
THE “VANZ BOYS”: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF AN UNDERGROUND MOTORCYCLE SUBCULTURE IN THAILAND

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Abstract

This study offers an ethnographic examination of the Thai underground motorcycle subculture known as the “Vanz Boys” (เด็กแว้น), with a focus on its manifestations in Greater Bangkok and Chonburi Province. Drawing upon participant observation and interviews with individuals involved in the subculture, we provide a comprehensive account of its practices, social dynamics, and cultural expressions, with particular emphasis on the ritualistic aspects of nocturnal street racing, including the central element of modified motorcycles with noisy exhaust pipes, and the gendered aspects of participation, such as the role of the “Scoy Girls” (สาวสก๊อย) as trophies. In addition, we conduct a critical discourse analysis of Thai media portrayals of the subculture, examining how narratives of delinquency, noise pollution, and public disorder construct the Vanz Boys as a social problem.

The primary objective of this study is to contribute to the limited body of academic literature on youth and biker subcultures in Thailand by offering a nuanced perspective, which also examines broader issues of class, gender, and youth urban marginalization in contemporary Thai society. This research not only enriches scholarly understanding, but it also serves as a potential resource for future studies, creative media production, and policy-making.

Keywords

Road safety, Bangkok, Chonburi, community spaces, social inclusion, youth subcultures, motorcycle tuning, SDG 3, public health, SDG 11, sustainable cities

INTRODUCTION

More than half a century ago, in 1967, Hunter S. Thompson published *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*, a groundbreaking nonfiction novel that chronicled his year-long immersion in the notorious Hell's Angels motorcycle club. This work, often regarded as the first ethnographic study of a motorcycle subculture, offered an insider's perspective on the values, rituals, and contradictions of outlaw biker life in California (Schouten-McAlexander 1995, Sheldon 2021). Thompson's firsthand account set a precedent for understanding motorcycle subcultures through qualitative, immersive methods rather than through the moral panic or the law enforcement narratives of the media (Time 1965).

Over the years, motorcycle subcultures have continued to evolve in diverse global contexts, including Thailand, where a distinctive form of youth motorcycle culture has emerged. Known colloquially as the “Vanz Boys” (เด็กแว้น, dek waen), a name derived from the onomatopoeic sound of modified engines (แว้น, waen), these predominantly male street racers represent a modern iteration of underground biker identity. Concentrated in urban and suburban areas all over Thailand, the phenomenon is especially present in the areas of Greater Bangkok and Chonburi Province, where every weekend the Vanz Boys engage in nocturnal street racing that is as much a ritualized performance as it is a contest of speed. Characterized by extensively modified motorcycles with loud exhaust systems, these events are not only about racing but also about visibility, style, and identity.

This study offers an ethnographic examination of the Vanz Boys, exploring their practices, social dynamics, and cultural expressions. Drawing on participant observation and interviews with members of the subculture, we investigate the gendered dimensions of participation, particularly the symbols and rituals such as the “Scoy Girls” (สาวสก๊อย, sao skoy) as trophies, and the ways in which street racing operates as a form of youth expression under conditions of economic and social marginalization. Additionally, we conduct a critical discourse analysis of Thai media representations, which frequently depict Vanz culture through narratives of delinquency, noise pollution, and public disorder. These portrayals contribute to the construction of the Vanz Boys as a public nuisance and reinforce a

stigmatized understanding of this subculture. This stigmatization, almost paradoxically, contributes to the popularity and appeal of the subculture among teenagers and young adults who value the rebellious status earned through challenging mainstream social conventions.

Illegal motorcycle street racing in Thailand is a complex and often misunderstood phenomenon. While responses by the authorities have focused on punitive and infrastructural measures such as police-organized raids, mass arrests and motorcycle seizures, and spectacularized destruction of the noisy exhaust pipes, these efforts have largely failed to curb the activity. They have even contributed to creating the character of the Vanz boy as a brave and charming young man who is not afraid to challenge the rules and the formal authority of the government and the police.

While quantitative analysis might show the impact of the Vanz Boys' activity in data like the number of casualties from accidents during speed racing, it does not adequately capture the motivations, meanings, and identities formed within this subculture. By employing a qualitative, ethnographic methodology, this research aims to offer a more nuanced, grounded account of this subculture, the broader social context in which it emerges, and the meaning constructed by the interaction between authorities, media, and members of the subculture.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the limited but growing body of scholarship on Thai youth subcultures and global biker movements. It also seeks to illuminate the intersection of class, gender, and urban marginalization in contemporary Thailand. The authors hope that the insights obtained from this study serve as a resource and reference for further research, policymaking, and cultural media creation for both academic and non-academic audiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The definition of subculture we use in this study is the one developed in the seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Dick Hebdige. In his work he examines how postwar British youth subcultures (e.g., mods, punks, skinheads, etc.) use style as a form of resistance to dominant cultural norms. He argues that subcultures express defiance through symbolic acts, such as fashion and music, which are later commodified by mainstream culture (Hebdige 1979).

Another element of our research is the concept of “moral panics” by Stanley Cohen. In his book, the author explores how media and societal reactions to youth subcultures, like the Mods and the Rockers, can create “moral panics.” He introduces the concept of “folk devils” to describe groups demonized by society and discusses the amplification of deviance through media portrayal (Cohen 1972).

