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An Unhealthy Co-Dependence: The Relationship between Alcohol Sponsorship and Cricket in Australia

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Abstract

Sponsorship of sporting events by the alcohol industry is a common practice in Australia and there is currently much debate about the appropriateness of inexorably linking sport with alcohol advertising and promotion. The aim of this paper is to provide some illustrative examples of current alcohol sponsorships in Australian cricket. This review reveals that alcohol sponsorship is pervasive in Australian cricket and exposure to alcohol sponsorship is inescapable for people who watch the sport, many of whom would be under the legal drinking age. These sponsorships include naming rights, on-ground presence, advertising campaigns featuring sponsored teams and individuals, interactive web sites, promotional materials and devices which associate teams and players with the consumption of alcohol, and even the creation of a sporting competition purely to promote an alcohol brand.

Introduction

FIFA's 15 official Football World Cup sponsors currently pay on average between 25 million pounds and 40 million pounds per four-year period, and this amount is expected to rise to an average of 75 million following FIFA's decision to reduce the number of official sponsors from 15 to six for the next World Cup in 2010 (Anonymous 2006). The rationale for this reduction was both the decrease in administrative requirements and the potential to avoid future controversy over sponsors from product categories such as fast food and alcohol (Anonymous 2006).

Visa's senior product manager stated that consumer tracking studies showed positive effects for the brand as a result of their sponsorship of the Olympics, and reported that "our cardholders feel a lot better about our brand and associate the Olympic values with our Visa values [such as] excellence, confidence, empowerment and leadership" It is these perceived benefits that led to the 16 Canadian sponsors of the 2004 Olympic Summer Games in Athens paying a minimum of \$1 million each for the right to use the Olympic logo on advertising and packaging; with the majority also emphasizing the need to accompany the sponsorship with premiums and competitions (Okalow 2004).

Alcohol Sponsorship of Australian Cricket in 2006

Sponsorship of sporting events by the alcohol industry is a common practice in Australia, and there is currently much debate within government, industry groups and public health advocates about whether associating alcohol with sport contravenes the spirit of the advertising codes of practice. It has been argued that such an association is inappropriate because of the potential impact on underage consumers who tend to be frequent watchers of live and televised sporting events (e.g., Howard and Crompton, 1995).

The aim of this paper is not to provide a systematic audit of all alcohol sponsorships of Australian cricket teams and events, but rather to provide some illustrative examples of current alcohol sponsorships which have been reported in the trade press. While many of us are aware of the presence of alcohol sponsorship of sport, it is useful to review in detail some current case studies to appreciate the extent and nature of the complex relationship between sport and alcohol sponsors.

Foster's Australia's VB (Victoria Bitter beer) has had the naming rights for Australia's annual one-day cricket series since 2003 (Sinclair, 2006). Foster's Australia launched its "VB Boonanza" campaign in conjunction with the commencement of the 2005/2006 summer one-day cricket international series. While we do not have figures on the total cost of the campaign, it was revealed that the prize pool alone was \$2.4 million. The campaign was described by Foster's communication manager, Jacqui Moore, as being part of "the reinvigoration of the brand with four months of summer action around the cricket" (Williams, 2005, p.3). While the campaign, which included TVCs, online, sponsorship, Point of Sale and a range of other promotions – was built around "Talking Boony," a talking figurine about the same size as a can of beer. Talking Boony as a caricature of David Boon, a former Australian cricketer, who was described in the trade press as "an Australian icon, partly for being a great Australian athlete, but mostly for looking like he should be sitting in the stands drinking beer, rather than padding up in the middle...But it was his effort in drinking 52 beers on a Qantas flight between Sydney and London at the beginning of (another) successful Ashes Tour that truly elevated him to icon status"(Sinclair 2006, p.27). The figurine contained a microchip and a timer which enabled him to "speak" during the cricket; about an hour before the start of the first match he spoke his first words "Hey, get me a VB, the cricket is about to start" and throughout the cricket he made many other comments to his "fans" - some about cricket, but many about beer (such as "Have you got any nachos? I like nachos. They go well with beer.")

The Boony campaign was criticised by public health advocates for exploiting Boon's notoriety as a binge drinker, arguing that such a promotion could only have negative effect on the entrenched drinking culture of cricket clubs (Munro, 2006a). However, the advertising industry applauded – and awarded – the campaign. In May 2006 the advertising agency that created the "Boony" campaign, George Patterson Y&R, won a prestigious Yellow Pencil award at the D&AD Global Awards in London in the new uses of broadcast category for its "innovative" campaign for Foster's (Alarcon, 2006a); and in June 2006 they won a Lion at the Cannes International Festival for the Talking Boony promotion (Jacobs, 2006a). They were equally popular with consumers, with all 200,000 sold and 1900 sold on eBay, with one going for nearly \$230 (Patterson, 2006).

