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Alcohol and sport: can we have one without the other?

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Abstract

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). As a result, there is much current debate concerning the alcohol sponsorship of sporting events and teams. The authors are currently involved in a series of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies examining the nature, and effects, of alcohol advertising and promotion. Although the purpose of these studies was to examine other aspects of the advertising and promotions, the authors observed that in each of these studies, sport has inevitably raised its head as inexorably linked with the advertising and promotion of alcohol. This paper presents a summary of these observed links and adds further to the observation that in Australia it remains difficult to have any involvement in sport – as a participant or a fan – without being exposed to a strong message that alcohol and sport are inextricably linked.

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Alcohol and sport: Can we have one without the other?

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Abstract

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). As a result, there is much current debate concerning the alcohol sponsorship of sporting events and teams. The authors are currently involved in a series of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies examining the nature, and effects, of alcohol advertising and promotion. Although the purpose of these studies was to examine other aspects of the advertising and promotions, the authors observed that in each of these studies, sport has inevitably raised its head as inexorably linked with the advertising and promotion of alcohol. This paper presents a summary of these observed links and adds further to the observation that in Australia it remains difficult to have any involvement in sport – as a participant or a fan – without being exposed to a strong message that alcohol and sport are inextricably linked.

Introduction

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., McDaniel, Kinney and Chalip, 2001; Greenfield and Room, 1997).

Alcohol and sports have been argued to be closely associated in many countries, including the US where the alcohol industry spent more than \$540 million on advertising in sports programs on TV (Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, 2003), 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 all more, and 5% 13 or more (Connolly, 2006); which is significantly more than the recommended maximum of four standard drinks.

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, Kinney and Chalip, 2001). 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. Indeed, it has been

argued that such an association is inappropriate because of the potential impact on underage consumers (e.g., Howard and Crompton, 1995) and the inconsistency between alcohol consumption and the physical demands of sports participation (McDaniel, Kinney and Chalip, 2001).

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). Consumption of alcohol is typically associated with sport among Australian teenagers and young adults as an important component of post-game celebrations (McGuifficke, Rowling and Bailey, 1991). However, it is also associated with the general ethos of being part of the team, and men in particular are more likely to drink excessively when socializing with members of their sporting team than other groups of friends (Black, Lawson and Fleishman, 1999).

Given this close association between alcohol and sport, it is perhaps not surprising that in each of the series of studies we conducted examining alcohol advertising and promotions – despite the fact that we were not specifically investigating the alcohol-sport nexus – sport, and the promotion of sporting events, was a key component of the advertisements and promotions which we identified in each of the studies. This paper provides a brief summary of our findings in relation to the apparently ubiquitous association between sports and alcohol promotions and provides further evidence for the reliance of the alcohol industry on sport for promotion of their products. In the context of public debate about increasing the regulation of alcohol advertising (particularly in relation to sport), this reliance remains an important issue for marketers to reflect upon.

Method and Results

Study one: A review of the regulation of alcohol advertising in Australia

From May 2004 until March 2005 television and magazine advertising campaigns (national and regional) were monitored for alcohol products. The three authors independently reviewed the advertisements, selected a subset which they believed potentially breached the codes of the ABAC and the ASB, and lodged complaints against those identified as potentially in breach. The authors recruited a panel of six expert judges to independently review the advertisements and complaints, and compared the decisions of this group to the decisions of the Advertising Standards Board.

The Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code clearly states that alcohol advertising must “not depict any direct association between the consumption of alcohol beverages, other than low-alcohol beverages, and the operation of a motor vehicle, boat or aircraft or the engagement in any sport” and that it “must not depict the consumption or presence of alcohol beverages as a cause of or contributing to the achievement of personal, business, social, sporting, sexual or other success (and) if alcohol beverages are depicted as part of a celebration, must not imply or suggest that the beverage was a cause of or contributed to success or achievement”.

However, the code does not make any specific references to association between the consumption of alcohol beverages and watching, or enjoying, sporting events. Following are examples of

recent advertisements (as described by the ASB), identified in our study, which present a clear association between alcohol consumption and sport, albeit not directly between drinking and playing sport:

- Toohey's New "Fan Cam" (television) - At a football match, fans make comments to the "Fan Cam". A range of people while drinking the product make comments such as giving tips to the players as well as some silly antics. The final comment is from a man who is asking "Have you got the car keys?"
- Toohey's New "Cane Toads" (television) - Three young men approach the Queensland Border (from the NSW border) and use golf clubs to hit cane toads back over QLD border

Even more concerning is the recent, and increasing, tendency of alcohol advertisements to not only focus on particular sporting events (such as the interstate rugby competition which was the focus of the ads described above) but also to include players from the teams as actors in the advertisements. Given that these sporting heroes are widely recognised as role models for young people, particularly young males, this has the potential to further increase the association between alcohol and sport among future drinkers.

