

**“It’s like a drink you’d have before you go to a party” Analysis of a Vodka Cruiser  
advertising campaign**

Running title: Analysis of a Vodka Cruiser campaign

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**Conflict of interest**

None to declare.

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## **Abstract**

**Introduction and Aims:** The aim of the present study was to explore young women's understandings of, and interactions with, an advertising campaign for a pre-mixed alcohol product that appeared to be promoting pre-drinking. This campaign was the subject of complaints to the Alcohol Advertising Review Board, revealing an inconsistency between the way the company responded to such complaints (arguing that the campaign does not encourage pre-drinking) and the way it described the campaign in trade press (the pre-drink enjoyed by the 'girls' while getting ready...).

**Design and Methods:** Twelve focus groups were conducted with 72 young women, aged 15-25 in Melbourne, Australia. These young women's interpretations of the messages communicated in this advertising campaign were analysed thematically.

**Results:** The young women identified, without prompting, the main message of the campaign as being a reference to pre-drinking. Most notably, the women saw the target audience as young (including underage) women.

**Discussion and Conclusions:** Given that young women who drink are increasingly doing so at harmful levels, a marketing campaign which is interpreted by the target audience to encourage pre-drinking among young (including underage) women appears to be inconsistent with the industry's own code for alcohol advertising. We renew the call for effective regulation of alcohol advertising to better protect young Australians.

**Key words:** Advertisement as Topic; Alcohol Drinking; Binge Drinking; Alcohol

## Introduction

Many countries, including Australia, are reporting encouraging trends in youth drinking, with increases in the average age of initiation and declining proportions of ‘recent’ drinkers (1, 2). However, studies also show an upward trend in the proportion of drinkers who drink at harmful levels (3), with a recent review of international trends concluding that problematic drinking is no longer a predominantly male problem (4).

Pre-drinking, or pre-loading, is an increasingly common part of the night out for young people (5), and presents additional harms above those of in-venue drinking (6, 7). Young males and females report similar pre-drinking duration, quantity and expenditure (8) with a greater impact on females’ overall alcohol consumption, such that they reach estimated blood alcohol levels comparable to those of their male counterparts (9).

Identified motivations for pre-drinking include control over the environment and interpersonal enhancement (5, 10), with some gender differences in motivations. Price considerations have been identified as a key motive for both genders (5, 10, 11), particularly among young high-risk drinkers, with females also reporting pre-drinking because they wanted to get *out* of control or to be social (11). While packaging and pricing are important considerations (12), there is also a need to critically examine the role of advertising in normalising pre-drinking, given the increasingly strong evidence of a link between alcohol advertising and drinking intentions and behaviours (13).

The regulatory (or quasi-regulatory) system for alcohol advertising in Australia (14), as in many other countries, contains a clause prohibiting the encouragement of excessive consumption. Given the contribution of pre-drinking to alcohol-related harms, it could be argued that a campaign which appears to promote a product as designed for pre-drinking breaches this clause. One such case is the “Where Vodka Goes to Get Ready” campaign for the pre-mixed beverage Vodka Cruiser, built around a series of illustrations “that capture the essence of summer and Vodka Cruiser” (15). The images – featured in a range of advertising including magazines, outdoor, online and social media – show groups of young women getting ready to go out.

The 3-month integrated media campaign, worth over \$ 1 million (16), featured traditional and social media as well as a range of in-store promotions, such as a free lip-gloss for spending \$20 or more. In 2015 Asahi was awarded for its innovative mirrored case stackers (retail display with head-height mirror surrounded by flashing LED lights), leveraging the insight that “Vodka Cruiser is predominantly purchased for immediate, shared consumption – the pre-drink enjoyed by the ‘girls’ while getting ready for a night out”; attributed as the reason for a 37.9% growth in sales (17). Asahi also partnered with a national radio network on an on-air and online “Vodka Cruiser Hottest House Party” promotion with a prize of a \$30,000 themed house party and ‘frequent messaging...reminding fans to pick up their Vodka Cruisers...’ (18).