A significant work in the field is the study by Anchalee Cohen on youth subcultures in Thailand. This ethnographic study explores how urban Thai youths construct identities through subcultural affiliations, highlighting the role of consumerism and symbolic boundaries. The author describes subcultures in Northern Thailand as they took shape in the 1990s in the Chiang Mai area (Cohen 2009). The Dek Saep described in the paper share many of the characteristics of the Vanz Boys subculture of our study. However, we consider the Vanz Boys as a specific subculture with their own defining symbols and rituals, where the activity of underground motorcycle racing and the noisy exhaust pipes are not just a pastime but the defining elements.

In his book *Owners of the Map: Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, Mobility, and Politics in Bangkok*, Claudio Sopranzetti gives some insight into motorcycle-based urban life in Thailand. The study focuses on working-class moto taxi drivers, particularly on their political role in urban politics and during the red shirt protests of 2010 in Bangkok. It offers ethnographic insight into motorcycle-based urban life in Thailand, and it helps to understand how motorcycles mediate space, status, and power in Thai cities. Although the focus of our research is more focused on the cultural aspects, Sopranzetti's work helps us to understand how aspects like hierarchy and leadership may work within the Vanz Boys subculture. As the author uses some of the classic ethnographic tools, such as immersive fieldwork, participant observation, and life stories, which we have also used in our study, his work also provided us with methodological insight, and it served as a point of reference.

We have gained valuable insight and information about Thai motorcycle racing subcultures from the paper *Belief Patterns and Concept of Middle-Class Motopunk Subculture in Bangkok Metropolitan Region and Perimeter*, a study of the middle-class motopunk subculture in Bangkok. Pickhun Reyngong and Adipon Euajarusphan investigate the attitudes, beliefs, symbols, slang, and behaviors of the motopunk subculture in Bangkok, offering insights into motorcycle customization, group dynamics, and cultural expressions. Their work offers valuable insight and information, but the fact that they limited the study to only middle-class participants of the subculture and consequently presented it as a middle-class phenomenon may miss the variety of social backgrounds among the people who take part in the subculture, while our observation showed many of them as having a more working-class profile. Reyngong and Euajarusphan's work is especially interesting for their definition of subculture as a product of behaviors and common elements of identity, diverse from that of national or regional culture, whose defining element is the belonging of the members to a community located in a geographical area (Reyngong-Euajarusphan 2020, p. 68-69). That helped us to answer the question of whether we can apply the term “subculture” to the subjects of our study, the groups of young people that gather on Thai roads at night to race with modified and noisy motorcycles. A main

difference in our study is in the English translation. The authors call them “motopunks” in the English version of the title and of the abstract, while the rest of the article is written in Thai, which allows them to use the original Thai word “dek waen” (เด็กแว้น). In our study we call them Vanz Boys, because that is the most common term used in English language mass media outlets on this topic.

Another recent study on motorcycle racing subcultures in Southern Thailand is Process of Becoming a Motopunk in an Area of Muang District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province (Martsri et al., 2021). In their paper, the authors adopt a qualitative, purposive-sampling approach in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province to interrogate the process of “becoming a motopunk,” including the underlying motivations and strategies for intervention. They identify four principal reasons for entry: (1) family problems, (2) peer-group influence on beliefs and behaviors, (3) low community social control, and (4) the emulation of televised values that confer group acceptance. The “process” itself unfolds through adolescent curiosity, immersive exposure to adult deviance in local gatherings, and affective resistance manifesting in oppositional acts. Finally, the authors propose “approaches” to ameliorate motopunk problems, emphasizing enhanced familial monitoring, empathetic dialogue, and cognitive-behavioral attitude adjustments among youth. The work offers a description of the social background and of the motivations of the Vanz Boys, which is consistent with the findings of our studies. The paper is also interesting for showing alternative strategies to deal with the phenomenon of this subculture, which go beyond repression and stigmatization.

The paper titled “Critical Discourse Analysis of News Headlines: A Case of Youth Crime in Thailand” was a helpful work for our discussion on the representation in Thai media of the Vanz Boys phenomenon. This study by Pornjan Duanprakhon applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how Thai news headlines represent youth crime. Focusing on a selection of headlines from major Thai newspapers, the research explores the linguistic and ideological strategies used to frame young offenders. The findings reveal that Thai media often construct youth crime narratives in ways that emphasize deviance, threat, and moral decline. Headlines frequently use sensationalized language, passive constructions, and vague actor references, which obscure systemic issues such as poverty or education while reinforcing stereotypes of youth as dangerous or out of control. The study also highlights how these representations reflect and reproduce dominant social ideologies, contributing to moral panic and the marginalization of young people. By focusing on discourse rather than crime statistics, the author shows how media language plays a powerful role in shaping public attitudes toward youth and crime. This work provided helpful details for our research, as the Vanz Boys have often been linked to youth crime and overly demonized in the media.

Finally, in The Study for Suggestion on Prevention and Problem Solving of “Motorcycle Gangs” from People and Government Officials, Teera Sindecharak investigates public and governmental perspectives on addressing issues related to “motorcycle gangs” or “caravan boys” in Thailand. The study focuses on three areas: Bangkok, Nakhon Pathom, and Chonburi. Key findings show large support for implementing preventive measures, including military conscription for offenders, suggestions for increased school and family involvement, and establishment of legal racing venues to keep illegal riders off the road. This study centers on public policy and societal attitudes toward “motorcycle gangs,” providing scholars useful information for understanding how groups like the Vanz Boys are perceived by the authorities and by the public. This perspective situates the subculture within broader discourses on youth behavior, social control, and policy responses in Thailand.

