

Article

'A Drink That Makes You Feel Happier, Relaxed and Loving': Young People's Perceptions of Alcohol Advertising on Facebook

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Abstract

Aims: To explore young people's perceptions of alcohol advertising on Facebook and investigate perceived compliance with the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC).

Methods: An online cross-sectional survey with 172 Australians aged 16–29 years recruited from a market research website and via Facebook. We compiled advertisements from six popular alcohol brands' Australian Facebook pages and asked respondents for their perceptions and interpretations in open and closed-ended questions.

Results: Open-ended responses most commonly indicated that the main messages of the advertisements related to social success. In closed-ended questions, respondents perceived advertisements implied that alcohol facilitated relaxation (67%), improved mood (65%), social success (57%) and confidence (49%).

Conclusion: Young people identified the main themes of alcohol advertising on Facebook as related to social success and significant improvement in mood. Young people's interpretations of Facebook alcohol advertising suggest breaches of ABAC guidelines. Strengthening the enforcement and application of the ABAC and social media alcohol advertising policies is justified.

INTRODUCTION

Exposure to alcohol advertising at a young age is associated with increased levels of risky drinking among young people (Grube and Wallack, 1994; Ayers and Myers, 2012; Australian Medical Association, 2013). These exposures are also associated with earlier onset of drinking (Hanewinkel and Sargent, 2009; Smith and Foxcroft, 2009) and have been shown to foster positive expectancies and attitudes towards alcohol and drinking behaviours (Mart, 2011). Social media platforms such as Facebook provide alcohol companies with a unique opportunity to advertise their brands to millions of young people, often at no cost (Mart, 2011). This advertising is expected to comply with the Facebook Advertising Policies (Facebook, 2015b) and any relevant local regulations. In Australia, alcohol advertising is subject to the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC)

(The Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code., 2013), but this is a voluntary code and responsibility for monitoring brand-generated alcohol advertising largely falls on consumers. Both of these guidelines prohibit the portrayal of consumption of alcohol as causing or contributing to the achievement of personal, intellectual, business, social, sporting, physical, sexual, or other success (The Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code, 2013; Facebook, 2015b). Due to the large volume of content generated by companies and users themselves on Facebook, an inability to penalize breaches of the code and slow responses to complaints (Board, 2013), there is some evidence that current alcohol advertising does not always comply with these regulations (Beullens and Schepers, 2013). The result is an advertising platform that is simultaneously more powerful and less controlled than ever before (Hastings and Sheron, 2013).

Social media, and specifically Facebook, provide companies with opportunities that differ from conventional forms of advertising. In addition to paid advertising, companies are able to pursue direct conversations with their audiences, enabling them to adapt and customize their messaging to the values, identities and cultural practices of their networks (Mart, 2011; Australian Drug Foundation., 2013). Alcohol companies have recognized these advantages and are encouraging interactions with their audiences to increase their exposure through connecting with cultural pastimes, appealing to past memories, encouraging user-generated content, incorporating their brands into the everyday lives of young people and connecting their brands to the idea of a shared national identity (Australian Drug Foundation, 2013). As a result, users become actively involved in both promoting and producing branded content across their networks. While alcohol companies argue they are targeting the profitable age group of 18–21-year-olds with their advertising (Hastings and Sheron, 2013), the effect of such campaigns on younger groups within these networks needs to be considered.

It is recognized that children and adolescents interpret advertising messages differently to adults and trained researchers (Austin *et al.*, 2007). Some studies have explored alcohol advertising on social media (Mart, 2011; Australian Drug Foundation, 2013; Beullens and Schepers, 2013), but not specifically from the perspective of young people. Receiver-oriented message analysis (ROMA) is a methodology that aims to establish how information is perceived by receivers, recognizing that information can be interpreted differently based on age and processing strategies (Austin, 2010). In this study we used ROMA to explore young people's perceptions of current alcohol advertising on Facebook across age groups and demographics. We aimed to determine whether current alcohol advertising complies with ABAC code and Facebook Policies according to the views of young people, who are deemed the most impressionable and at risk. We aim to provide evidence that will help guide future regulations relating to alcohol advertising on social media.

