

## Invited Commentary

### ALCOHOL BRANDS IN YOUNG PEOPLES' EVERYDAY LIVES: NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN MARKETING

SALLY CASSWELL

SHORE (Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation) Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

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**Abstract** — New developments in alcohol marketing are likely to be particularly important for younger members of the population both because of their use of new technology and the role brands play in their lives. This paper discusses the response of young people to this marketing, the functions it fulfils for the alcohol industry and the need for new policy responses.

#### YOUNG PEOPLES' ENVIRONMENTS

Any discussion of the likely impact of marketing on young people requires an understanding of the full range of influences on their behaviour in the current environment. Like adults, young people are affected by their physical and economic environment: the level of accessibility of alcohol beverages and the price at which they can be bought relative to other goods are both likely to be important influences on the levels of consumption by young people (Babor *et al.*, 2003; Academy of Medical Sciences, 2004). Marketing plays a synergistic role in relation to these influences. Many places where alcohol is sold provide an opportunity for the utilization of marketing materials which produce a visually significant impact on the physical environment. Similarly, an effective marketing strategy for some groups of the population is to provide information about price of beverages; in some countries print media and sales outlets promote alcohol beverages based on price (Stockwell *et al.*, 1992; Casswell *et al.*, 1993).

There are, however, likely to be other influences on young people which are more intense than those experienced by many adults. Exposure to the mass media has increased markedly since the 1960s (Signorielli, 1990) and with it exposure to marketing of all sorts. Increased exposure to alcohol advertising has followed in many places in the world over the last two decades. A highly concentrated industry, particularly in relation to spirits and beer beverages results in higher levels of advertising. The advertising to sales ratio for the alcohol industry is ~9% compared with 3% for the average advertising to sales ratio (Schonfeld & Associates, 1999). In less developed countries there is also increasing exposure to global marketing through internet access, video recordings and television channels accessed by satellite.

In addition to the central role of the mass media there are other aspects of the environment in which young people are growing up which are also relevant to the likely impact of alcohol marketing. Changes in the structure of societies and the values underpinning everyday life have reduced the influence of family, community and nation state (Giddens, 1979, 1991; Miles, 2000). The expansion of consumer goods and the increasing reliance of the economy on their consumption has facilitated the marketing of consumer goods as expressions of lifestyle and identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Klein, 2000). There has been an increase in the value that youth culture attaches to brand labels and symbols. Alcohol beverages play an important role in this, with brands of alcohol communicating social status and aspirations (Jackson *et al.*, 2000).

#### BRAND MARKETING

The concept of brand capital (Saffer, 2002) describes the accretion of meaning and emotion associated with a brand: this is one of the primary functions of marketing. The relationship which is established with a brand through marketing is ideally, from the marketers point of view, a close one and brands are increasingly conceptualized as personalities with which we can form relationships (Hanby, 1999). In New Zealand longitudinal research, those young people who had established a relationship with a brand of beer by the age of 18 years were found to be heavier drinkers and self reported more alcohol related aggressive behaviour at the age of 21 (Casswell and Zhang, 1998).

Increasingly, the marketing of brands has become an integral part of the everyday social lives of young people. Alcohol brands have become a part of the entertainment, sporting and cultural ambience. The Molson Beer concerts, for example, are regular music concerts held in Toronto, Canada. The power of the brand and its identification with youth culture is attested by the fact that the names of the entertainers themselves were not advertised. It was sufficient to know that it was the Molson concert in order for young people to be sure

Correspondence: SHORE (Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation) Massey University, PO Box 6137, Wellesley Street, Auckland, New Zealand. Tel.: 64 9 366 6136; E-mail: s.casswell@massey.ac.nz

that it would be culturally appropriate to their needs and therefore worth attending (Klein, 2000).