METHODOLOGY

Grounded in the anthropological tradition of immersive qualitative research, this study employs a multi-method ethnographic approach based on qualitative analysis, juxtaposing narratives in research, government communication, and the media with first-hand ethnographic data. By situating our work within the broader framework of global biker subculture studies, we aim to shed light on a subculture that is still relatively unknown.

The fieldwork investigation took place in the Greater Bangkok area and Chonburi Province, and it combined a mix of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal unstructured conversations at the subculture’s events. The goal was to produce a nuanced, emic understanding of the subculture’s practices, social organization, and cultural meaning-making.

To make a comparison between the stories as they have been described in mainstream media and as we have observed on the ground, the research also includes a review and analysis of newspaper articles from Thai newspapers in English and Thai.

The following are the details of the sources and data we used.

1. Participant observation. Over a period of two years, between March 2023 and February 2025, the authors attended events in both urban and peri-urban settings known for active Vanz subculture activity, including nighttime motorcycle gatherings, racing sites, and social hubs such as convenience stores, garages, and street-side hangouts. Locations included Thung Khru (ทุ่งครุ) and Bang Khun Thian (บางขุนเทียน) districts in Southern Bangkok; Don Mueang (ดอนเมือง) district in Northern Bangkok; Rangsit (รังสิต) municipality in Pathum Thani (ปทุมธานี) province;

Mueang Chonburi (เมืองชลบุรี) district, Nongkho Airport (สนามบินหนองค้อ) in Si Racha (ศรีราชา) district and Pattaya (พัทยา) city in Chonburi (ชลบุรี) province. Most of the racing occurred at night on weekends, due to many of the participants being off duty from work and also because many Vanz gatherings followed official and legal motorcycle events. The researchers attended these events as both observers and partial participants, building trust and rapport over time. Observation focused on everyday practices, group dynamics, performative aspects of racing, and gendered interactions, particularly the roles and representations of the “Scoy Girls” (สาวสก๊อย). Field notes were recorded during or immediately after each session with the aim to capture sensory details, spatial arrangements, vernacular speech, and affective atmosphere. The research also includes a collection of photos taken at the events to document and offer the visual account of our descriptions. Extra care was taken to maintain ethical boundaries, particularly when observing illegal street racing, by not participating in any acts that might endanger the participants or the public. Some participants agreed to take part in the study but not to have their faces shown. In all those cases, we blurred their faces to make sure they were not recognizable.

2. In-depth interviews. We conducted semi-structured interviews with about 30 participants. We conducted ten individual interviews with members of the subculture, which included “Vanz Boys,” “Scoy Girls,” mechanics, and event organizers. These interviews were accurately noted and are discussed separately one by one in the study. Many more interviews were conducted in an informal fashion and not completely noted or recorded; therefore, they were not discussed. Nevertheless, they were used as a source of information for better understanding of the subculture. Participants were aged between 20 and 39 years old, mostly Thai, with one foreigner living in Thailand and attending the events of the subculture. The interviews were conducted in both English and Thai (translated later into English). Open-ended questions were used to explore participants’ motivations, social affiliations, perceptions of risk and law enforcement, and views on media representations. Given the potentially stigmatized and criminalized nature of the subculture, ethical considerations were paramount. The researchers took precautions to avoid interfering with or influencing illegal activities. All interviews were anonymized, and nicknames instead of their real names were used to respect their concern for personal privacy. Furthermore, the participants were informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time.

3. Thai and English language newspaper articles. To complement ethnographic data, the study conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Thai and English language stories from the news, portraying the Vanz Boys and issues related to them, published over a period of about 12 years (2012-2025). Thai language media outlets we used include the following: The Thai Post (ไทยโพสต์), The Thai Rath (ไทยรัฐ), The Krungthep Turakij (กรุงเทพธุรกิจ), Khaosod Online (ข่าวสด), Thai PBS, and MGR Online. English language media outlets included The Bangkok Post and The Pattaya Mail. Analysis focused on discursive constructions of delinquency, noise, urban disorder, and gender roles, following Fairclough’s framework on CDA, with attention to ideological framing and the reproduction of moral panic. This is a note regarding the choice between translation and transliteration of Thai words. We chose to follow the terminology used by English language media outlets. This study’s main subjects may be called something else in other works. The Royal Institute of Thailand’s system, which is widely used in research, officially transliterates the Thai term for the subculture (เด็กแว้น) as “dek waen” (Kanchanawan 2006). Other studies have used the term “motopunk” (Reyngrong and Euajarusphan 2020; Martsri et al. 2021). As mentioned above, we decided to use the term “Vanz Boys” because it is more commonly used in Thai English language newspapers.