Not surprisingly, given the positive response from the industry and increased consumer sales, in October 2006 Foster's Australia announced an extension of the Boony campaign for the 2006/2007 summer cricket series. This season, not only will we have "Talking Boony", we will also have "Talking Beefy," modelled on former English cricket captain Ian "Beefy" Botham. The figurines will be available as a pair with promotional VB cartons, and "The Battle of the Tashes" has been billed as VB's biggest ever promotion (Patterson, 2006). This season's 375,000 pairs of figurines, which use infra-red panels to spar with each other this time, are being issued with replaceable batteries "in the hope they'll stay in people's homes long after the Ashes are over" (Patterson, 2006).

It is not uncommon for professional sporting competitions to have more than one alcohol sponsor, although rarely in competing product categories, and Australian cricket provides a good example of this scenario. While Foster's VB has the naming rights, and remains the official beer sponsor of Cricket Australia, in September 2006 Johnnie Walker Scotch whisky announced its increased involvement in Australian cricket, including both a lucrative \$20 million sponsorship deal with Cricket Australia, and an on-pack promotional campaign. The five-year deal between cricket Australia and Johnnie Walker was described as "cement(ing) Johnnie Walker as the official scotch whisky of Cricket Australia, and follows the successful ICC Johnnie Walker Super Series in 2005-2006, which attracted more than 900 million viewers worldwide" (Jacobs, 2006b, p.6). Johnnie Walker's Marketing Director Andy Gibson was also quoted as saying "Red Label Cricket demonstrates what Johnnie Walker can bring to the sport" (Jacobs, 2006b, p.6).

The 2006 "Movember" campaign – a men's health campaign designed to increase awareness of prostate cancer, male depression, and testicular cancer and to raise funds by having men grow a moustache sponsored by friends' donations – has also been criticised for its links with alcohol and sport (Munro, 2006b). Foster's VB is a major sponsor of the Movember campaign, and VB promotions are evident in the promotional materials, and particularly the web site. For example, the "Pool Room" page on the web site has a group of men in a room filled with VB paraphernalia and all drinking the beer, along with a large poster on the wall which asks "what sort of man grows a Mo? Of course, he's a bloke who carries around a golden thirst" Even more alarmingly, the page includes a video entitled "A Mo Bro never let someone drink alone" and shows an unhappy man who cheers up when one of his friends buys him a drink. Finally, to the ire of public health advocates, the campaign's registration form features a photo of "archetypal binge drinker" David Boon (Munro, 2006b). In case there was any doubt of the link between cricket, VB, and Movember, at the launch of the "The Battle of the Tashes" VB campaign (see above) VB's marketing manager Ben Wicks said "As a major Movember sponsor, we're hoping some of the cricketers will keep their mo growing into the Ashes season. The two overlap nicely, because the first test is in late November" (Patterson, 2006).

Sports Sponsorship of Alcohol

The relationship between Australian sport and alcohol promotion reached a new low in September 2006 with the launch of the Fourx (XXXX) Gold beach cricket campaign. The highlight of the campaign is "a competitive six-a-side beach cricket tournament which will feature 21 cricket legends from Australia, England and the West Indies slugging it out" (Buchan, 2006, p.6). The cricket series is part of the XXXX Gold beach cricket campaign which includes TVCs, a website featuring an interactive game, themed XXXX Gold packaging with vouchers for a free cricket ball and discounts on other beach cricket merchandise, as well the distribution of free beach-cricket kits to thousands of grassroots cricket teams across Australia.

The international beach cricket series will feature famous past players from Australia, England and the West Indies, and will be televised nationally; with the respective captains being Alan Border, Graham Gooch, and Courtney Walsh. The organisers are expecting crowds of up to 7000 people at each of the games, and arrangements have been made for the building of temporary stands for spectators (Lalor, 2006).

What makes this promotion unique is that this tournament, and the game itself, was contrived entirely as a promotion for XXXX Gold beer. It has “a new set of rules, and a world-first high-tech technology ‘switch pitch’ which allows slow or fast-paced bowling, developed especially for the tournament” and XXXX Gold beach cricket director (yes, that is his job title), Andrew Coates, was quoted as saying that “the campaign was the biggest promotion ever held for the brand, and he expected the tournament to become a permanent addition to the sports calendar” (Buchan, 2006).