In another example, the launch of a new happening worked interactively with many elements of youth culture. A recent marketing innovation which won top awards at both the International Association of Promotional Marketing and the Cannes International Advertising Awards was the 'Smirnoff Half Day Off'. The campaign 'encouraged people to duck their responsibilities on December 7 and take a half day off with friends to enjoy Smirnoff at participating bars in New Zealand' (Smirnoff – Best in the World, 2003). This involved entrants registering on the Smirnoff Half Day Off website ([www.halfdayoff.co.nz](http://www.halfdayoff.co.nz)) to go into a draw to win \$25 bar tabs. The campaign also involved an element of viral marketing (Wilson, 2000; Lodish *et al.*, 2001; Cardwell, 2002; Witthaus, 2002) to propagate the message; in order to enter for the free bar tab the applicant had to enter the names of three friends. These three friends received a personalized message from their friend encouraging them to go to the Smirnoff site for their own free bar tab. Seventy-five percent of registrants sent such a message. On-premise volume increased 14% over the previous December and some bars recorded 130% above their average Friday night takings (Smirnoff – Best in the World, 2003). Spontaneous brand awareness also increased, from 38% to 57%. This marketing example, in which the brand received a boost in market share of 8.2% (Smirnoff – Best in the World, 2003), illustrates the development of brand capital in which 'the collective positive associations that individuals have about a brand' (Saffer, 2002) are increased.

The range of marketing approaches utilized in the Half Day Off campaign is illustrative of the marketing mix available to those promoting products to the young.

Smirnoff spread the message with edgy billboards, street posters, magazine ads, Web banners, and flyers posted in bars, clubs, and music stores. Consumers registered at Smirnoff's Web site for a chance to get their bar tabs paid (5000 people got checks for \$25). Radio DJs walked out at noon to join the half day off crowds, and all registrants got an e-mail instructing them to 'turn your computers off and head for the bar.'

(Smith, 2001)

Despite the breadth of the marketing mix, the opportunities being utilized are all very targeted to a younger segment of the audience and this marketing, in common with much of the marketing aimed at younger people, would be relatively invisible to other segments of the population. This relative invisibility may have implications for the level of awareness and understanding of marketing activity of those in positions to influence policy. Other commonly utilized marketing opportunities such as television and cinema are necessarily somewhat less targeted. While these remain important sources of marketing messages for young people, in many jurisdictions they are increasingly complemented by new approaches. In particular, a 1997 study concluded that the visual and interactive nature of the internet put unprecedented power in the hands of alcohol marketers, especially in reaching and influencing the young (Montgomery, 1997). Jernigan and O'Hara (2004) reported recently that in the US more than half of the annual \$4 billion alcohol marketing budget is now spent on promotions such as these.

## DEVELOPING AND PROMOTING NEW PRODUCTS

Crucially important to the new marketing approaches is the development of new products which are packaged and promoted to meet the needs of specific groups of young people. A range of such beverages have been released, aimed at a new generation of young alcohol consumers who are demographically and culturally much more varied than the traditional wine drinkers of Mediterranean cultures and beer and spirits drinkers of Anglo-industrial cultures. These 'ready to drink' beverages are more convenient and palatable than spirits but, in many cases, have a higher alcohol content than beer in order to meet the need to compete in the psychoactive market and fulfil the clearly acknowledged goal of young consumers of reaching intoxication (Brain *et al.*, 2000).

An analysis of Scottish teenage drinkers has shown the differing needs of 'starter drinkers' (14–15 years old) versus 'established drinkers' (16–17 years old) (MacIntosh *et al.*, 1997). The needs of these different stage drinkers are met by specific product development. Jackson *et al.* (2000) analyse the way 'Mad Dog', a fortified fruit wine, and the marketing strategy used to promote it, provide a good fit with starter drinkers: the taste of alcohol is disguised by the sweet and fruity flavours; the screw top increases portability, important when much drinking takes place illicitly in the outdoors; and a high alcohol content satisfies the need for rapid intoxication. The marketing mix also includes the relatively low price per unit of alcohol and a high level of availability through sales in small grocery stores in which it is hard to enforce age limits on purchase. High profile mass media marketing is not used to promote 'Mad Dog', possibly because it is unlikely to be cost effective, but also because it might attract the attention of policy makers (Jackson *et al.*, 2000). This product and its marketing mix is contrasted with 'Barcardi Breezer', a pre-mixed spirits-based drink available in several fruity flavours, targeted at 'established drinkers'. Barcardi Breezer draws credibility from the major international branding of Barcardi Rum and employs heavyweight, aspirational advertising and sponsorship deals. The product is designed to be drunk from the bottle, to give the consumer the opportunity to identify with the brand and to use the product's brand value to communicate with their peers. It is available to drink in licensed premises as well as for takeaway. The relatively high price also communicates quality and sophistication (Jackson *et al.*, 2000).