Review of Media Articles

Both Thai and English outlets have portrayed the “Vanz Boys” phenomenon as indicative of a broader social malaise, often framing the youth involved as both emblematic of modern urban anxiety and as ostensible threats to public order. In the Thai press, stories frequently foreground the spectacle of large-scale police operations and the collateral impact on families, depicting authorities as engaged in a paternalistic project to rein in rebellious youth. For instance, the Thai Rath reported in July 2016 that police, working alongside military personnel, had surrounded and arrested sixty-three suspected dek waen (เด็กแว้น) in Bang Phong Phang (บางโพธิ์พาง), prompting parents to post bail of 20,000 baht per child while local social workers initiated a seven-day reorientation program to instill “discipline” and “road safety consciousness.” (Thai Rath, July 16, 2016). This language of remediation recurs across Thai sources, casting the Vanz Boys as problematic youths to be coerced into proper, responsible behavior. The Bangkok Post has similarly framed the phenomenon as a problem ripe for novel policing strategies, recounting how Chon Buri police designated a four-kilometer seaside bridge for legally sanctioned racing to preempt nighttime street takeovers. The narrative recounted in A bridge too far in campaign to tame the wild ‘vanz boys’ emphasized the authorities’ attempt to rechannel youthful energy, even as it noted that subsequent complaining from the local community and political pressures forced a withdrawal of the experiment. It is interesting to notice that even in an article that reports on a positive attempt to contain the subculture, negative language is plentiful. Starting from the headline, they are addressed as wild vanz boys who need to be tamed. The article then refers to them as demons, accusing them of causing traffic chaos, gambling, and drug use (Bangkok Post, March 27, 2016). Many of the news stories we reviewed stress civil society’s calls for the authorities to be as strict as possible. Authorities have responded by deploying extraordinary measures

underpinned by emergency decrees and expansive interpretations of public order statutes, thereby reinforcing a punitive stance. A polling exercise reported by the Bangkok Post in June 2016 revealed that approximately seventy percent of respondents considered the Vanz Boys a grave problem, and nearly eighty percent endorsed Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's invocation of Section 44 to seize modified motorcycles outright (Bangkok Post, June 10, 2016). Section 44, central to the 2014 interim constitution, granted the executive branch near-unilateral authority to bypass standard judicial procedures. You would expect that kind of measure to apply to extremely serious cases, such as organized crime or national security issues. By associating its application with illegal street racing, even before they apply the law, they pass the message that the Vanz Boys are an unnecessary evil to be dealt with through the most extreme means. Simultaneously, Thai mass media have documented systematic crackdowns and preemptive arrests. In the article mentioned above, the Thai Rath noted that following the raid in Bang Phong Phang, the detained minors underwent traffic discipline training (oprom got winaijarajorn อบรมกฎวินัยจราจร) and were subjected to two-year motorcycle impoundment threats if rearrested (Thai Rath, July 16, 2016). This "containment through correction" rationale aligns with a discourse of deterrence that privileges state control over rehabilitative or educational alternatives. The authorities' public announcements frequently emphasize zero tolerance, thereby exacerbating perceptions of street racing as a menace warranting extraordinary state intrusion into family and community life.

Media coverage, in turn, reinforces a moral panic by selectively amplifying stories of accidents, noise complaints, and clashes between riders and law enforcement. Within Thai outlets, terms such as "เด็กแว้น" and "แว้น" (waen) carry derogatory connotations, amplifying juvenile delinquency and moral deviance. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework is instructive here: news articles construct an interwoven narrative that positions the Vanz Boys as pathological outliers requiring correction, thus legitimizing draconian interventions. For example, when the Thai Rath described parents paying bail for their children, the report underscored the emotional and economic burdens on families while concurrently validating the necessity of "อบรม" (training) as a corrective measure (Thai Rath, July 16, 2016). Such framing draws a clear boundary between "responsible" citizens and "reckless" youth, presupposing that these young riders lack legitimate social outlets.

The notion of "moral panic," as elaborated by Stanley Cohen, elucidates how societal fears coalesce around a defined group labeled a "folk devil," whose purported transgressions threaten prevailing norms (Cohen 1972). In this sense, Vanz Boys is a concept that serves as a convenient focus for broader anxieties about urban modernity, youth dissatisfaction, and lawlessness. The volume of front-page reports on racing accidents, arrests, and confiscations, often accompanied by arresting photos of youths and rows of impounded motorbikes, amplifies the sense of crisis.

Origins and social context of the subculture

The Vanz Boys subculture emerged in Thailand during the late 1990s and early 2000s, coinciding with the widespread availability of inexpensive two-stroke motorcycles such as the Honda Nova and Yamaha TZR. These machines, affordable, lightweight, and easy to modify, became central to the lives of many rural and working-class youth, who appropriated them not only as modes of transportation but also as vehicles for cultural expression and social belonging (Phongpaichit and Baker 1998). Dismissed by mainstream society as a juvenile pastime or a public nuisance, the movement has evolved into a highly codified urban phenomenon with its behaviors, attitudes, symbols, rituals, and beliefs (Reungrong and Euajarusphan 2020).

Fieldwork conducted in Bangkok and in Chonburi province reveals that many participants come from households with limited access to the expensive leisure activities available to middle-upper class Thai citizens and foreign residents. Economic precarity, coupled with the erosion of traditional communal structures in peri-urban areas, has driven youth to seek solidarity, status, and creative autonomy through initiatives such as Vanz Boys gatherings. These night meets are often held under highway flyovers, in industrial zones, or along peripheral ring roads. The choice of those locations not only serves to evade police attention but also to create liminal spaces where participants can experiment with identity and show their audacity to cultivate peer recognition and climb the power hierarchy within the group.

