

Supply Means Supply – what does ‘supply’ mean? Consumer responses to a campaign targeting secondary supply of alcohol to teenagers

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Abstract

A significant factor contributing to the problem of underage drinking is the ‘secondary supply’ of alcohol to minors. Secondary supply by parents for consumption in private settings is legal in most states of Australia including NSW. The NSW Police Force, in partnership with the Central Coast Health Promotion Unit, developed a community-based intervention to address the issue of secondary supply of alcohol to minors (‘Supply Means Supply’). This paper reports on a series of focus groups to examine in more depth the drivers of attitudes towards secondary supply to minors, and to assess responses to the Supply Means Supply campaign messages. Twenty focus groups were conducted with teenagers, young adults and parents/carers in Wollongong, Penrith and Dubbo.

Background

Underage drinking in Australia is widespread, with 75% of children having tried alcohol by the age of 12, and frequency and quantity of consumption increasing as they move through adolescence (White & Smith, 2012). Nearly half of 17-year old males (46%) and more than a third of 17-year old females (37%) are considered regular drinkers. Teenagers are increasingly drinking at risky levels, defined as consuming seven or more alcohol drinks on a single day for males, and five or more for females (White & Smith, 2012). The proportion of risky drinkers increases from 1% of 13 year olds to 18% of 17 year olds (White & Smith, 2012). Alcohol consumption by adolescents presents serious health and social problems unique to their age group. Due to the remarkable changes adolescent brains undergo as part of the normal process of development, alcohol consumption can have more devastating impacts on the brain of adolescents than the brains of adults (Lubman, Yucel & Hall, 2007). Socially, implications include delinquent behavior and risky sexual behaviors (National Centre on Addiction and Substance Abuse, 2002).

A significant factor contributing to underage drinking is the ‘secondary supply’ of alcohol to minors (i.e. the supply of alcohol to minors by persons other than licensees/staff employed by licensed premises, such as parents, siblings and older peers). In a recent survey of NSW students aged 12-17 years, parents were reported as the most common source of alcohol supply for those who had consumed alcohol in the past seven days (NSW Department of Health, 2008). Secondary supply by parents for consumption in private settings is legal in most states of Australia including NSW (*Liquor Act 2007 No 90*).

Supplying alcohol to minors has been associated with a range of parenting factors and behaviours (Ryan, Jorb & Lubman, 2010). Ryan et al. (2010) examined parenting factors associated with alcohol use in adolescents and found associations between lower levels of alcohol consumption and parents’ attitudes and actions towards alcohol and adolescents. Conservative injunctive norms towards alcohol consumption, or disapproving of consumption by adolescents, are associated with lower levels of drinking (van der Vorst,

Engels, Meeus et al., 2006). The availability of alcohol and the parents' level of awareness of the peers and activities of their children are also associated with consumption (Ryan et al, 2010). Children are also influenced by parental modeling or descriptive norms, with regular drinking habits of parents associated with higher levels of alcohol consumption in their adolescent children (McCullum, 1990; van der Vorst, et al., 2006).

Although these associations are supported by a substantial body of research, parents may not understand the extent to which they influence the drinking behaviour of their children (McCullum, 1990). It also appears that many adults still believe that supplying their teenage child with alcohol is an effective method to teach socially responsible drinking; that a controlled and supervised introduction to alcohol minimizes the likelihood of their children engaging in excessive consumption as an act of rebellion (Tamasailau et al, 2012; Ward & Snow, 2011). Supplying alcohol to 15 to 17 year old children in the home and under parental supervision is supported by half of Australian adults, with those on higher incomes even more likely to perceive this as an appropriate behaviour (63%) (BUPA, 2009). Perceived norms surrounding the drinking behaviours 'other parents' condone may influence parental attitudes (Gilligan, Kypri & Lubman, 2012).

The NSW Police Force, in partnership with the Central Coast Health Promotion Unit, developed a community-based intervention to address the issue of secondary supply of alcohol to minors: 'Supply Means Supply' is a multi-faceted enforcement, education and advertising intervention targeting parents, carers and young people aimed at educating these populations about the issues surrounding secondary supply.