## FUNCTIONS OF MARKETING FOR INDUSTRY PLAYERS

These examples of product development and the marketing strategies used to promote them illustrate one of the key functions of marketing for the alcohol industry—to encourage and maintain new cohorts of drinkers in established alcohol markets. Natural attrition means a continual process of loss of heavy drinkers from the established market (through changes such as marriages and mortgages, ageing and eventually death). The youth sector is an important part of the market as heavier drinking is concentrated in the late teenage years and in young adulthood. As mentioned earlier, beverage alcohol is increasingly competing against other psychoactive drugs as

well as against non alcohol drinks for 'share of throat'. Marketing which ensures that the size of the market is not affected by a downturn in younger people's drinking is therefore important to the industry.

In emerging alcohol markets, marketing of alcohol also involves an active interaction with youth culture and an emphasis on branding (Jernigan, 2001; Cooke *et al.*, 2002) and, in this context, provides a form of consumer education which helps to create an alcohol culture in societies, including some Asian countries, where none exists, but which provide significant market opportunities for the alcohol industry (Wujayanayake, 2001).

It is likely that there are other important functions of alcohol marketing beyond those which have a direct impact on the consumer. In particular, marketing which uses the mass media and engages in sponsorship as well as direct advertising is likely to enhance the perception of the alcohol industry as good corporate citizens (Cooke *et al.*, 2002). It is also possible that the advertising of alcohol in the mass media will influence social norms about alcohol. For example, parents, and regulators and policy makers, may experience a gradual reduction in the awareness of alcohol as a drug with potential to cause harm, replacing this with a perception of alcohol as a positive and sophisticated part of daily life. In turn, this change in perception may affect both the likely impact of health promotion activities (Mosher and Jernigan, 1989) and the willingness of policy makers to impose regulations such as those which control access to alcohol. However, these more indirect functions of alcohol marketing have been subjected to relatively little research attention.

### IMPACT ON CONSUMPTION AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Much of the research focus on alcohol marketing has been relatively unsophisticated attempts to measure if a direct impact on consumption is related to mass media advertising. It has, for example, relied on a theoretical model in which exposure to advertising *per se* was thought to create a behaviour change. More theoretically developed work has shown the importance of the recipients' affective response to the advertising messages (see for example, Thorson, 1995).

There has also been a lack of available data to research the effect of advertising, particularly where econometric models have been applied, which has led to the use of expenditure data as a proxy for advertising. These expenditure data have been available only in mature markets with high levels of advertising, and this has meant that the changes in expenditure on advertising have been in the area of diminishing marginal return, leading to a failure in this research approach to demonstrate consistent relationships between advertising expenditure and consumption (Saffer and Dave, 2002).

Other research approaches have used both quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the response of (predominantly young) people to advertising. Qualitative research, some employing the techniques of market researchers, has demonstrated the positive emotional response of young people to the alcohol advertising. For example, a recent Australian study investigated the response to a radio campaign for a vodka-based mixed spirits drink. It found that

the main message of the advert was that the product delivered mood effects: both removal of negative emotions, such as stress reduction, and inducing positive states such as feeling carefree and gaining increased enjoyment. Consumption of the product was perceived to offer 'self confidence', sexual, relationship and social success (Jones and Donovan, 2001).

Responses following exposure to beer advertising from US college students have shown an effect on beliefs about drinking. In one study, repeated exposure resulted in perceptions of alcohol as more beneficial and less risky, compared with students not exposed (Snyder and Blood, 1992) and, in a similar study, students reported more positive assessments of the benefits of beer following exposure to beer advertising (Slater and Domenech, 1995).

A cumulative effect of advertising is also found in the responses of those who report higher levels of exposure or more positive affective responses to advertising in the context of population surveys. One of the earliest research programmes in this area was funded by the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (Atkin and Block, 1981, 1984). In this research, those who reported seeing the most advertisements tended to perceive the typical drinker as more fun loving, happy and good looking and this was associated with more favourable attitudes regarding the benefits of drinking. There were also differences in self reported drinking, with a higher proportion of those in the more exposed group reporting relatively large amounts consumed per week (Atkin and Block, 1983). There have been a number of cross sectional surveys carried out since that time, all of which have shown associations between the survey respondents' reports of exposure or response to alcohol advertising and their expectations of future drinking (in the case of the younger samples), positive beliefs about drinking and/or self reported drinking itself (Strickland, 1982; Atkin *et al.*, 1983; Grube and Wallack, 1994; Wyllie *et al.*, 1998a,b).