Rather than simply functioning as informal street racers, the Vanz Boys frame their collective gatherings as forums for self-expression, emotional refuge, and mutual aid. The subculture challenges dominant moral narratives of delinquency by emphasizing loyalty, technical skill, and an ethos of shared struggle. Outsiders often use the term *dek waen* (เด็กแว้น) in a pejorative connotation, labeling them as troublemakers and reinforcing a middle-class moral panic around their youth deviance. Yet, as Cohen argues in her study of youth subcultures in Chiang Mai, such groups often reflect deeper anxieties around modernity, marginalization, and shifting national imaginaries (Cohen 2009). These anxieties are particularly acute in rapidly urbanizing areas like Bangkok's outskirts and industrial nodes such as Chonburi, where traditional norms are destabilized by the pressures of globalization and where the rapid economic development has left out the children of the expanding working class.

The Vanz Boys exhibit a hybrid ethos that combines working-class resourcefulness with aesthetic experimentation and a rejection of bourgeois values or property, as seen in not uncommon cases of gang fighting and vandalism, one of them also documented by a video taken by a foreign tourist and posted online in March 2023 (Thai Rath, March

31, 2023). The video showed more than twenty Vanz Boys vandalizing the booths of the food vendors of Bangsaen Beach and using sticks and kitchen tools taken from the booths to fight against a rival group. Their motorcycles are not merely vehicles to move around; they are curated objects, carefully modified to reflect personal taste and collective belonging. This visual and sonic language of customization speaks to a broader practice of identity construction in the face of limited socioeconomic mobility.



[Photo 1. Vanz Boys Tuning the Motorcycle. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]



[Photo 2. Vanz Boys Tuning and Customizing the Motorcycle right before a Gathering. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

Scholars such as Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit have long argued that Thailand's youth cultures must be understood within the broader context of economic disparity and uneven development. In Thailand's Boom and Bust and other works, they describe how shifts in economic policy and rural-to-urban migration have produced new social formations, particularly among young people navigating the contradictions of a consumerist society without the means to fully participate in it (Phongpaichit and Baker 1998). The Vanz Boys exemplify this condition; neither fully excluded nor comfortably integrated into the national modernity, they occupy a precarious space on its margins, carving out autonomy through speed, noise, and kinship.



[Photo 3. Vanz Boys Preparing to Race at Night Gathering, Courtesy JRP Thailand]



[Photo 4. Vanz Boys Preparing to Race at Night Gathering, Courtesy Federico D'Orazio and JRP Thailand]

Symbols and Aesthetics

The motorcycle is the core of the Vanz Boys subculture. Through the relentless customization of two-stroke motorcycles, stripped to reveal skeletal frames, thin wheels, fitted with appositely fabricated exhausts that emit the trademark “waen waen waen” (แวน ๆ) roar, and adorned with fluorescent decals and underglow LEDs, riders signal not only technical prowess and material investment but also a performative defiance of normative urban order (Reyngrong and Euajarusphan 2020).



[Photo 5. Customized Vanz Motorcycle (Yamaha). Copyright Manuele Mambelli]



[Photo 6. Home Customized Vanz Motorcycle (Honda Nova). Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

Complementing these sonic and visual modifications is a vernacular dress code: grime-stained jeans or cargo trousers paired with graphic T-shirts bearing skull motifs, skeletal imagery, or Thai rock band logos, alongside ubiquitous rubber slippers or flip-flops and half-shell helmets. The dressing makes the rider's body become an extension of the bike itself (Cohen 2009). Tattoos inked in improvised roadside parlors further embed narratives of risk, belonging, and individual biography into the flesh, mirroring the bikes' own bricolage of parts and meanings. In sum, the Vanz

Boys align their motorcycles, wardrobes, and bodies as interchangeable semiotic resources, forging a dynamic aesthetic regime that negotiates class aspirations, spatial claims, and mediated visibility in contemporary Thai society.



[Photo 7. Vanz Boy Style and Look with Matching Clothes and Motorcycle. Copyright Manuele Mambelli]



[Photo 8. Vanz Boys at Meetup. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

The gathering places and the challenge to the authorities

On many Friday and Saturday nights, you can spot the Vanz Boys speeding to the designated areas of their gathering, usually moving in small convoys of five to ten motorcycles. The exact location is kept secret and only shared in closed social media groups at the last minute. The participants only know the broader area to which they converge, waiting for the message of the organizers in places like deserted petrol stations, dark alleys, or under flyovers. The secrecy is key to preventing the police from preparing to confront them. Once they have gathered together, the hundreds of noisy motorcycles are, of course, no longer a secret. However, they can be sure that nobody, not even the police, will bother

them. Indeed, a large number of agents and a well-organized effort are required to counteract and prevent a Vanz Boys' event.



[Photo 9. Vanz Boys in Action. Courtesy เจ้าเกาะเรสซิ่ง]



[Photo 10. Vanz Boys in Action. Courtesy เจ้าเกาะเรสซิ่ง]



[Photo 11. Vanz Boys in Action. Courtesy เจ้าเกาะเรสซิ่ง]

Based on our observations, interviews, and media coverage of the phenomenon, here is an account of how the Vanz Boys take control of the space. They block the road with two pickup trucks at either end of the street area they need, after hundreds of them have converged at the races. All the motorists who happen to pass by that road must find an alternative route.

However, by planning their raids in advance, the police can prevent illegal races and arrest the Vanz Boys involved. They use large container trucks to block the road and prevent the Vanz Boys from running away. They then enter the scene, arrest the Vanz Boys en masse, and seize their modified motorcycles (Bangkok Post, May 31, 2015).