The campaign resulted in four complaints to the Alcohol Advertising Review Board which focused on the inference of pre-drinking and/or appeal to young people (377/15, 478/15, 395/15, 402/15). For example, a complaint regarding the Vodka Cruiser Facebook Page (395/15) highlighted “messages encourage irresponsible consumption of alcohol” through a focus on pre-drinking, reflected in users’ comments such as “pre drinkkkk :) with cruisers”. The magazine ‘advertorial’ (377/15) described the product as “perfect while getting ready for a great night out” and offered the chance to win one of ten \$1,000 pre-drink prize packs so readers could “Start your night the right way with a case of Vodka Cruiser...” All four complaints were upheld.

The aim of the present study was to explore young women’s understandings of this campaign.

## **Method**

Twelve focus groups were conducted across three age groupings: 15-17-year-olds (four groups), 18-21-year-olds (four), and 22-25-year-olds (four), with a total of 24 participants per age group (Table 1). Participants from metropolitan Melbourne were approached via a recruitment agency from a database of individuals with prior consent to be contacted for research. Participants were grouped based on their socio economic background, and most were born in Australia (64 of 72). The focus groups were conducted by female facilitators, were 49-57 minutes in duration, audio recorded, and transcribed. Participants received a gift card for participation (\$60 for 15-17 years and \$80 for 18-25 years).

[Insert Table 1 here]

Participants were excluded if they worked in the alcohol industry; were non-drinkers aged 18 years or above; or had visual impairment that would prevent them from being able to view the advertisements being presented to the group. All participants provided informed consent. The study was approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

The data was collected as part of a larger study on women's exposure to, and interactions with, alcohol advertising. As such, the participants saw the Vodka Cruiser campaign materials as one in a series of campaigns and were not prompted with our perspective of the campaign. They were asked, as for each of the others, whether they had seen the ad before, the main message, the target audience, and what they liked (and/or disliked). A thematic analysis was undertaken on the data. Themes were initially identified by the first author, and discussed and refined by iteratively the first and second authors.

## **Results**

Four key themes emerged from the focus groups: visual appeal, targeting girls, pre-drinking, and drink responsibly (see illustrative quotes in Table 2).

### Visual appeal

Participants in all of the groups commented favourably on the visual appeal of the ad, using words such as 'pretty', 'cool' and 'fun', focusing on the attractive 'arty' nature of the illustrations, and the sense of happiness and fun conveyed. Participants in the older groups commented that it would be more appealing to younger girls, and in two groups a participant commented that the ad looked like the ones in *Dolly* magazine (an Australian magazine targeting girls aged 14 – 17).

### Targeting girls

Participants in all groups commented that the ad targeted young women; all but one group noted that this included, or was primarily, those under eighteen years. This perception was a combination of the perceived positioning of the product itself, the apparent age of the women

in the illustration, and the style of the ad. Some adult participants specifically commented that the evident appeal to younger audiences was strong enough to exclude themselves from the target audience.

### Pre-drinking

Participants in all groups clearly identified the message of the ad as being that this was a drink to be consumed before going out, whilst getting ready for the night ahead. There was a consensus that the tagline “Where Vodka goes to get ready” was a reference to, and invitation to engage in, pre-drinking. The term pre-drink was echoed across all groups as the main message of the ad.

### Drink responsibly

Participants in three of the four younger (15-17yo) and one of the middle (18-21yo) groups spontaneously commented on the ‘drink responsibly’ message; typically in response to what they did not like about the ad. The comments focused on the very small size of the font, the text being ‘hidden’ in the ad, and the inclusion of the message as a legal requirement or sense of obligation rather than genuinely aiming to encourage responsible consumption.

[Insert Table 2 here]

## **Discussion**

There is substantial evidence to support the contention that exposure to alcohol advertising is associated with earlier drinking initiation and higher levels of drinking (13, 20), as well as positive alcohol expectancies among children (21) and adolescents (22).