An important element of the 'Supply Means Supply' (SMS) intervention was a series of television and radio advertisements designed to communicate the SMS message to the three target groups. The SMS campaign consisted of four television advertisements, a radio advertisement, and a series of print advertisements (which can be viewed online at: http://www.police.nsw.gov.au/community_issues/alcohol/supply_means_supply). The campaign ran from 13 December 2009 to 6 March 2010. The UOW Centre for Health Initiatives, working in partnership with NSW Police and the AER Foundation, conducted an evaluation designed to (1) assess knowledge and attitudes towards underage supply (using a pre and post-intervention survey, reported elsewhere); (2) examine in more depth the drivers of attitudes towards secondary supply; and (3) to assess responses to the SMS media campaign messages (a series of focus groups). This evaluation was conducted in the three trial Local Area Commands (Wollongong, Penrith and Dubbo).

Method

Twenty focus groups were conducted to examine knowledge, awareness and attitudes of teenagers, young adults and parents/carers towards the supply of alcohol to minors and to the media components of the SMS program. Five groups were conducted in each of the three trial LACs (teenagers $n=1$; young adults $n=2$; parents/carers $n=2$); with five subsequent groups in Wollongong to supplement smaller numbers in the under 18 and 18-24 year age groups. A total of 39 parents and carers, 44 18-24 year olds and 14 under 18 year olds participated in the focus groups across the three LACs.

Participants were recruited from a pool of respondents to a previous survey on secondary supply of alcohol who had provided their contact details for participation in future research, through friendship networks and snowballing techniques. All participants received either a \$20 voucher (under 18s) or a \$40 voucher (over 18s) as a thank you for their time.

A discussion guide was used in order to ensure topics such as the participants' attitudes and behavioural responses, as well as key issues of acceptability, believability, relevance and impact of the media components of the SMS program were all covered in conversation. If a parent of young person raised a relevant topic that was not covered in the discussion guide, the facilitator would let conversation flow naturally. The focus group transcripts were analysed and coded for key themes using NVivo software program; responses inconsistent with emerging patterns were sought and are reported where they occurred.

Results

Knowledge about the Supply of Alcohol to Minors

The majority of parents, young adults and teenagers were aware that there were laws about the supply of alcohol to people under the age of 18. However upon further questioning it was apparent that there was a great deal of confusion around exactly what the laws were and particularly how they were related to parents:

They don't allow underage drinking on the streets or anything but when you're in a family environment your dad says 'son do you want a glass of wine'? Sure dad, thank-you. That's fine but I think it gets a bit hazy when you add strangers on your property, I don't know, I'm not really sure. (Parent, Wollongong)

With regard to the source of their knowledge about these laws, a small number of parents and young adults had seen the Supply Means Supply ads, while others reported seeing signs in bottle shops. Several young adults had learnt about alcohol and the laws about provision to minors in their Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA) course, while the teenagers reported that their information usually came from either school or their parents.

Attitudes to the Supply of Alcohol to Minors

The majority of parents did not believe that the provision of alcohol to their own children who were under 18 was a black and white issue, with many agreeing that it was better for young people to drink under supervision than "on the streets" alone.

They get curious. It's better to have a controlled situation where they have a sip, rather than go and get it off their mate. (Parent, Dubbo)

Parents generally reported that while they reluctantly provided small amounts of alcohol to their children, they did so in order to prevent them going off and getting "loaded" without their knowledge.

It's probably better if they can sit around and have a beer where you can see them rather than sculling half a bottle of spirits in the shed and coming out and then being violently ill and blind drunk. (Parent, Wollongong)

This is an interesting position as the evidence from countries such as Australia (as opposed to countries with a different drinking culture) suggests that the provision of alcohol by parents may have the opposite effect, although only one of the parents acknowledged this:

You might give them one or two glasses of wine and that's OK at a party because everyone's doing it, have one or two, but you don't see what they're drinking when you're not there. So you might give them a glass or two of wine, they might get a bottle of vodka. Because you said it's OK to drink the consequences are very much on you as

on anyone else. (Parent, Wollongong)

Parents overwhelmingly stated that they would not be comfortable providing or supplying alcohol to a minor who was not their own child:

It's a trust between parents that the boys are at my home, you know, so I take that quite seriously. (Parent, Penrith)

The teenagers generally reinforced this, saying that their parent would not provide alcohol for their friends. However, the young adults were divided as to whether they would provide alcohol to their siblings and/or their friends. Some said they would not, but most would and many had, with stories of their experiences highlighting the difficulties they can get into.