[Photo 12. Mass Arrest of Vanz Boys by the Police in Bangkok. Courtesy Bangkok Post, Sanook.com Photo]

Given the complexity of planning an operation during the illegal racing events, local police have adopted a multi-pronged strategy of marked and unmarked patrols, motorbike checkpoints, and the mentioned dawn raids aimed at seizing modified motorcycles under the Motor Traffic Act (Sindecharak 2023). They also enlist intelligence from community-policing units to anticipate hot spots. Yet the subculture's deep cartographic knowledge of the metropolis enables riders to reroute gatherings with little lead time, disseminating encrypted coordinates via social media groups, usually on Line or Facebook, so that new loci appear as swiftly as old ones are cleared (Sopranzetti 2018; Reyngrong and Euajarusphan 2020). Repression and police crackdowns are not the only ways Thai authorities are trying to face the problem. Interestingly, some cities have experimented with regularizing street-racing events, offering race tracks like in Buriram (บุรีรัมย์) or building a road on the sea to accommodate motorcycle racing, like in Chonburi (Bangkok Post, March 27, 2016). While some members of the subculture welcome these overtures, others view them as co-optation, preferring the unregulated thrill of the street. In fact, many Vanz Boys and Scoy Girls actively seek the rebellious excitement that comes with breaking the rules and earning the label of troublemakers and renegades. So, the more spectacularized the punishment, the more exciting it gets.

Gender roles and the “trophy” Scoy Girls (สาวสก็อย)

In the predominantly male Vanz Boys subculture, the young women, known colloquially as “Scoy Girls” (สาวสก็อย), occupy a unique position that blends conspicuous adornment with substantive agency. Scoy Girls most often appear as pillion passengers, their elevated perch offering both literal and figurative vantage points. Armed with handheld cameras, they live-tweet races, stream to social media, and document the subculture's ephemeral spectacles. Beyond functionality, Scoy Girls deploy a carefully calibrated sartorial arsenal. Cropped tops and body-contouring tanks pair with distressed denim shorts to signal both defiance and desirability.



[Photo 13. Scoy Girls on her Motorcycle. Copyright Federico D'orazio]



[Photo 14. Scoy Girl Posing at a Gathering. Courtesy เจ้าเกาะเรสซิ่ง]



[Photo 15. Scoy Girl Signalling the Start of the Race. Courtesy เจ้าเกาะเรสซิ่ง]



[Photo 16. Scoy Girls with Rider. Copyright Federico D'orazio]

Platform flip-flops elevate them, literally, above the asphalt, while makeup routines emphasize a contrast between porcelain-like skin and dark lipsticks. Colored contact lenses and bleached or neon hair introduce an otherworldly flair, evoking the subculture's affinity for the sensational. Temporary "skoy" tattoos, chunky belts, and statement bracelets complete the look, creating a walking billboard for subcultural identity. Scoy Girls also orchestrate their own performances. During "bike parades," pairs of participants cruise commercial boulevards in choreographed convoys, honking their horns in unison and waving handheld LED fans to enhance the atmosphere of the dusk-lit streets. These convoys are less about speed than about presence.

Mainstream Thai society frequently dismisses Scoy Girls as attention seekers or moral transgressors, employing tropes of female impropriety to police gendered boundaries. Within the Vanz Boys milieu, however, these young women command respect for their technical know-how and for their networking prowess, brokering alliances between rival crews. It is not uncommon to also see the Scoy Girls riding their own heavily modified motorcycles. Scoy girls establish their importance in the subculture through a ritual that turns them into trophies for the winners. The Vanz Boys risk their lives by racing their modified motorcycles with little or no safety rules. The winner will not only earn the respect of the group and emerge as a leader, but he will also win the right to get intimate with the Scoy Girl who is placed as a trophy. As it emerged from our interviews, the girls do not feel exploited or reduced to sexual objects but excited and attracted to the alpha male who risks his life to win her with his riding skills and bravery.

INTERVIEWS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we will discuss the interviews and events we observed and partially participated in. Below we discuss the content and findings of the interviews of which we have a record. We will describe the activities that took place during the events, including details about participants, races, entertainment, and locations. The researchers have also included photographs from the events and interviews. By showcasing the people, motorcycles, and the environment where the subculture comes alive, the photos are a crucial element of our research, helping the reader to understand and truly grasp what the Vanz Boys subculture is all about.

Interview 1. Guy

We met Guy at a small beachfront café along Bangsaen Beach Road, a place pulsing with the energy of Thailand's underground motorcycle scene. It is the kind of spot where engines hum long after they have been shut off and where the Vanz Boys often hang out before or after a race. Guy is a keen motorcycle rider with a preference for large-engine bikes. He owns a 1,000cc Yamaha.



[Photo 17. Guy on his Yamaha 1,000 cc. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

He did not identify himself as a Vanz Boy, although he admitted to having taken part in many illegal night races. In our conversation, it emerged that his main motivation for joining the races is excitement and entertainment. He joins the events for fun, like he was going to a party. When asked about Vanz Boy's identity and belonging to a subculture, he replied that he does not think anyone feels much part of it. People only join for fun and excitement. This interview shows that many participants in the Vanz Boys subculture exhibit little awareness of the larger group and belonging to it. They identify more with their smaller groups of friends rather than feeling part of a larger subculture.

