

Alcohol Brand Websites: Implications for Social Marketing

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Introduction

This paper presents the findings from exploratory research that explored young people's attitudes and responses to alcohol brand websites. In recent years alcohol marketing spend has increasingly shifted away from spending on advertising in traditional media to other channels such as Internet and social media (Gordon, 2011). Systematic reviews of the evidence suggest that alcohol marketing is associated with drinking behaviours (Anderson *et al.* 2009). Therefore, research on the nature and impact of marketing in such channels is warranted. The findings from this study can help inform upstream social marketing (advocacy, policy making) to regulate alcohol marketing (Hastings, 2007), and provide competitive analysis to inform alcohol social marketing interventions downstream (Gordon, 2011b).

Alcohol in Australia

Harmful drinking is a major public health concern in Australia (WHO, 2011). Heavy episodic and harmful drinking of alcohol is also associated with a range of social costs including unsafe sex, teenage pregnancy sexual assault, violence, motor vehicle accidents, poor productivity and educational performance, and family breakdown (Wechsler, 1994; Newbury-Birch *et al.* 2009). The Australian National Alcohol Indicators Project (NAIP) estimated that between 1993 and 2002, over 2,500 young Australians aged between 15 and 24 years died from alcohol-attributable injury and disease and more than 100,000 were hospitalised (Chikritzhs *et al.* 2004). Furthermore, 60% of respondents to the 2008 ASSAD survey (12 to 17 year old secondary students) reported consuming alcohol in the past year (White and Smith, 2009). Among 17 year olds, 46% of males and 37% of females had consumed alcohol in the last week, with just under half of these having consumed at risky/high risk levels (7+ drinks for males and 5+ drinks for females on a single drinking occasion). The 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey demonstrated that these trends continue into adulthood, finding that approximately 65.7% of males and 61.5% of females aged between 20 and 29 years consumed alcohol at risky/high risk levels on at least one occasion in the last 12 months, and 16.0% of males and 12.0% of females consumed this amount at least weekly during the same period (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2008).

Alcohol marketing, and social marketing

This has generated considerable discussion about the drivers of alcohol consumption, and appropriate intervention and policy responses including regulation or bans of alcohol marketing (Babor *et al.* 2010). In addition, social marketing has been suggested as a suitable behaviour change approach to tackle alcohol issues (Stead *et al.* 2007). To help inform both upstream and downstream social marketing activities, we conducted a study to explore alcohol brand website activity in Australia. Existing research suggests that alcohol brand websites often feature content forbidden in traditional media channels, such as sexual references or encouraging excessive drinking (Carroll and Donovan, 2001; Gordon, 2011). However, few studies have examined young people's response to such activity.

Methodology

The study featured a series of four focus groups, two male, two female (n=6-8 per group) conducted with students aged 18-25 at a regional NSW University, using a convenience sampling approach. Ethical approval was obtained from the University ethics committee, and written; informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Participants were logged into a computer and invited to spend a few minutes visiting each of the websites of the following alcohol brands: Baileys, Carlton, Corona, Johnny Walker, Tooheys, and Vodka Cruiser. A

group discussion was then held using a semi-structured discussion guide to explore the following themes: participants' views on website content and target audience; influence on attitudes and behaviours; and regulation and policy. Focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed and then thematically analysed using QSR NVivo.

Results

The research found that although young people were not heavy users of alcohol brand web sites, they enjoyed much of the content, and regarded it as part of an accepted strategic marketing effort by alcohol brands. The websites seemed to generate traffic by word of mouth; demonstrating the function of a strategic marketing approach by alcohol brands. Participants stated that the content of the sites encouraged them to think about the brands featured and about consuming alcohol generally: *"To be honest it sparks my interest in Cruisers for the first time since I was 15, 16."* (Females, Group 1). *"They've got nice pictures, the taste things, all the different categories and I started to think maybe I should give it another go and try the other ones. So it did sort of prompt me to consider Johnny Walker as a nicer alcohol than I had bought before"* (Females, Group 2). *"The Bailey's one everything looked delicious, like it made me hungry and want to drink Bailey's... Yeah, but it was like truffles and stuff like that"* (Females, Group 1).

Concern was expressed at the Cruiser site due to its youth orientation and lack of age restriction entry control. *"I think even the Cruiser one was like a Dolly magazine... You didn't even need your age, like your date of birth to get into that... It was like bright colours and stars and everything that 12 year old girls love and it was obviously just aimed at young girls"* (Females, Group 1). *"It made me really dislike Vodka Cruisers how they were marketing it. I didn't realise how much they were targeting the youth market, you know, geared on youth all the time. Seeing that I just went that is so wrong...It's really irresponsible... That looked really irresponsible. It looked like the front of a Dolly magazine."* (Females, Group 2)

However, participants were largely ambivalent regarding the content of other sites that seemingly encouraged immoderate drinking (for example the Carlton site referred to tips for dealing with slow drinkers): *"on Toohey's, they had the beer economy thing happening. It was like such and such, oh that's five cases of beer, sort of encouraging excessive amounts...yeah but that's what they are supposed to do"* (Males, Group 2). They believed that there was no need to regulate alcohol marketing, and the culture of heavy drinking was such an accepted norm in society that alcohol marketing was an unimportant factor.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that the culture of excessive and immoderate drinking is being perpetuated by alcohol brand websites. Worryingly, young people seem accepting of the deluge of alcohol marketing to which they are exposed. Upstream social marketing efforts to influence policy and regulation of alcohol marketing are required to change the social environment (Hastings and Sheron, 2011). Multi-channel, strategic alcohol social marketing interventions are also required to effect behaviour changes. Alcohol producers and marketers should consider more robust CSR policies and activities. Research on the impact of alcohol brand websites on attitudes, intentions and drinking behaviours would offer further insight.

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