteries and revered monks, regarded as significant figures in Thai culture, has a potential to perpetuate youth's motivation and values enshrined in Buddhism. In addition, youth residing in small rural areas outside the municipality are plausibly endowed with inherent cognitive infrastructure that keeps such motivation and values in Buddhism alive. According to the Sufficiency Economy philosophy, formulated by the King Rama IX of Thailand (United Nations Development Program, 2007), a speculative argument based on theoretical and empirical evidence can be proffered with respect to the high degree of religiosity found. The psychological and cognitive infrastructure that predominantly characterizes people in rural areas may reflect the values of frugality, moderation, reasonableness, which may serve as a foundation on which values in Buddhism flourish. These values also act as an internal immunity that keeps other unvirtuous values such as greed in check, enabling life to be in wholesome balance.

Strength and limitations

The study's main strength is the inclusion of the nationally representative sample of Thai adolescents and young adults. This maximizes the validity of the results while biases are minimized. The study's findings may be generalizable only to Thai youth due to a different cultural context. The interpretations of the data should be proceeded with caution, as the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes casual inferences being drawn from these results. This study was conducted without details about family arrangement. Thus, family structure such as living with both parents, single parent, cohabiting parents as well as family type such as 2-generational, 3-generational in which grandparents are present should also be added in the future research. These factors have been empirically shown to have significant association with youth religiosity and, therefore, may provide more insights into how family structure in Thai society affects youth religiosity.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings point to the importance of the following individual, family, and contextual correlates and their implications in sustaining youth's religiosity: gender, age, higher education, the extent of life experiences, which are counterbalanced by the values of frugality and moderation, influenced by culturally grounded significant others such as the revered Buddhist monks. It is speculative, yet highly plausible that the increasing depth of understanding that underlies the

Buddhist practices, gained through life experiences or challenges may facilitate access to Buddhist practices, thus amplifying youth's interest and engagement in such practices. The increasing trend in religiosity is, therefore, found as adolescents are transitioning into adulthood, when the education is advancing, or when the role in the household takes many of the responsibilities. The argument proffered here illustrates the distinctive effects of sociodemographic characteristics on Buddhist religiosity engagement that set themselves apart from those found in much research on Christianity. This argument is further strengthened by the insignificant association between marriage and Buddhist practice engagement. Youth seek to engage in Buddhist practices not because they expect some benefits from relational networks in congregations, but plausibly due to the recognition in the value of Buddhism in managing life challenges implicit in increasing life experiences. It is, therefore, suggested that other aspects of religiosity such as the reasons of engaging in Buddhist practices, experiences, or consequences from the practices should be included in the questionnaires in the future survey research.

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