Interview 2. DeeJay

Near Bangsaen Beach is a small garage owned by a mechanic known as DeeJay, where several bikes are repaired. DeeJay played a key role in our research, not only for sharing his deep knowledge of the Vanz Boys subculture and

his perspective as an insider, but also for introducing us to people involved with the Vanz Boys phenomenon through his network in the world of motorcycle racing.

Asked about the motivations to join the subculture, DeeJay initially focused on excitement and fun. However, he added a new element. He said that the boys want to win the race and be popular. The girls also want to be the center of attention and be recognized as queens of the event. These answers may seem simple, but they show that these events' fun aspects also reflect the larger society's aspirations. Many individuals among the Vanz Boys come from working-class backgrounds, have low education, often originate from dysfunctional families, and may feel that they have limited opportunities for social mobility in life. The world of motorcycle racing becomes, then, a channel to fulfill their aspirations. The boys may become champions and leaders; the girls may become the stars of the night.

Interview 3. Martin

It was at DeeJay's garage that we met Martin, a foreign mechanic from Germany who, at the time of the interview, had been living in Thailand for more than five years. Martin has firsthand knowledge of the illegal races in Thailand as both a spectator and an active biker in legal circuit races.



[Photo 18. DeeJay and Martin. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

He replied “no” to the question of whether he had ever participated in any illegal night race. The negative answer may stem from his concern that participating in the races could be illegal, and as a foreigner, he might face more severe consequences than Thai nationals. He would risk having his visa revoked, for example, and being expelled from the country. However, he shared his experience as a spectator and his understanding of that world as a mechanic. When asked about motivations, he confirmed that fun and excitement are the number one reason why they race. He added that there were sometimes material prizes, such as supplies of lubricating oil or small amounts of money. He also mentioned illegal betting, but he quickly added that he did not know much about it.

Interview 4. Mr. A

Martin owns a small garage, and he attends legal track circuit racing to promote his business. One of his competitors is Bangkok-based Mr. A, a well-known individual in the racing community. Mr. A was the single greatest source of firsthand information for our research. He owns several businesses related to the motorcycle industry. His main enterprise is the production and direct sale of helmets through online channels and in booths at motorcycle festivals and events.



[Photo 19. Mr. A. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

Mr. A confirmed that the main motivation to go to a Vanz Boys event is fun. When asked whether Vanz Boys race for money, he was quick to reply and confirm that it is “never for money, only for fun.” He also mentioned how the boys want to win the “Scoy Girl” placed as a trophy for the winner. This is one of the most distinguishing yet controversial aspects of the illegal races. It is not money the riders go after. For them it is actually a financial burden, as they spend most of their small working-class salaries on accessories for their bikes. What they really want, it seems, is excitement, glory, and winning the most desired girl of the gathering.

Mr. A is always on the road, traveling in a van with his family for street markets and festivals, where he sells his uniquely decorated helmets in booths. Since most of his sales come from online channels, the itinerant activity is for him less about business and more about a way of life. He enjoys the vibes of the motorcycle racing environments. Our research confirms that the contagious atmosphere is indeed one of the strongest motivators for all the people attending both official and illegal motorcycle events.

On the issue of safety and wearing helmets at the races, Mr. A replied that wearing helmets “empowers” the bikers when they travel from one city to another, meaning that they are less likely to be checked by the police. However, he then added that motorcycle helmets lowered the status of the Vanz Boy as a fearless rider. Wearing a helmet would mean that the rider was concerned for his safety, and that would be considered a sign of “weakness” to be ashamed of. Mr. A’s answer shows how important it is to the subculture to have the courage to challenge the likelihood of potentially fatal accidents.

Interview 5. Jer

Through Mr. A, we got to know Jer, one of his associates. They were visiting various night markets in Chonburi province to find new locations for selling helmets and accessories for bikers. At 39 years of age, Jer is the oldest rider we interviewed. He is the only one to have admitted to having been a Vanz Boy. He said that he no longer races, but that in the past he used to do it almost every weekend.

We asked Jer what his main reasons were for riding. He confirmed that he had never done it for money, but for fun and for being famous. He liked the feeling of being famous and when everybody was looking at him with respect and admiration.

We also asked Jer a question about safety and wearing helmets while racing. He said that nobody wears helmets while racing. If one did, they would be looked down upon by their peers.



[Photo 20. Jer, Former Vanz Boy. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

Interview 6. Bee

Bee is Jer’s girlfriend. She was accompanying him on his business trips. To the question of why Vanz Boys and Scoy Girls joined the gatherings, she replied that fun and entertainment were not the main motivators. She mentioned that being part of the group was more important. When they went to the events, the participants felt part of something big and important. When asked why she liked going to the events, she answered that she had many friends who also went. Then she added that winning a race made you a hero. That, she believed, was the most important thing for the riders.



[Photo 21. Bee, Jer's Girlfriend. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

Interview 7. Garfield

Garfield is a student at Burapha University. Following her rider boyfriend, she has taken part in many events of the subculture. With her we talked about the Vanz Boys scene in Bangsaen. Burapha University is located in the heart of Saen Suk (แสนสุข) municipality, a town in Chonburi normally referred to as Bangsaen (บางแสน), which is the name of the main beach and the unofficial name for the area. Vanz Boys often arrange gatherings at Bangsaen, which is those that Garfield joins in. She says that her boyfriend could be defined as a Vanz Boy, but that nobody addresses him using that term, nor does he identify himself with it. Garfield confirmed that the main motivator is definitely not money. She mentioned another kind of illegal race, which she called the “big bike group,” and she said that at those races people place bets. However, she said that betting would be very unusual at a Vanz Boys race. She stated that winning the trophy Scoy Girl is as big a motivator as the popularity of being the champion.