Australian research has consistently identified that messages in both traditional and new media advertising are inconsistent with the industry’s self-regulatory code (23-25). A survey of 15–24 year-olds (n=287) explored interpretations of print and television alcohol advertisements; perceived messages included that the product would make them more confident and sociable, less nervous, and help them have a great time and succeed with the opposite sex (26). More recently, a survey of 16–29 year-olds (n=172) found more than half

perceived a sample of alcohol advertisements on Facebook to imply that alcohol improved mood and increased social success and relaxation (27).

There is evidence of gender differences in responses to alcohol advertisements. In the earlier study mentioned above, females were more likely to report being annoyed by two liqueur advertisements (one showed an attractive woman in a sexually suggestive pose, and one showed two attractive women enjoying a social function) but more likely to report that they wanted to be like the people in these advertisement than for any of the other 10 advertisements in the study. An earlier study found 64% of 15-16-year-old girls (compared to 16% of boys) perceived a series of radio advertisements for a pre-mixed alcohol drink to suggest the product would ‘help me not worry about how I look’ (28). It appears young women may perceive alcohol advertisements to be offering valued outcomes from the consumption of the product and may aspire to emulate these images of ‘successful’ young women.

An analysis of imagery in alcohol advertising and discourses about alcohol in young men’s and women’s magazines identified that these mediums present (excessive) drinking as normative and conveying a cool and adult identity. Women’s magazines presented feminine imagery whilst concurrently aligning drinking with professionalism, adventure and being in public spaces (29).

Public health advocates have argued the Vodka Cruiser campaign promotes pre-drinking and encourages excessive alcohol consumption (30), potentially breaching the advertising code (31). While Asahi claimed in their response to AARB that the campaign was not in breach as it “simply places Vodka Cruiser as *part of* a number of aspects of this ‘pre-show’ occasion” (avoiding use of the term ‘pre-drink) (32), in the trade press they proudly claimed that “(Vodka Cruiser is) *the pre-drink* enjoyed by the ‘girls’ while getting ready...” (17) and “*is owning pre-drinks* this summer” (16).

The young women in our focus groups were confident the target was young women, with many specifically referring to underage drinking and linking the visual appeal and imagery to teen-targeted messaging. They were also consistent in their view that the campaign was a reference to, and invitation to engage in, pre-drinking.

### *Implications for public health*

Australian women are drinking more, and in more harmful ways, with the gender gap declining, disappearing, and even showing signs of reversing in the youngest cohorts (33). Pre-drinking has been identified as a contributor to closing the gender gap on what was previously seen as a male problem. As noted above, there is evidence pre-drinking presents additional harms above those of in-venue drinking, and has a greater impact on females' overall alcohol consumption. This increased alcohol consumption is associated with high, and increasing, levels of harm. The 2014 Australian secondary school survey found female teen drinkers were more likely than males to report having vomited, had an argument, and attended work or school after drinking, with 32.1% of current female drinkers reporting they intended to get drunk most or every time they consumed alcohol (3).

### *Implications for advertising regulation*

There are a range of factors that influence women's drinking, such as increasing financial independence and changes in gender roles. However, the alcohol industry increasingly sees women as a lucrative target market and targets marketing to women; including the development of new products and marketing campaigns that utilise these social and cultural changes. Like the tobacco industry before it, the alcohol industry is exploiting positive changes in the role and status of women to increase demand for their products.

Thus, a marketing campaign which is interpreted by the target audience to encourage pre-drinking among young (including underage) women is concerning, and inconsistent with the industry's own code for alcohol advertising. The young women themselves commented on the irony of a 'drink responsibly' message in an advertisement that appears to be encouraging them to consume alcohol before they go out (to consume more alcohol).

Studies conducted over the last two decades have consistently identified that the Australian system of self-regulation is ineffective in protecting young people from exposure to inappropriate messages about alcohol. Based on the findings of this study, we renew the call for effective regulation of alcohol advertising to better protect young Australians.