My younger sister absolutely scared the living daylights out of me, I had no idea what to do with them and they were vomiting. (Young adult, 18-24, Penrith).

Believability of the SMS Ads

The television and radio advertisements were played in the focus groups, and participants were asked to comment on them. Some of the parents and the young adults said that the TV ads were believable as they were realistic and familiar scenes, particularly the skate park scenario.

That's really common at skate parks. In every skate park, you see teenagers hanging around, sometimes drinking. That is a very common example. That's what happens in suburbs. My kids are not allowed to go to the skate park because of this. (Parent, Penrith)

However the large majority of the teenagers and many of the young adults interviewed felt the ads were not believable, as they took them very literally. They commented that things such as the age of the offender, the time of day and the type of party were unrealistic.

It's not what a party would look like. At an under 18s party with alcohol, they're not just sitting around quietly and look like they haven't drunk. As soon as the kids get to the party, they're sculling and just drink as much as they can. (Under 18, Penrith)

Impact of the Message

A small number of participants felt that the ad provided them with new information, although most participants felt that the information was already well known. With regard to communication of the message itself, many of the participants felt that the information was not specific enough – particularly in terms of the size of the fine and the nature of other potential consequences. For this reason, many preferred the radio ad as it told them specifically how much the fine was. Similarly many preferred the “skate park” ad as there is a siren and the police arrive at the end, again giving them a clear idea of the consequences.

That [party] was one of those ambiguous situations - a home situation. We don't know what the laws are. The voiceover says: “you will pay the price”, but I don't know what the consequences are, I don't know what the laws around this kind of scenario are. I don't know what they're talking about. (Young adult, 18-24, Wollongong)

It's a good visual. It reminds you that the police could be around the corner. When I hear a siren, I automatically feel like I've done something bad even if I haven't, so as soon as I hear a police siren I get conscious. It reminds you that you can be in a lot of trouble. (Parent, Penrith)

One of the strongest themes arising from the focus groups was the perception that these ads would have had more impact if they had shown what the consequences were to the minor rather than the penalty to the adult doing the supplying:

I think about the things that could happen and the effects on my sibling. Those things stand out more to you (like those nightmare ads of him walking across the road, and smashing into a table and getting into a fight). Those things are more in your face than saying: 'it's illegal, bad me'. Those things are more real, more tangible; you can see they could happen." (Young adult, 18-24, Wollongong)

While this was mentioned by many of the participants it should also be noted that it has been well established in the health behaviour change literature that, contrary to popular opinion, the use of fear in media campaigns designed to elicit behaviour change, particularly for young people, is not generally a successful tactic. In this specific context, evaluations of several large-scale government campaigns using fear messages to target underage drinking have demonstrated high recall but no impact on behaviour (see, for example, King et al 2003). We note that an important element of successful fear campaigns is the provision of an efficacy message that counteracts the fear and provides an achievable alternative behaviour; in our current social context young people see few efficacious alternatives to drinking if they are to participate in social activities.

Acceptability of the Message

The participants' ideas about message acceptability were both variable and contradictory. Although most participants indicated that they felt the laws were reasonable and appropriate, many thought the ads described situations that, while realistic, showed how difficult it is to enforce laws relating to alcohol supply to minors. Participants felt that police were unlikely to be aware of or able to penalise the suppliers, particularly at sports games and house parties, and that even being out on the street presents a difficult situation to enforce. So while the participants indicated that the message may be reasonable, they questioned its ability to be enforced. Some participants suggested that (for some viewers) the ads may in fact demonstrate that minors can "get away" with underage drinking.