We then moved on to the topic of the Scoy Girls and their role in the racing events. She said that they were the Vanz Boys' girlfriends, and because of that, she was also one of them. She said that many of them were high school students and that, as a college student, she was older than the average Scoy Girl. She then added some interesting information about the terms *dek waen* (เด็กแว้น) and *sao scoy* (สาวสก๊อย). She repeated that nobody in the subculture used those words to identify themselves or others, as they had a derogatory connotation used in the media and from the general public who looked down on them. About the English translation “Vanz Boys,” she added that most of them would not even know what that meant.

With Garfield we also talked about style and safety, especially about helmets. She told us that she did wear a helmet but that she had never seen a Vanz Boy wearing one. She stated that, “if you wear [a] helmet, you don't look like [a] Vanz Boy.”



[Photo 22. Garfield, Scoy Girl. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

Interview 8. Monjikorn

Monjikorn is a friend of Garfield. He said that he joined the Vanz Boys racing events, but he preferred to avoid saying whether he was also taking part as a rider. When asked about safety and helmets, he told us that helmets were helpful to avoid being stopped by the police. He then explained how the police often try to extract money from bikers. He added his opinion on why the Vanz Boys do not wear helmets. He said that it was to show their faces to the girls. His answer confirms the importance and centrality of the relationship between Vanz Boys and Scoy Girls in the subculture.



[Photo 23. Monjikorn. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

Interview 9. Aom

Aom is not the typical Vanz Boy, but he attends regularly the events of the subculture. We went to meet him at his food stall at a night market in Bang Khun Thian (บางขุนเทียน) district in Southern Bangkok. When he does not sell food at the market, he rides on his Vespa and joins motorcycle events, both legal and illegal, where he performs stunts such as wheelies. He said he wanted to go to the event to have fun and become famous. Aom's story shows us how the aspirations of the members of the subculture are not the same for everyone. Every rider is unique, but they all share a love of motorcycles and the dangers they face. In his case, the danger he faced was due to performing sophisticated stunts. When we asked him where he got his passion for stunts, he said that he was inspired by an Italian YouTuber famous for his Vespa stunts (@nicolalimpennatore, blog on YouTube).



[Photo 24. Aom, Vespa Stuntman. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

Interview 10. Anonymous

We conducted our last interview near Si Racha beach, at a gathering point outside a minimart. We were introduced to him by students at Burapha University. As he was giving us information deemed to remain secret, he did not want to show his face and be recognized. He told us dates and locations of events, where we would later go to take pictures and collect information for our research. He wore a helmet that covered his entire face throughout the interview. Intriguing details about rival gangs competing at the races were provided by him. His account adds to and enhances our understanding of the Vanz Boys subculture, which consists of many different groups. This confirms the idea that there is not a common identity and sense of belonging to the subculture, but the various Vanz Boys and Scoy Girls rather belong to smaller groups, often competing and even fighting with each other.



[Photo 25. Anonymous Vanz Boy. Copyright Federico D'Orazio]

CONCLUSION

In the past two years, the authors of this study have attended the environments of the Vanz Boys, a subculture located outside mainstream Thai society. This phenomenon is worth studying because it is part of the experience of more and more youths in Thailand, because of the potential problems that need to be addressed, and because of the lack of understanding and studies on it. We have approached the subculture from an ethnographic perspective, observing the environments and the people and talking to them.

Our findings show a world way more complex than that which emerges from the mainstream media in Thailand. Newspapers have focused on the problems they cause in the communities where they gather. Major problems that they cause to the community are the annoying noise of their exhaust pipes, traffic chaos, especially when they block the roads, limiting the mobility of the general people, the petty crimes sometimes committed by some gangs that take part in these events. The problems that affect them and their families include accidents, the potential for injury, and even the risk of loss of life. All these problems exist and need to be addressed. However, we have found that the picture emerging from mainstream media does not show the complexity of this apparently simple, but, we have found, multifaceted, subculture. Media outlets tend to focus on the negative aspects and on the spectacularization of the punishments, while deeper analysis and understanding is more likely to produce better solutions and ways to deal with this phenomenon.

We tried to contribute to addressing this information and understanding gap through our field observations and interviews. Our findings show that the Vanz Boys do not have explicit awareness of a specific identity and sense of belonging to a larger group. They often identify with a smaller group or gang. Their main motivators are the thrills related to the dangers they face without fear and the risks they take. The choice to seek those dangers and risks, such as not wearing a helmet while racing at extreme speeds, is in fact a distinctive element of their identity. Ritual aspects like the Scoy Girl as a trophy blend with the fun of taking part in a form of entertainment that does not depend on the models proposed by mainstream society.

In the end, we would like to conclude this study by thanking all the people who shared their experience with us, contributing to increasing knowledge and understanding of it. We hope that more research on this subject will come and will continue to spread light on a phenomenon that is rising in popularity and, for good or for bad, affects the lives of millions of people, both in and out of the Vanz Boys subculture.

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