In October 2006 Allan Border, a renowned Australian retired cricketer and ex-captain, resigned his position as a national selector – not because he was disgusted at the increasingly symbiotic relationship between cricket and beer, but because of a perceived conflict of interest between his sponsorship by XXXX (as the captain of the Australian beach cricket team) and Cricket Australia's sponsorship by Foster's (Brown, 2006a). Foster's claimed that the XXXX campaign, involving Border, was ambush marketing and was un-Australian (Brown, 2006b). A similar situation arose in the ICC Champions Trophy in Sri Lanka, nearly resulting in the cancellation of the tournament, and potential sponsees have been cautioned that they should ensure that “no scope should be left for commercial competitors to be sponsoring the same event,” (Brown, 2006b, p.5) including an overlap between the sponsorship of competitions, governing bodies, teams, and individual players. Cricket Australia are having difficulty identifying a replacement for Allan Border, and one of the key reasons cited for this difficulty is the gap between the earnings of a selector and the earnings from a media contract (Brown and Saltau 2006).

Discussion

It is well known that attitudes towards alcohol consumption are strongly influenced by social and cultural norms, and more directly by the specific social situation in which alcohol consumption occurs (e.g., Greenfield and Room, 1997; McDaniel et al., 2001). One of the most commonly raised concerns among those addressing alcohol consumption and young people is the close association between alcohol and sport (Sivyer, 1990). Alcohol and sports have been argued to be closely associated in many countries, and university students who are sports fans have been found to drink more alcohol, be more likely to engage in binge drinking, and more likely to report alcohol-related problems than students who are not sports fans (Nelson and Wechsler, 2003).

Australia has been described as “a model case where alcohol and sport are united in a close partnership” (Munro 2000, p 199). For example, a recent survey of Queensland-based surf lifesaving, rugby union, and Australian Rules football club patrons found that 40% usually drank five or more alcoholic drinks on each visit, 22% drank seven or more, and 5% 13 or more (Connolly, 2006); which is significantly more than the recommended maximum of four standard drinks. Australian studies have shown that non-elite sportspeople consume excessive levels of alcohol, and that members of male sporting teams feel pressured to drink alcohol because of the masculine image of sporting activity and mateship (Lawson and Evans, 1992).

Much of the focus of research and advocacy has been on alcohol advertising during sports telecasts – for example, an analysis of US media spend which showed that the alcohol industry spent more than \$540 million on advertising in sports programs on TV (Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, 2003). Alcohol, and the promotion and advertising of alcohol,

has been associated with sporting events for many decades, and in most countries – to the extent where it has been argued that it would “be unusual to view a sporting event without seeing some form of event signage or a commercial for an alcohol or tobacco brand” (McDaniel et al. 2001).

It was suggested in the late 1990s that public awareness of the impact of alcohol abuse on society would lead to increasing pressure to regulate alcohol sponsorship of sporting events; particularly in light of several high-profile cases such as the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse’s formal protest against Anheuser Busch's sponsorship of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, and the National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organisation’s first formal protest over the same company’s involvement with World Cup Soccer (McDaniel and Mason, 1999). However, it was also mooted that organising and regulatory authorities would be hesitant to regulate such activities due to their high degree of dependence on income from alcohol sponsorships (Howard and Crompton, 1995).

One of the arguments often given for the increasing level of alcohol sponsorship of sport is the difficulty in obtaining other sponsors, particularly since the imposition of bans on tobacco sponsorship. However, Australian soccer has a number of lucrative sponsorships with non-alcohol products; for example, in the lead up to the World Cup the Socceroos major sponsors included Qantas (who also has the naming rights for the team, thus the Qantas Socceroos) and Weet-bix breakfast cereal (Robertson, 2006). The recent FIFA World Cup telecast attracted a number of major sponsorships, despite the elimination of the Australian team, including LG Electronics, Powerade (energy drink), Nike, Hyundai, and National Australia Bank (Alarcon 2006b). Felt (2002) notes the increasing involvement in sports sponsorship of a range of other entities, including political causes, sports apparel companies, telecoms and media corporations and global consumer brands.

In 2002 James Felt wrote that “the first high volume consumer brands to be involved in Formula 1 as well as other sports were alcohol and tobacco brands...(but) it may be said that sport as a whole has reduced the involvement of tobacco and alcohol, which has been part of sports sponsorship since the nineteenth century” (Felt 2002). However, as shown by the review of trade reports of current alcohol sponsorships, this does not appear to be the case in Australia. Not only are alcohol sponsorships of sport thriving – particularly in the most high-profile sports, cricket and rugby – we are now seeing sports sponsorships of alcohol.

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