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**Table 1: Demographics of focus group participants**

Number of attendees	SES*	Age	Alcohol measure		Australian born
			Ever had alcohol U18**	AUDIT-C score $\geq 3$ ***	
6	mid	15-17	3		6
6	high	15-17	2		5
6	low	15-17	2		6
6	mid	15-17	2		5
5	mid	18-21		2	5
7	high	18-21		5	7
7	mid	18-21		5	7
5	low	18-21		3	5
5	mid	22-25		4	3
6	high	22-25		3	3
7	low	22-25		5	7
6	mid	22-25		6	5

\* Socioeconomic status determined by the recruitment company

\*\*All the participants in the 15-17 year old category were current students and all were asked if they had ever had a drink containing alcohol.

\*\*\*For participants aged over 18 years, the AUDIT-C was administered (19), using a cutoff score of greater than or equal to 3 to indicate probable hazardous drinking.

**Table 2: Themes identified in the focus groups**

Theme	Illustrative quotes
A. Visual appeal	<p><i>It's different, like, it's quite artistic, like not just a picture of someone or...</i>  <i>That's true.</i>  <i>...something. I don't know, maybe it appeals to young people because of that as well; it's quite artsy.</i>            [Group 10, low-SES, 22-25yo]</p> <p><i>And the colours of the drinks as well.</i>  <i>Yeah, are appealing.</i>  <i>Yeah, and look like they taste good.</i>            [Group 4, mid-SES, 15-17yo]</p>
B. Targeting girls	<p><i>I: OK. Who do we think the target audience is?</i>  <i>Young girls.</i>  <i>Yeah quite young, yeah.</i>  <i>18, 19, 20.</i>  <i>16.</i>  <i>Yeah late teens yeah.</i>            [Group 12, mid-SES, 22-25yo]</p> <p><i>Younger.</i>  <i>Yeah, 18 to maybe like 24, probably younger, I don't know.</i>  <i>Like 15 to 19.</i>            [Group 7, mid-SES, 18-21yo]</p> <p><i>Probably our age plus.</i>  <i>Yeah.</i>  <i>Around 20.</i>  <i>Yeah, 18/17.</i>  <i>I reckon its like 16.</i>  <i>Yeah 16 up, yeah.</i>            [Group 3, low-SES, 15-17yo]</p> <p><i>I think it's like it's targeted at younger people. I see a lot of young people drinking Vodka Cruisers...that's got the whole selfie thing, which is like the millennium kind of kids' thing....</i>            [Group 1, mid-SES, 15-17yo]</p> <p><i>The drawings are really cool but I think it is targeting a very young audience, they're like really limiting their audience.</i>            [Group 9, high-SES, 22-25yo]</p> <p><i>I don't want to be associated with that image...it makes me feel 16 again and reading Dolly magazine or something.</i>  <i>It's like what they think young girls think that it's like to be in your 20s, but it's not.</i>            [Group 8, mid-SES, 22-25yo]</p>

<p>C. Pre-drinking.</p>	<p><i>Pre-drinks!</i>  <i>Yeah pre-drinks.</i>  [Group 11, low-SES, 22-25yo]</p> <p><i>Kind of like...</i>  <i>Pre-drink with Cruisers.</i>  <i>Yeah, the pre's yeah.</i>  [Group 6, high-SES, 18-21yo]</p> <p><i>Start your night with Cruisers.</i>  <i>Yeah, like pre-drinking.</i>  [Group 10, low-SES, 22-25yo]</p> <p><i>I kind of like it, because its almost like where Vodka goes to get ready, it's like a drink you'd have before you go to a party.</i>  <i>Like pre...</i>  [Group 1, mid-SES, 15-17yo]</p>
<p>D. Drink responsibly</p>	<p><i>She was just saying the tiny little drink responsibly in the corner; it's just sort of kind of ironic.</i>  <i>I: Do you think it should be bigger or smaller or you wouldn't expect it to be there?</i>  <i>Bolder. I feel as though they put it on there because they feel obliged to put it on there, but they really don't care if that's how you consume it or not.</i>  [Group 2, high-SES, 15-17yo]</p> <p><i>...how it says "Drink responsibly" but it's not obvious.</i>  <i>That's a legal thing.</i>  <i>Oh, is it?</i>  <i>Yeah, they put it in grey with red dots in the last possible place you can see it.</i>  [Group 5, mid-SES, 18-21yo]</p>