METHODS

Design

A cross-sectional survey design was used to determine young people's perceptions of current alcohol advertising on Facebook. A focussed group discussion was initially conducted to inform question development and the selection of alcohol advertising for the online survey. An online survey was subsequently used to canvass the perceptions of young people towards specific alcohol-branded advertising. This study received ethical approval from the Alfred Hospital Human Research Ethics Committee.

Data collection

Focussed group discussion with young Facebook users

A formative focussed group discussion was conducted with four participants after the completion of a literature search to test various questions about how young people engage with and perceive alcohol advertising on Facebook. Participants were shown examples of alcohol advertising and asked to openly describe their perceptions and interpretations of this advertising. Participants were recruited from a university Facebook social group. All participants were aged between 16 and 29 years, drank alcohol at least occasionally, had their own Facebook account, and provided written consent to participate. Participants were provided with refreshments during the 90-minute discussion and reimbursed AU\$40 for their time and travel costs. Discussion

was audio-recorded and subsequently referred to when developing the online survey.

Online survey with young Facebook users

Eligibility criteria were the same as for the focussed group discussion; however consent was implied by completing the online survey. The self-completed survey consisted of 25 items and took 10–15 min to complete. The survey was developed on Lime Survey and was subsequently promoted through Pure Profile, an online consumer recruitment site, to recruit respondents aged 18–29 (Pureprofile, 2015). Respondents aged 16 and 17 were recruited through Facebook posts, because Pure Profile does not recruit under-18-year-olds.

The online survey examined demographic characteristics, drinking behaviours and the perceptions and opinions of young people towards specific alcohol advertising. Data collected included: *age, sex, level of education, favourite type of alcohol, number of times drank alcohol in last year, number of drinks had on average drinking occasion and number of times had more than six drinks on one occasion.*

The remainder of the survey used ROMA methodology to explore young people's perceptions and interpretations of a series of alcohol advertisements on Facebook (Austin, 2010) guided by the main research questions. This process involves inviting respondents who are members of a particular message audience (in this case, young people) to code content based on their own interpretations of the advertising. This method aims to establish how advertising is perceived by different receivers, without being prompted by definitions and categories predetermined by researchers where possible. To this end a collection of advertising content was compiled from six popular alcohol brands' Australian Facebook pages; *Strongbow*[®], *Smirnoff*[®], *Toobey's*[®] *Extra Dry*[™], *Rekorderlig*[®], *Jacob's Creek*[®] and *Coopers*[®]. These six were chosen from the top 50 Australian alcohol brands on Socialbakers (a website reporting social media statistics) (Socialbakers, 2015) and represented a diverse range of images, themes and beverage types. For the purpose of the analysis, the findings from each alcohol-branded advertisement were then collapsed. Respondent's perceptions of these advertisements were measured by asking three questions (below).

The first question aimed to identify the perceived main message of the advertising, without prompting for answers: 'Apart from telling you to drink Strongbow, what do you think was the single main message of the ad?' Respondents were able to enter free text as a short answer. Responses were then coded into themes; *Product characteristic, Context-inducing, Emotion-inducing, Association with success, Real world tie-in, Encouragement to drink and Type of person appealing to.* The coding framework was tested by two researchers (E.R.N.W. and C.J.C.W.), through coding 10% of responses and resolving any coding discrepancies. The remaining responses were coded by one researcher (E.R.N.W.).

The second question aimed to identify perceived key messages of the advertising using prompted themes developed by the research team: 'Do any of these adverts suggest that drinking alcohol may: improve your mood, help you to feel more confident, lead to professional success, make you feel more outgoing, lead to sporting success, help you to be more sexually attractive, make you feel more relaxed'. These themes were chosen as they align with the themes in ABAC and Facebook guidelines that are prohibited. Respondents were able to respond to each statement using a five-point Likert scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. For analysis these responses were then collapsed into a binary measure where 'agree' and 'strongly agree' became agree and 'neutral', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' became do not agree.

The third question aimed to identify the perceived target audience of the advertising by asking: 'In your opinion, would you say the ad was aimed at people older than you, in your age group, or younger than you?' Respondents were able to respond with 'much older than me', 'older than me', 'my age', 'younger than me' and 'much younger than me'.