The question as to whether this body of evidence reflects a causal impact of advertising rather than just a greater interest in advertising on the part of those with already more favourable attitudes has been addressed in the research literature. Structural equation modelling (Bentler, 1993) has been used to assess whether data from cross-sectional surveys fits a hypothesized model in which advertising impacts on expectations of future drinking (Grube and Wallack, 1994) and positive beliefs and consumption levels (Wyllie *et al.*, 1998a,b). These analyses have found good fits of the models with the data. More supporting evidence has been found in a series of longitudinal analyses of data from a cohort of New Zealand teenagers in which it has been found that recall of (largely beer) advertising at age 15 years predicted heavier drinking among the males when aged 18 years (Connolly *et al.*, 1994) and that positive response to beer advertising measured at age 18 years predicted heavier drinking at age 21 (Casswell and Zhang, 1998; Casswell *et al.*, 2002) and more frequent drinking at age 26 (Casswell *et al.*, 2002).

Another line of research has investigated the impact of bans on advertising. Early investigations of bans in some Canadian provinces found no measurable impact (Smart and Cutler, 1976; Ogborne and Smart, 1980; Schweitzer *et al.*, 1983; Makowsky and Whitehead, 1991). However, a cross sectional comparison of different regions of the United States in the period 1986–1989 reported an effect of advertising on traffic



fatalities which was significant (although smaller than that of price) (Saffer, 1997). Saffer has also reported cross country comparisons which have found effects of advertising bans (Saffer, 1991). The most recent of these, which reported analyses of a pooled time series of data from 20 countries over 26 years, found that advertising bans do decrease alcohol consumption (Saffer and Dave, 2002).

#### CURRENT POLICY RESPONSES AND THE NEED FOR NEW POLICY DEVELOPMENT

By far the most common policy response is self regulation: a voluntary code which the alcohol and advertising industries and the media choose to follow. These usually address the content of advertising but may also provide for restrictions on such issues as advertising of particular beverages, hours, the kind of media and programme type in which advertising occurs and sometimes the level of saturation of the advertising. Much of the policy debate and health promotion action has focused on these voluntary codes which generally attempt to modify the marketing messages communicated by influencing the content of the advertising.

Within the context of a self regulation system (often involving alcohol producers, media and advertising industries), attempts to utilize complaints processes to prevent the communication of powerful alcohol brand messages have not been widely successful. There is evidence suggesting that these voluntary agreements have been poorly implemented in a number of jurisdictions (Saunders and Yap, 1991; Sheldon, 2000; Dring and Hope, 2001; Hill and Casswell, 2004; Roberts, 2002; Lunde, 2004). This is not surprising, given the poor compliance and inherent instability experienced with self-regulation in a range of industries (Ayres and Braithwaite, 1992).

There is also a more fundamental weakness in this approach which attempts to control the marketing message by the kinds of issues covered in the voluntary codes. It is unlikely that these, even if rigorously adhered to, counter the emotional impact of advertising, much of which is communicated by music and is increasingly youth culture specific (Hill and Casswell, 2004). Furthermore, these voluntary agreements tend to cover only the most visible and less targeted media, particularly television.

Voluntary agreements, as illustrated by those preventing mass media advertising of spirits in the UK and the US, have also been found to be unstable and to be threatened by falling sales (Hill and Casswell, 2004).

Despite, or perhaps because of, evidence of the ineffectiveness of self regulation, the global alcohol industry has demonstrated its commitment to promoting self regulation as the policy option most appropriate to emerging markets in *'Self-Regulation and Alcohol: A Toolkit for Emerging Markets and the Developing World'* (ICAP, 2002).

In contrast to the common approach of self regulation there is the policy response of alcohol advertising bans, and for these there is some evaluation. A minority of countries have in place fairly complete bans, while others have legal restrictions specific to beverage type, hours of exposure and programme type. Many European countries have enacted some form of ban on broadcast alcohol advertising (Hill and Casswell, 2004; World Health Organization, 2004). France, in enacting

the Loi Evin in 1991, went further by placing a near ban on broadcast alcohol advertising and sponsorship of sports; this legislation has withstood numerous threats, despite the context of the European Community, and has succeeded in forcing advertisers to modify their advertising. For example, it is no longer permissible to use images of drinkers or to depict a drinking atmosphere. As a result, the drinker has disappeared from the images, which now highlight the product itself. The law has been perceived as efficient in correcting excesses in the form and content of advertising messages and has been seen as essential for the implementation of a coherent problem prevention effort (Regaud and Michel Craplet, 2004).