I've never heard of anyone actually being fined or getting in trouble for buying alcohol for a minor. How are you going to get fined? Is there going to be a police officer within 5 feet of the bottle shop? (Parent, Wollongong)

This (the bottle shop) ad actually shows that you can get away with it. (Young adult, 18-24, Dubbo)

Relevance of the Message

The majority of the focus group participants did not perceive that the message was relevant to them personally. None of the parents in these focus groups stated that they were providing alcohol to young people inappropriately (not necessarily illegally) and, rather than comment on the relevance of the message to themselves, they expressed concern over the suppliers as "undesirables": individuals who are heavy drinkers, or as parents with low regard for their children, people who they did not identify with. A further part of this distancing themselves from the role of supplier was describing their anger at "people like that" – the adults who provided alcohol in some of these circumstances. For example in the "skate" ad.

I think the people who are providing access to alcohol are actually heavy drinkers.

(Parent, Penrith)

My reaction to the ad is doesn't that idiot realise what he's done? He is the one I am angry with, not so much that the kids ask him. (Parent, Penrith)

While these ads elicited a reaction from these parents and raised their awareness that adults (other than themselves) are supplying their children with alcohol, and therefore the campaign goal has in part been achieved, the message that the supply of alcohol to minors is illegal did not appear to seem relevant to them, even though nearly all of them revealed that they felt it was okay for them, in some circumstances, to supply children with alcohol.

Young adults were more aware of the role they played in the supply of alcohol to minors (as seen by their descriptions of experiences of supplying alcohol in different situations). However while they recognised the ads as targeting them, they were more philosophical about alcohol use in society and several argued that they did not see themselves as part of the problem, but rather felt it was a cultural and social issue.

Cricket is so ingrained in the Australian psyche and so is beer drinking. (Young adult, 18-24, Wollongong)

Similarly the teenagers felt that the supply of alcohol to minors was culturally acceptable and adults therefore did not see the message as particularly relevant to them.

They know it's illegal but they're not going to get caught and no harm will be done. I don't think it's so much of a grey area, so it's an acceptable break of law. (Minor, Wollongong)

Discussion

It is apparent that parents and others in the community remain confused regarding the laws surrounding secondary supply to minors, particularly by parents to their children. While focus group participants largely agreed that the laws were reasonable and that they would not provide alcohol to minors under most circumstances, parents said they provide alcohol to their own children in the belief that allowing them to consume alcohol under controlled conditions is less harmful than if minors consume alcohol unsupervised. Legally, parents are not prohibited from providing alcohol to their own children, although they are advised against this by the National Health and Medical Research Council due to the negative health impacts of underage consumption.

This campaign addressed the illegality of providing alcohol to other people's children, of siblings providing alcohol, and the potential unintended consequences of parents' provision of alcohol to their children (such as their children giving the alcohol they supply them to other children). However, campaign messages (e.g. 'you will pay the price') were considered vague and unenforceable by most participants, in particular young adults and minors. Confusion surrounded the meaning of the campaign message, 'Supply Means Supply'. A clearer explanation of the law and information on the specific penalties was suggested as a more effective way of communicating the message.

Furthermore, participants did not think the illegality of supplying minors on its own was a good enough reason to prevent people from continuing to do so. Many suggested stronger focus on the explicit negative consequences to the minor, including the use of fear messages. It is important to interpret this advice from participants with caution as previous research has shown that health campaigns which demonstrate negative consequences (particularly those

that use fear) are generally unsuccessful in changing behaviour. Further, it is important to note that it was not the role of the campaign to educate parents on the health risks of underage consumption or to appear to be telling them how to raise their own children.

The social acceptability of alcohol generally, and its connection to sport and celebration in particular, was thought by the participants to contribute to the normalisation of alcohol consumption, even for those under the age of 18. Therefore while it is not legally acceptable to provide minors with alcohol, it seems to be culturally and socially acceptable, and many community members seemed to believe that this makes the law less important than other laws (such as speeding, for example). This culture of acceptability is an ongoing challenge to this campaign (or any related activity).

This intervention highlights the complexities of conveying messages regarding the illegality of supplying minors with alcohol. Alcohol consumption by adolescents is clearly an area needing to be addressed and parents remain the main source of supply (for their own, and other people's, children). It appears that messages to increase awareness of the illegality of underage supply need to be communicated in the broader context of addressing ingrained social norms around underage drinking.

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