Data analysis

We conducted descriptive analysis using Stata 11. Responses to different brands' advertisements were combined. Chi-square tests compared responses between age groups (16–17, 18–24 and 25–29 years of age).

RESULTS

A key finding from the formative focussed group discussion was that participants considered alcohol advertising that was 'user-generated', 'casual' and 'subtle' in appearance more effective because it gives the impression it was created by a 'real person'. This gave the advertising more credibility because they could relate to the image and/or cultural pastime presented. Participants also thought that the alcohol advertising would particularly appeal to young people, as demonstrated by the

Table 1. Participant demographics and characteristics ($n = 172$)

Participant demographics and characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Sex		
Female	108	63
Male	61	36
Transgender	3	2
Age		
16–17	34	15
18–24	63	34
25–29	75	50
Education		
Did not complete high school	9	5
Completed high school	22	13
TAFE, college or diploma	23	13
Still in high school	47	27
Still studying at university	27	16
Bachelor degree or higher	44	26
Favourite drink		
Beer	32	19
Cider	35	20
Mixed drinks	53	31
Wine	26	15
Other	26	15
How often have drink containing alcohol		
Monthly or less	80	47
2–4 times a month	58	34
2–3 times a week	26	15
4 or more times a week	8	5
How many drinks would have on typical day drinking		
1 or 2	69	40
3 or 4	43	25
5 or 6	32	19
7, 8 or 9	20	12
10 or more	8	5
How often had 6 or more drinks on one occasion		
Never	62	37
Less than monthly	62	37
Monthly	28	17
Weekly	18	11

following quotes: 'It's an avenue where young people can participate in the whole alcohol thing, because it's just on Facebook', 'The status stuff can work for younger kids' and 'Younger people will be engaging a lot in these adverts. Someone like my brother's age, and he's like 11. He'd love that sort of competition to get free tickets'.

One hundred and seventy-two participants aged 16–29 years responded to the online survey (Table 1), of whom 63% ($n = 108$) were female and 15% ($n = 34$) were 16–17 years old. Forty per cent were currently studying at university or had completed a university degree ($n = 71$). Spirit-based mixed drinks were the favourite drink reported most frequently by respondents (31%, $n = 53$). Over half of respondents reported having a drink containing alcohol at least twice a month (53%, $n = 92$) and 40% reported having one or two drinks on a typical day drinking ($n = 69$). Seventeen per cent reported having six drinks or more on a single occasion at least monthly ($n = 28$).

The most frequently reported main messages perceived by participants (without prompting) fell under the 'association with success' theme, specifically relating to social success (Table 2). Example quotes from respondents include; 'drinking is a social event and aids in the betterment of your social status', 'To be enjoyed together with people', 'For outings and social occasions' and 'Good to have with mates'. Other frequently reported messages came under the *Context inducing* theme and specifically related to 'Family/friends get together' as well as 'Partying/festivals'. Examples of these types of responses include; 'It's very casual, something to share with friends at a casual get together', 'Perfect to be enjoyed in any occasion with the people you love', 'For fun times with friends', 'Party drink, fun and social', 'Be young and party' and 'Drink while partying'.

When prompted in later questions, the most frequently agreed upon main messages were; *feel more relaxed* (67%), *improve your mood* (65%), *make you feel more social and outgoing* (57%) and *feel more confident about yourself* (49%; Table 3). There were some statistically significant differences in agreement between age groups. The youngest age group (16–17-year-olds) were more likely to agree that the messages were present and this then decreased by each subsequent age group.

When asked about the perceived target audience for the advertising, most respondents thought the advertising was targeting people their age or slightly older, although this differed by age group (Table 4). The majority of 16–17-year-olds (83%) thought the advertising was targeting people slightly older or much older than themselves, while the majority of 18–24-year-olds thought the advertising was targeting people their age or slightly older than themselves (80%) and the majority of 25–29-year-olds (54%) thought the advertising was targeting people in their age group.

DISCUSSION

Our ROMA analysis of young people's perceptions of alcohol advertising on Facebook suggested that the main theme was related to success, particularly social success, and a significant improvement in mood. These responses suggest that current advertising on Facebook is not complying with ABAC and Facebook guidelines. The advertisements were easily sourced, present a range of alcohol advertising methods on Facebook, and suggest inadequacies in the current system for monitoring alcohol advertising and raise concerns relating to responsibility for monitoring advertising on social media.