Study two: A review of the nature of alcohol promotions in licensed venues

The authors identified 25 licensed venues (pubs and clubs) within the defined boundaries of the CBD area of a large regional city. Trained research assistants visited, on four occasions over four weeks, each of the licensed venues and noted point-of-purchase and other alcohol promotions conducted in the venues. Again, a close association between alcohol and sporting events was evident in several of the promotions we observed during this study.

The State of Origin (this is an annual sporting event that has the Queensland rugby league team playing 'best of 3' games spread over several weeks against the NSW rugby League team) was played on Wednesday 06/07/06. While the design of the study did not permit us to visit all of the venues on that night, the three that were visited showed a consistent pattern of reduced, and even free, drinks associated with the progress of the game. One venue offered reduced price schooners of beers from 7.30pm until the end of the game; another offered reduced price schooners from the start of the game until the first point was scored, as well as a promotion in which every \$5.00 spent over the bar provided an entry into a competition to win a NSW Blues (the home state team) fridge; and the third offered patrons free beer from start of the game until the first point was scored.

We also found that one venue ran regular drink promotions associated with televised boxing matches – promoted as "Fight Nights" – which were observed on two of the occasions it was visited by the research assistants. On both occasions, patrons were offered reduced price beer from the start of the matches until the last fight; for example, on the Sunday there were seven fights, commencing at 1.00pm.

Study three: A review of the nature of alcohol promotions in bottle shops

The methodology for this study was similar to that of study two. That is, all bottle shops in the CBD of the same city were visited on four occasions over four weeks, and research assistants noted all visible point-of-purchase promotions.

There were a range of promotions which offered free gifts with the purchase of alcohol products, including one for a popular brand of pre-mixed rum and cola which offered patrons the opportunity to purchase a Wallabies fleece jumper for \$25 with the purchase of a six-pack of cans. We also identified a number of competitions, including one for the same pre-mixed brand of rum which offered patrons who spent more than \$25 on their products entry into a competition to win three National Rugby League (NRL) semi final tickets, and one which offered a competition to win a golf trip for three people with the purchase of a carton of beer.

Study four: Examining the effects of promotions in licensed venues on drinking among young males

This final study was an exploratory, qualitative study incorporating three focus groups with male university students. Prior to the study, one of the authors visited the local university bar to identify relevant point-of-sale promotions for discussion at the focus groups. Again, one of the three promotions identified was associated with sports; this was a drink card which required patrons to purchase four glasses of the promoted beer to receive a free Wallabies hat (the Australian Rugby Union team), with the hat provided over the bar on purchase of the fourth drink. The promotion had a strong association with the Rugby team as it used the team's colours rather than the brand's colours in the poster and the hat.

The results of this study clearly demonstrated that this promotion, and similar promotions, resulted in the participants consuming all the required beverages in one sitting to receive the prize, which was perceived to be of high value, with many stating that they would continue drinking to see whether they could "earn" two.

Discussion

Results from the literature reviewed and the studies conducted by the authors (and reported in this article) add to the strong evidence for a link between alcohol advertising/promotion and sport. In addition, the observations provide further opportunity to reflect on whether associating alcohol with sporting events contravenes the spirit of the advertising codes of practice.

The observations raise the important question of what environments remain free of the association between sport and alcohol, and what environments – if any – exist for young adults to participate in the enjoyment of sport that is free of these pressures and associations. Attendance at sporting clubs is associated with greater than recommended drinking levels and the playing of non-elite sport with post match celebrations involving higher levels of alcohol consumption. The lounge-room is not safe for the fan of elite sports, with the TV broadcast of sport inextricably

linked with the promotion of alcohol (with sports people used as models within advertisements and supporters also used as model drinkers in ads such as the Toohey's Fan Cam).

The studies discussed here show that those who seek to watch sporting events outside the privacy of their own home, in the local pub or club are also likely to find a strong link between the watching of sport and the consumption of alcohol. Even those seeking to purchase alcohol products at the local bottle shop are encouraged to link their purchase with memorabilia that associates that brand of alcohol, and alcohol in general, with popular and successful sporting teams.

Given the ABAC code states that alcohol advertisements must not depict the consumption or presence of alcohol as a cause of "social or sporting success" we must question the cumulative effect of these combined promotions on a young person's ability to be a sports fan, let alone a competitor, without seeing alcohol as an integral part of sport in Australia. The association goes beyond the implication of success, to the question of whether any involvement in sport – as a participant or a fan – is possible without the shadow of alcohol.

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