As mentioned earlier, an evaluation of the impact of bans on alcohol advertising which drew data from 20 countries over 26 years showed an effect on alcohol consumption (Saffer and Dave, 2002). However, Saffer and Dave (2002) have also drawn attention to the rescinding of bans in Canada, New Zealand, Finland and Denmark, suggesting that in times of falling aggregate consumption bans were difficult to maintain as a policy option. The commercialization of the broadcast media and the need for increased advertising revenue played a key role in the New Zealand case (Casswell *et al.*, 1993).

More fundamental issues in the marketing policy arena are whether the range of policy options in use adequately address the issues raised by current and emerging marketing practice. Very few jurisdictions have controls in place over the increasingly common branded events which merge alcohol brands with key aspects of youth culture, or the new brand advertising on large plasma screens at the point of sale in youth oriented bars and clubs. Similarly, sponsorship by alcohol brands is not often subject to policy. The internet, another marketing opportunity of increasing importance, is similarly not subject to restrictions of any kind. New products and their packaging are also not generally subject to controls. Alcohol marketing is clearly a policy area in urgent need of new thinking and new research to meet the current technological and cultural contexts in which alcohol is being marketed to youth.

A potential new policy framework may arise from new conceptualizations of the importance of the impact of alcohol advertising on the most vulnerable, especially younger, drinkers and the role of brand capital in relation to their construction of their self identity (McCreanor *et al.*, 2004). Two indicators of the impact of alcohol advertising on young people; first, level of exposure and second, their response to the marketing, have provided evidence for a new framework for policy development.

In the United States, the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth has provided considerable evidence of the levels of exposure to young people of alcohol advertising in a variety of media (Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, 2002). For example, a study of alcohol advertisements in US magazines found that, in 2002, underage youth (13–20 years) saw more beer, spirits and low alcohol mixed drinks advertising than people aged 21 years and older. Comparisons between 2001 and 2002 showed that the exposure to young women had increased at a faster rate than to young men (Jernigan *et al.*, 2004).

A bi-partisan group of US senators and representatives has introduced the 'Stop Underage Drinking Act' which includes provision for public health monitoring of the amount of alcohol advertising reaching youth. The UK also has a

voluntary agreement in place which states that no alcohol advertisements can be placed in publications or on a poster site if more than 25% of the potential audience is under 18 years old (Jackson *et al.*, 2000).

This indicator of the impact of alcohol advertising on younger people is more distal than measures of respondents' receptivity to the advertising, particularly their liking for the adverts and their brand awareness (Unger *et al.*, 2003). Jackson *et al.* (2000) have suggested that all forms of marketing communication should be regulated according to the message received by the consumer. Research from Australia described earlier, which assessed the response of young people to a radio campaign for a vodka based mixed drink (Jones and Donovan, 2001) modelled the way in which the respondents' own responses to existing or potential advertising could be measured, and these measures used for monitoring and control purposes.

Given the fluidity and complexity of the marketing situation, including the development of new strategies and cutting edge information technologies, and the ability of the industry to utilize a marketing matrix in a very creative and effective way (Jernigan and O'Hara, 2004) it may be ineffective to seek to implement bans on specific media (such as the broadcast media). Instead, it may be more effective to require all forms of alcohol marketing to be subject to controls framed in terms of the two key measures: first, on the levels of exposure to young people, and, second, measures of the response of young people to the advertising. Given the lack of adequate implementation which has been associated with the self regulatory approach, these controls would best be subject to regulation and monitored by an appropriate regulatory body.

Sponsorship is likely to pose particular needs and here the tobacco experience can provide useful models in which sponsorship by alcohol brands would be bought out over a period of time (Deeks, 1992; Hill and Casswell, 2004).

It is apparent that these national level policy developments would be more effective in the context of a global level response which addressed the new trans-national marketing opportunities provided by the internet and by satellite communications.

In conclusion, there is a clear need for further debate. There is a need for strong input from an international public health field which is informed by both the latest research evidence and the most recent developments in alcohol marketing, and is cognisant of the way in which marketing creates an alcohol environment not conducive to the success of public health policies and programmes.

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