Social success was the main unprompted theme that was identified by young people across all three age groups in response to the advertising, particularly in relation to family and friend get-togethers and

Table 2. Unprompted perceived main theme of Facebook alcohol advertising

Themes and examples	Frequency of theme (N = 1337)
Product characteristics	
Tastes good/easy to drink <i>'Goes with everything and tastes good'</i> ^a	62
Sophisticated <i>'Elegant drink to have with friends over lunch'</i>	58
Context inducing	
Lead to a good time <i>'Drinking Smirnoff will make your life fun!'</i>	55
Drink at any occasion <i>'Drink whenever, where ever, it's all good'</i>	71
Enjoy outdoors <i>'Good to drink outside'</i>	19
Summer/relaxing times <i>'It's a good drink for summer'</i>	93
Partying/festivals <i>'PARTY'</i>	124
Romantic occasions <i>'That Jacobs creek drink is romantic and classy'</i>	52
Family/friends get together <i>'It's very casual, something to share with friends at a casual get together'</i>	121
Emotion inducing	
Relax <i>'Great for relaxing'</i>	86
Happy/fun/enjoyable <i>'A drink that makes you feel happier, relaxed, and loving'</i>	121
Get drunk <i>'Drink it to get wasted'</i>	4
Cheer up <i>'Smirnoff can make you feel better'</i>	9
Association with success	
Sporting <i>'Smirnoff loves sports and party. Drinking Smirnoff would make people feel cooler'</i>	2
Social <i>'Drink to entertain'</i>	200
Sexual <i>'For sexy times'</i>	33
Real world tie-ins	
Link to event, pastime or memory <i>'Coopers' beer is a great way to celebrate events such as the Fringe and Australia Day'</i>	21
Everyday lives <i>'That the cider goes well with daily life events'</i>	9
Recipe <i>'Can put in sweet recipes'</i>	10
Encouragement to drink	
Goes with certain food <i>'To be enjoyed over cheese and crackers with close friends'</i>	41
Healthy <i>'Natural made cider from real fruits'</i>	3
Type of person appealing to/stereotypes	
Masculine <i>'Tooheys is for "real" men'</i>	47
Feminine <i>'Typical girly night involves vodka'</i>	19
Older/sophisticated <i>'It's more of a classy drink, much more for mature adults rather than a "party" drink'</i>	39
Aussie <i>'Coopers is proudly for Australia'</i>	38

^aText in *'Italics'* are example quotes from participants which were classified under each theme.

partying. Themes identified in the advertising were also commonly related to mood enhancement, including increased happiness, having fun, enjoying yourself and feeling more relaxed. These findings are

consistent with another Australian study exploring alcohol advertising on the radio, which found that mood enhancement themes were frequently reported by youth (Jones and Donovan, 2001). These findings

Table 3. Percentage agreeing that the alcohol advertising implied the following prompted theme

Outcome ^a	16–17 year olds		18–24 year olds		25+ year olds		P-value ^b
	(n = 204)		(n = 378)		(n = 450)		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Improve your mood	165	82.1	264	69.8	238	53.6	0.00
Help you to feel more confident about yourself	137	67.2	185	48.9	185	41.1	0.00
Lead to professional success	33	16.2	54	14.3	88	19.6	0.012
Make you feel more social and outgoing	155	77.1	235	62.2	201	44.7	0.00
Lead to sporting success	33	16.2	47	12.4	87	19.3	0.071
Help you to be more sexually attractive and success	85	41.7	122	32.3	132	29.3	0.013
Make you feel more relaxed	161	80.1	257	68.0	270	60.0	0.003

^aParticipants assessed 6 adverts for each of the above outcomes, hence *n* is the number of participants multiplied by 6.

^bP-value is for difference between age groups using chi-squared test.

Table 4. Perceived target age group of advertising

Target age group	16–17 year olds		18–24 year olds		25+ year olds	
	(n = 138)		(n = 306)		(n = 450)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Much older than me	47	34.1	44	14.4	42	9.3
Slightly older than me	67	48.6	110	35.9	104	23.1
In my age group	17	12.3	137	44.8	244	54.2
Slightly younger than me	5	3.6	12	3.9	50	11.1
Much younger than me	2	1.4	3	1.0	10	2.2

suggest that alcohol companies are using Facebook to reinforce the notion that alcohol is an intrinsic part of Australian culture, and that it plays a central role in many people's social lives (VicHealth, 2013). Here, companies appear to be promoting the positive connection between social success, culture and alcohol, to connect with their young networks. The alcohol industry has 'developed an extensive, real-time, culturally embedded mode of branding . . .' (Carah, 2014), allowing their brands to be incorporated into the everyday lives of young people. Evidence suggests that the tobacco industry is making the same advances using social media (Liang *et al.*, 2015).

Interestingly, the majority of 16- and 17-year-olds in our study felt that the alcohol advertising was targeted at people older than themselves, and those in the older age groups thought the advertising was directed at them. However respondents from the younger age group were more likely to perceive positive prompted themes in the advertising than older respondents. Proportionally more 16- and 17-year-olds thought the advertising suggested alcohol would improve your mood, make you more confident and outgoing and feel more relaxed than the older age groups. This finding supports previous research showing that younger people are particularly responsive to the portrayal of drinking alcohol in relation to success (Atkin *et al.*, 1984). Given that younger people thought the advertising was targeted at older people and promoted drinking in a positive light, this also reinforces the likelihood that younger people are striving to engage in this 'adult' behaviour. The particular risk of this form of alcohol advertising to young people was also suggested in our formative focussed group discussion. Participants agreed that younger adolescents were more likely to engage with alcohol advertising on Facebook than older adolescents, both for the status and as a forum in which they can participate in discussions around alcohol.

A unique feature of social networking sites is their interactive nature (Veale *et al.*, 2015), which allows users to post images, comment,

'tag' friends, 'like', 'follow' and 'share' the content of others, to establish like-minded communities, and to interact with both individuals and organizations (Zhang *et al.*, 2010). As such, users can become actively involved in both the production and promotion of branded content within their networks—a means of advertising alcohol all participants in our focussed group discussion identified as effective. The lines around what is communication between companies and users and what is advertising become increasingly blurred. This is particularly important in relation to monitoring advertising. Currently the responsibility for monitoring brand-generated alcohol advertising on social media largely falls on consumers, who can submit complaints to ABAC, who will then review the content; however, ABAC dismisses most complaints. Advertising on Facebook is reviewed by Facebook before it is released using the Advertising Policy (Facebook, 2015a). However content that is generated by companies on 'pages' (such as that included in our study) does not undergo any formal review and it is unclear whether the same advertising guidelines apply. It is also unclear whether their guidelines apply to user-generated content or only content that companies produce. Research has shown that user-generated alcohol content on Facebook is associated with increased real-life risky alcohol consumption and positive attitudes to alcohol (Ridout *et al.*, 2012; Moreno *et al.*, 2015). Further research is recommended to inform policies and practices for monitoring alcohol content on social media, including alcohol brand Facebook pages, given the scale and informal nature of this platform and high exposure to millions of young people.

Study limitations include that respondents aged 18–29 years were recruited differently from 16- and 17-year-olds for the online survey, which could introduce bias when comparing age groups. Further, the sample size for the online survey was small and recruited using a convenience methodology and hence may not be representative of the views of all young people. Another potential limitation is that our

sample of respondents consumed less alcohol on average than the general population, according to the National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2013 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013), and therefore may have interpreted the advertising differently. Selected advertising might not have been representative of all Facebook alcohol advertising, although a wide variety was chosen to represent different techniques across different brand types.

In conclusion, young people in our study frequently identified social success and a significant positive change in mood as the common theme portrayed in alcohol advertising on Facebook. This implies that alcohol advertising on social media is not conforming to current ABAC guidelines. Given the evidence that exposure to alcohol advertising is associated with an increase in risky drinking among youth, this finding is of concern to public health. Efforts need to be made to ensure policymakers are aware of these discrepancies and to explore ways to better monitor informal advertising content on social media, particularly in relation to younger Facebook users.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None declared.

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